

# How to Promote Transfer of Learning

by Winston Sieck - November 10, 2013

<https://www.globalcognition.org/transfer-of-learning/>

Can an eighth-grade math student apply her knowledge of geometry to estimate the square footage of the family's new home? If so, then she has experienced *transfer of learning*. Transfer of learning means to extend knowledge you've gained from one situation to new ones.

Parents and educators hope that kids [get more out of school](#) than a grade on a test. They want them to be able to transfer what they have learned to solve problems they confront outside school. Transfer of learning isn't just about school. If you change jobs to a new field, you still want to find ways to apply your existing skills to the new problems you face.

Susan Barnett and Steven Ceci of Cornell University point out that transfer of learning is not as simple as it first sounds. They published a review paper, "[When and where do we apply what we learn? A taxonomy for far transfer](#)," in *Psychological Bulletin*. In it, Barnett and Ceci describe six different kinds of transfer of learning:

- *Knowledge domain*. Does the skill transfer from one subject to another? For example, you learn some [critical thinking skills](#) by writing a literary analysis essay in language arts. Do those skills transfer to writing assignments in science or history?
- *Physical context*. If you study for a test in your room at home, can you then remember and apply it in the classroom?
- *Temporal context*. This is about transfer of learning across time. Will you still be able to solve the problem in a week (or a year)?
- *Functional context*. Is the transfer of learning to another school task or test, or is it part of an everyday activity?
- *Social context*. If you learned a new skill in a group setting, can you apply it when alone? How about the other way around?
- *Modality*. Transfer of learning from a text to visual task, a paper-and-pencil exercise to hands-on application, and so on. For example, you can solve an equation of a parabola, but can you graph it?

## Improving transfer of learning

David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon described several ways to promote transfer of learning in their paper on [cognitive skills](#), published in *Educational Researcher*:

- Practice the skill a lot in a wide variety of conditions. Ideally, change up all of the categories above.
- When facing a new challenge, reach back to your prior experiences. Try to think of principles that might be relevant.
- Examine two problems or examples that look different, but have the same kind of solution. Work

out in your mind what makes them alike.

- Study up on the new subject to gain background knowledge about it. The more you know about the topic, the easier it is to transfer what you already know to problems in that area.
- Try to come up with principles as you encounter new problems or ideas. Keep a favorite in mind, and look for new opportunities to apply it.
- Make your learning social, so that you need to justify and explain what you are learning to another. Listen for the principles that pop out of the conversation.

Transfer of learning depends on the kind of transfer and how the knowledge is gained. The learner also matters. In essence, it helps to [push past simple learning](#). When you face a new problem, how do you try to handle it?

Image Credit: [JFXie](#)

Barnett, S. M., & Ceci, S. J. (2002). When and where do we apply what we learn? A taxonomy for far transfer *Psychological bulletin*, 128 (4), 612-637 : [10.1037//0033-2909.128.4.612](https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-2909.128.4.612)

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