

How Students Learn

HISTORY, MATHEMATICS, AND SCIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Committee on *How People Learn*, A Targeted Report for Teachers

M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford, *Editors*

Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education

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**COMMITTEE ON *HOW PEOPLE LEARN*:
A TARGETED REPORT FOR TEACHERS**

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Preface

This book has its roots in the report of the Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (National Research Council, 1999, National Academy Press). That report presented an illuminating review of research in a variety of fields that has advanced understanding of human learning. The report also made an important attempt to draw from that body of knowledge implications for teaching. A follow-on study by a second committee explored what research and development would need to be done, and how it would need to be communicated, to be especially useful to teachers, principals, superintendents, and policy makers: *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice* (National Research Council, 1999). These two individual reports were combined to produce an expanded edition of *How People Learn* (National Research Council, 2000). We refer to this volume as *HPL*.

In the present book, the goal is to take the *HPL* work to the next step: to provide examples of how the principles and findings on learning can be used to guide the teaching of a set of topics that commonly appear in the K-12 curriculum. As was the case in the original work (1999), the book focuses on three subject areas: history, mathematics, and science. Each area is treated at three levels: elementary, middle, and high school. Distinguished researchers who have extensive experience in teaching or in partnering with teachers were invited to contribute the chapters. The committee shaped the goals for the volume, and commented—sometimes extensively—on the draft chapters as they were written and revised. The principles of *HPL* are embedded in each chapter, though there are differences from one chapter to the next in how explicitly they are discussed.

Taking this next step to elaborate the *HPL* principles in context poses a potential problem that we wish to address at the outset. The meaning and relevance of the principles for classroom teaching can be made clearer with specific examples. At the same time, however, many of the specifics of a particular example could be replaced with others that are also consistent with the *HPL* principles. In looking at a single example, it can be difficult to distinguish what is necessary to effective teaching from what is effective but easily replaced. With this in mind, it is critical that the teaching and learning examples in each chapter be seen as illustrative, not as blueprints for the “right” way to teach.

We can imagine, by analogy, that engineering students will better grasp the relationship between the laws of physics and the construction of effective supports for a bridge if they see some examples of well-designed bridges, accompanied by explanations for the choices of the critical design features. The challenging engineering task of crossing the entrance of the San Francisco Bay, for example, may bring the relationship between physical laws, physical constraints, and engineering solutions into clear and meaningful focus. But there are some design elements of the Golden Gate Bridge that could be replaced with others that serve the same end, and people may well differ on which among a set of good designs creates the most appealing bridge.

To say that the Golden Gate Bridge is a good example of a suspension bridge does not mean it is the only, or the best possible, design for a suspension bridge. If one has many successful suspension bridges to compare, the design features that are required for success, and those that are replaceable, become more apparent. And the requirements that are uniform across contexts, and the requirements that change with context, are more easily revealed.

The chapters in this volume highlight different approaches to addressing the same fundamental principles of learning. It would be ideal to be able to provide two or more “*HPL* compatible” approaches to teaching the same topic (for example, the study of light in elementary school). However, we cannot provide that level of specific variability in this already lengthy volume. Nevertheless, we hope that common features across chapters, and the variation in approach among the chapters, are sufficient to provide instructive insights into the principles laid out in *How People Learn*.

This volume could not have come to life without the help and dedication of many people, and we are grateful to them. First and foremost, the committee acknowledges the contributions of Robbie Case, who was to have contributed to the mathematics chapters in this volume. Robbie was at the height of a very productive career when his life came to an unexpected end in May 2000. Robbie combined the very best in disciplinary research and attention to the incorporation of research findings into classroom tools

to support teaching and learning. In this respect, he was a model for researchers interested in supporting improved educational practice. The mathematics chapters in this volume are marked by Robbie Case's influence.

The financial support of our sponsors, the U.S. Department of Education and the President's Circle of the National Academy of Sciences, was essential. We appreciate both their support and their patience during the unexpectedly long period required to shape and produce so extensive a volume with so many different contributors. Our thanks to C. Kent McGuire, former assistant secretary of the Office of Education Research and Improvement for providing the initial grant for this project, and to his successor and now director of the National Institute for Education Sciences, Grover J. Whitehurst; thanks are due as well to Patricia O'Connell Ross, Jill Edwards Staton, Michael Kestner, and Linda Jones at the Department of Education for working with us throughout, and providing the time required to produce a quality product.

This report is a somewhat unusual undertaking for the National Research Council in that the committee members did not author the report chapters, but served as advisers to the chapter authors. The contributions of committee members were extraordinary. In a first meeting the committee and chapter authors worked together to plan the volume. The committee then read each draft chapter, and provided extensive, and remarkably productive, feedback to chapter authors. As drafts were revised, committee members reviewed them again, pointing out concerns and proposing potential solutions. Their generosity and their commitment to the goal of this project are noteworthy.

