Tips on Teaching for Transfer: A "BDA" Framework

BDA = Before Instruction, During Instruction, After Instruction

Before Instruction

*Deciding What to Teach?

Design instruction around principles and concepts that have transfer potential. Most knowledge is what investigators label "inert," "passive," "local," or "contextually bound" meaning that it does not transfer. Much of what is taught in schools falls under the umbrellas of these terms. If we don't see the possibility for transfer in what we plan to teach, it is highly unlikely that the students will.

A motivational consideration: select transfer tasks (especially initial ones) that are challenging but not impossible. The concept of transfer may be new to students. You may be placing them in unfamiliar territory when you ask them to transfer. If they perceive transfer to be unachievable, you may lose the game after a single move.

*Target Near Transfer

The literature suggests that "far transfer" occurs rarely. Build lessons around problems or tasks that you believe will appear reasonably similar to the learner. Widen the distance between initial learning and novel task as students encounter success and grow more confident

Salomon and Perkins (1988) discuss "hugging" as a strategy for promoting near transfer. Hugging involves organizing your lesson so that the initial learning (e.g. a skill) "hugs" the most desired transfer task closely.

*Time for Learning

Set aside sufficient time for initial learning that is deep and thorough. Some investigators found that transfer failed because the initial learning did not occur. Do not ask students to transfer what they have not mastered.

*Rubrics

Develop rubrics that include transfer as a criterion and discuss them with students so that students are made aware of the value that you've assigned to it. Noting how

infrequently studies report successful acts of transfer, you may want to weight the transfer criterion lightly or feature for "bonus points" (see rewarding transfer below) until you get reasonable evidence that your transfer instruction is actually working.

During Instruction

***Make Transfer Explicit**

Explain transfer and its value to students. Be very explicit in describing transfer as the instructional target. We are more likely to do something if we are aware of it, know what it is, and are convinced of its value.

***Model Transfer**

Show your students examples of transfer. Ask them to work together, engage in some "mindful exertion," and generate examples of their own.

***"Bridging"**

Salomon and Perkins (1998) use the term "Bridging" use to describe strategies for teaching "far transfer." They recommend tasks that invite students to complete analogies (e.g. Civics 1, K-3 "A classroom without a teacher is like a _____ without a _____?") and describe applications (e.g. History 2, 6-8 "In what other circumstances might the skill of analyzing for credibility prove valuable?").

***Use Visual Representations**

Create graphic organizers that you can use frequently and that leave durable imprints. Examples of transfer graphic organizers that we are developing and that will be available on this DSSEP website include:

Near Transfer Organizer
_____ (picture of a hug inserted) _____

Far Transfer Organizer
_____ (picture of a bridge inserted) _____

Backward Reaching Transfer Organizer
_____ (picture of a hand reaching backward) _____

Forward Reaching Transfer Organizer
_____(picture of a hand reaching forward) _____

Invite students to describe their initial learning in the blank spaces to the left and the transfers they've made or propose in the blank spaces to the right.

Consider transfer bulletin boards to heighten awareness of the learning target (i.e. transfer) and its value in your classroom.

***Time Between Learning and Transfer Task**

Expose students to the transfer task shortly after they have mastered the initial learning (at least when you first start working with transfer). Try to get students to see the transfer possibilities quickly. Be patient as you look for the evidence of transfer, however. It may come days later after students have had time to process and incorporate other understandings.

***Multiple Contexts**

Teach the instructional target (principle or concept) in multiple contexts and make the connections between initial learning and varied contexts explicit.

***Patterned Instruction**

Present principles and concepts in patterns that allow the students to see the learning target stripped from its original context and deployed or assimilated in a new context:

Contextualize – decontextualize – then recontextualize.

Teach the principle or skill in an initial context.
Remove the principle from its context and examine it with the students.
Then, demonstrate the vitality of the principle or concept in a new context.

***Prompt then Wean**

Studies indicate that transfer is most likely to occur when students are given prompts that draw their attentions to the initial learning and the possibility of transfer (e.g. "Can you think of something you did earlier that might be relevant or that might help you find a solution?"). Wean them off the prompts as they begin prompting themselves.

***"What if" Problem Solving & Generalizing**

Introduce students to a problem after initial instruction (e.g. teaching a skill, principle, concept). Encourage them to use the initial learning to come up with a solution. Then, make adjustments to the problem (e.g. "'what if' the problem changed in the following way _____? Would your solution still work? If not, try to find a solution that solves both problems.").

After you introduced a few "what if" problem modifications, ask the students to refine their solutions so that the solutions apply to most or all of the modified problems. Discuss the generalizability and value of the new solutions.

At the End or After Instruction

***Reward transfer (as well as attempts at it).**

***Metacognitive Activities**

Coach students to ask themselves questions about how learning might be transferred. Encourage them to think regularly about transfer and the ways in which principles and concepts might span contexts.

***Transfer Homework**

Assign homework involving transfer like tasks that engage students in the search for analogies, examples, and applications of the initial learning.