

# Transfer of Learning

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## Overview

**T**ransfer is “the application or use of knowledge learned in one setting to another, different setting” (Gagne, Yekovich, and Yekovich, 1993). In a learner-centered approach, the student actively acquires knowledge and interprets it, based on previous knowledge and experience. This process of *generalization* is a key feature of transfer. Unfortunately, negative as well as positive transfer can occur: in some instances, the learner may overgeneralize or make inappropriate applications of both new and old knowledge. Gould (1993) suggests that transfer does not occur spontaneously, but requires structured support and facilitation from teachers. In continuing education, the challenge all instructors face is: how do I help students positively transfer the knowledge learned in the classroom to the workplace?

## Implications for Teaching

A key finding in the transfer literature is that organizing information into a conceptual framework allows for greater transfer (Bransford, et al., 2000). Yet it is important to note that material can become “context-bound” if presented in a single context. Knowledge that is taught in several contexts is more likely to support transfer. The traditional instructional focus on memorizing facts and details does not lend itself well to transfer. Instead, identifying underlying themes and principles, as well as learning with understanding are more effective strategies.

## Additional Resources

Bransford, J., Brown, A., Cocking, R., Donovan, M., & Pellegrino, J. (Eds.). (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Cree, V. (Ed.). (2000). *Transfer of learning in professional and vocational education*. New York: Routledge.

Gagne, E., Yekovich, C. & Yekovich, F. (1993). *The cognitive psychology of school learning (2nd edition)*. New York: Harper-Collins.

Gould, N. (1993). Cognitive change and learning from practice: A longitudinal study of social work students. *Social Work Education*, 12, 77-87.

Holton, E. & Baldwin, T. (2003). *Improving learning transfer in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.