Alexandra Wigdor, director of the Division on Education, Labor, and Human Performance when this project was begun, provided ongoing guidance and experienced assistance with revisions. Rona Brière brought her special skills in editing the entire volume. Our thanks go to Allison E. Shoup, who was senior project assistant, supporting the project through much of its life; to Susan R. McCutchen, who prepared the manuscript for review; to Claudia Sauls and Candice Crawford, who prepared the final manuscript; and to Deborah Johnson, Sandra Smotherman, and Elizabeth B. Townsend, who willingly provided additional support when needed. Kirsten Sampson Snyder handled the report review process, and Yvonne Wise handled report production—both challenging tasks for a report of this size and complexity. We are grateful for their help.

This report has been reviewed in draft form by individuals chosen for their diverse perspectives and technical expertise, in accordance with procedures approved by the National Research Council's Report Review Committee. The purpose of this independent review is to provide candid and critical comments that will assist the institution in making its published report as sound as possible and to ensure that the report meets institutional standards

for objectivity, evidence, and responsiveness to the study charge. The review comments and draft manuscript remain confidential to protect the integrity of the deliberative process. We thank the following individuals for their review of this report: Jo Boaler, Mathematics Education, School of Education, Stanford University; Miriam L. Clifford, Mathematics Department, Carroll College, Waukesha, Wisconsin; O.L. Davis, Curriculum and Instruction, The University of Texas at Austin; Patricia B. Dodge, Science Teacher, Essex Middle School, Essex Junction, Vermont; Carol T. Hines, History Teacher, Darrel C. Swope Middle School, Reno, Nevada; Janis Lariviere, UTeach—Science and Mathematics Teacher Preparation, The University of Texas at Austin; Gaea Leinhardt, Learning Research and Development Center and School of Education, University of Pittsburgh; Alan M. Lesgold, Office of the Provost, University of Pittsburgh; Marcia C. Linn, Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology, University of California, Berkeley; Kathleen Metz, Cognition and Development, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley; Thomas Romberg, National Center for Research in Mathematics and Science Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison; and Peter Seixas, Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, University of British Columbia.

Although the reviewers listed above have provided many constructive comments and suggestions, they did not see the final draft of the report before its release. The review of this report was overseen by Alan M. Lesgold, University of Pittsburgh. Appointed by the National Research Council, he was responsible for making certain that an independent examination of this report was carried out in accordance with institutional procedures and that all review comments were carefully considered. Responsibility for the final content of this report rests entirely with the authors, the committee, and the institution.

John D. Bransford, *Chair*
M. Suzanne Donovan, *Study Director*

Contents

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|----|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| | <i>M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford</i> | |
| | A Fish Story, 2 | |
| | Learning Environments and the Design of Instruction, 12 | |
| | Putting the Principles to Work in the Classroom, 20 | |
| | Intent and Organization of This Volume, 21 | |
| | Notes, 25 | |
| | References, 26 | |
| Part I: History | | |
| 2 | Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History | 31 |
| | <i>Peter J. Lee</i> | |
| | History and Everyday Ideas, 33 | |
| | Substantive Concepts, 61 | |
| | History That Works, 65 | |
| | Notes, 73 | |
| | References, 74 | |
| 3 | Putting Principles into Practice: Teaching and Planning | 79 |
| | <i>Rosalyn Ashby, Peter J. Lee, and Denis Shemilt</i> | |
| | The Reality Test, 80 | |
| | Working with Evidence: Pilgrim Fathers and Native Americans, 84 | |
| | Working with Evidence: The St. Brendan's Voyage Task, 119 | |

- Appendix 3A: Implications for Planning, 164
 Notes, 177
 References, 177
- 4 “They Thought the World Was Flat?": Applying the Principles of
How People Learn in Teaching High School History 179
Robert B. Bain
 Where to Begin? Transforming Topics and Objectives into
 Historical Problems, 181
 Designing a “History-Considerate” Learning Environment:
 Tools for Historical Thinking, 199
 Conclusion, 209
 Acknowledgments, 210
 Notes, 211
 References, 212

Part II: Mathematics

- 5 Mathematical Understanding: An Introduction 217
Karen C. Fuson, Mindy Kalchman, and John D. Bransford
 Principle #1: Teachers Must Engage Students’ Preconceptions, 219
 Principle #2: Understanding Requires Factual Knowledge and
 Conceptual Frameworks, 231
 Principle #3: A Metacognitive Approach Enables Student
 Self-Monitoring, 236
 Next Steps, 243
 Notes, 246
 References, 246
 Suggested Reading List for Teachers, 256
- 6 Fostering the Development of Whole-Number Sense:
 Teaching Mathematics in the Primary Grades 257
Sharon Griffin
 Deciding What Knowledge to Teach, 259
 Building on Children’s Current Understandings, 267
 Acknowledging Teachers’ Conceptions and Partial
 Understandings, 279
 Revisiting Question 2: Defining the Knowledge That
 Should Be Taught, 281
 How Can This Knowledge Be Taught?:
 The Case of Number Worlds, 282
 What Sorts of Learning Does This Approach Make Possible?, 302

