

Using Schema Theory To Teach American History

For decades, cognitive scientists and psychologists have discussed the schema theory of human memory (Head 1920; Piaget 1926; Bartlett 1932; Ausubel 1967). The underlying idea of this theory is that humans, as they receive incoming information, organize it around their previously developed schemata, or "networks of connected ideas" (Slavin 1988, 155).

Humans develop many schemata over the course of their lifetimes. Young children have mental images of what a human face looks like; all new faces encountered are in some way compared to this image. In adult life, we each have a mental image of what the current tax system is like. Each new tax rule or regulation we learn about fits into our existing mental network of tax information.

As a major theory of learning, schema theory has tremendous implications for school classrooms. It is crucial for teachers to realize that students can remember substantial amounts of new information only if they are able to cluster it with their related existing ideas. People forget information if they do not work to integrate it into their existing mental frameworks. Ausubel states that "as a result of this type of anchorage to cognitive structure, the newly-learned material is no longer dependent for its incorporation and retention on the frail human capacity for assimilating and retaining arbitrary associations" (Ausubel 1967, 20). Teachers also must realize that the schemata of each student are distinct from those of others, even the teacher himself/herself. In this ever-changing, information-based society, history teachers must design instructional methods that are solidly rooted in these realizations. If we do this, we can give our students the historical framework, the thinking skills, and the reflective habits they will need later in life.

Several methods have been advocated as schema activators, or ways to foster more meaningful learning. David Ausubel (1960) championed the "advance organizer" as the best way for teachers to activate the appropriate schemata of students so that more conscious clustering of new information with existing ideas could take place. For example, to introduce a lesson on Shintoism, a teacher might activate students' religion schemata by having students think about their own religions—their major lessons, stories, and principles. This teacher's students are more likely to remember the key tenets of Shintoism by directly placing them into their existing schematic "organizations" than if they were presented with those tenets with no cognitive preparation. Other educators have suggested that concept maps and teacher questions are useful for activating students' cognitive structures (Willerman and Mac Harg 1991; Cliburn 1990; LeNoir 1993).

What happens, though, when students are limited by their experiences and have no schemata with which to organize new information? Torney-Purta puts cognitive theory in a developmental context by stating that "younger children have less elaborate or complex schemata for political, social, or economic events...than older children" (1991, 205). To meet the learning needs of these students, I argue that teachers often must go beyond merely activating existing student schemata. When dealing with complex concepts or ones that are foreign to students, teachers must help students develop the appropriate new schemata. Young people often have no conception of such faraway and abstract ideas as international trade or social policy. For this reason, should we omit these concepts from our curricula? Of course not. But if we do teach them, we must try our best to make sure students understand them. How can we do this?

Coming to a comfortable understanding of a topic often requires great effort. Remember college calculus? With this in mind,Sizer (1984) states that students must be considered "workers" rather than receptacles for information. Only with their cognitive effort and the appropriate "coaching" from their teachers will true understanding and skill acquisition arrive. Those educators who base their efforts on schema theory find truth in Sizer's principle of "student-as-worker"; students must work hard and receive the right kind of instruction to integrate new information actively into their existing schemata, to make sense of complex new ideas. In a school that adheres to the "student as worker" tenet, students are logically placed on center stage; the work of all adults in the buildings is centered on their thinking.

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