| | | |
|------------------------------|--|-----|
| | Summary and Conclusion, 305 | |
| | Acknowledgments, 306 | |
| | Notes, 306 | |
| | References, 306 | |
| 7 | Pipes, Tubes, and Beakers: New Approaches to Teaching the Rational-Number System | 309 |
| | <i>Joan Moss</i> | |
| | Rational-Number Learning and the Principles of <i>How People Learn</i> , 312 | |
| | Instruction in Rational Number, 319 | |
| | Conclusion: How Students Learn Rational Number, 341 | |
| | Notes, 343 | |
| | References, 345 | |
| 8 | Teaching and Learning Functions | 351 |
| | <i>Mindy Kalchman and Kenneth R. Koedinger</i> | |
| | Addressing the Three Principles, 359 | |
| | Teaching Functions for Understanding, 373 | |
| | Summary, 389 | |
| | Acknowledgments, 391 | |
| | Notes, 392 | |
| | References, 392 | |
| | Other Relevant Readings, 393 | |
| Part III: Science | | |
| 9 | Scientific Inquiry and <i>How People Learn</i> | 397 |
| | <i>John D. Bransford and M. Suzanne Donovan</i> | |
| | Principle #1: Addressing Preconceptions, 399 | |
| | Principle #2: Knowledge of What It Means to “Do Science,” 403 | |
| | Principle #3: Metacognition, 407 | |
| | The <i>How People Learn</i> Framework, 411 | |
| | Conclusion, 415 | |
| | Notes, 416 | |
| | References, 416 | |
| 10 | Teaching to Promote the Development of Scientific Knowledge and Reasoning About Light at the Elementary School Level | 421 |
| | <i>Shirley J. Magnusson and Annemarie Sullivan Palinscar</i> | |
| | The Study of Light, 422 | |
| | The Study of Light Through Inquiry, 426 | |

| | | |
|--|---|-----|
| | Supporting Learning Through Cycles of Investigation, 460 | |
| | The Role of Subject-Specific Knowledge in Effective Science Instruction, 467 | |
| | Conclusion, 469 | |
| | Notes, 470 | |
| | References, 472 | |
| 11 | Guided Inquiry in the Science Classroom | 475 |
| | <i>James Minstrell and Pamela Kraus</i> | |
| | The Unit: The Nature of Gravity and Its Effects, 477 | |
| | Summary, 511 | |
| | Notes, 512 | |
| 12 | Developing Understanding Through Model-Based Inquiry | 515 |
| | <i>James Stewart, Jennifer L. Cartier, and Cynthia M. Passmore</i> | |
| | Genetics, 516 | |
| | Developing Darwin's Model of Natural Selection in High School Evolution, 540 | |
| | Classroom Environments That Support Learning with Understanding, 555 | |
| | Summary, 561 | |
| | Notes, 562 | |
| | References, 563 | |
| A Final Synthesis: Revisiting the Three Learning Principles | | |
| 13 | Pulling Threads | 569 |
| | <i>M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford</i> | |
| | Engaging Resilient Preconceptions, 569 | |
| | Organizing Knowledge Around Core Concepts, 575 | |
| | Supporting Metacognition, 577 | |
| | Principles of Learning and Classroom Environments, 586 | |
| | Notes, 588 | |
| | References, 589 | |
| | Other Resources, 590 | |
| | Biographical Sketches of Committee Members and Contributors | 591 |
| | Index | 597 |

How Students Learn

**HISTORY, MATHEMATICS, AND SCIENCE
IN THE CLASSROOM**

1. Students Learn Differently. It may seem obnoxiously obvious, but how many classrooms are currently designed with one learning style in mind? Worksheets and flashcards work well for students who absorb knowledge visually, but for a child who needs to hear the information in order to grasp it, traditional methods of teaching force him or her to use a physical sense that is not as well-developed. The visual learner doesn't have the same opportunity to stretch his or her other senses. How can we teach our young and adult students to learn and what we can start with? Involve students in planning the curriculum. Give them the possibility to choose what topic will be following. Let's look at the situation when you don't use any specific coursebook for lessons (you have a tailored course) or prepare students for exams. You plan to study the topics "Food, Holidays, and Sport", let students decide which topic they want to study first. "How Students Learn: History in the Classroom, edited by M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005. 615 pages. \$34.95, paper, with a CD-ROM". The History Teacher. Society for History Education. 39 (3): 410-411. doi:10.2307/30036810. ISSN 0018-2745. Gilbert, John K. (2005-09-26). Learn how to build a brand with purpose and personality. Design School. Courses. 01. Create a learner identity with a personal page. Do your students see themselves as more than students—as learners with an identity of their own, with a sense of direction and ownership over their education? Encouraging students to form a "learner identity" will help them fuse the notion of lifelong learning with their current studies, and to see themselves as active participants in a process that extends beyond a single unit, class, or school year. Welcome to Exploring How Students Learn, a collection of resources related to college student learning. This site highlights research findings and theoretical perspectives about learning that have direct implications for improving college teaching. Why focus on learning? Despite our best efforts as teachers, students do not always achieve what we hope. Even when students are well prepared and engaged their knowledge may be fragmented and superficial, their skills underdeveloped, awkward, and halting.