Graphic Organizers:
Toward Organization and Complexity of Student Content Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Within the current national atmosphere of accountability and high-stakes testing, many teachers are changing their instruction to return to more traditional strategies that emphasize rote memorization. As a result, classroom curriculum and student learning are narrowing. This study sought to explore the potential of graphic organizers as an instructional strategy to expand student content knowledge beyond rote memorization to include more organized, complex, meaningful learning.

For the purpose of this study, graphic organizers are described as visual displays of concepts, their component parts, and the relationships among their parts. This study was conducted over a six week period in a third grade classroom in a rural elementary school in Virginia. Ten focus students were identified for in-depth data collection on their learning process as recorded during science instruction.

Although existing research strongly supports graphic organizer effectiveness as an instructional strategy toward general student achievement, little is known about the type of learning they support or the process by which students' knowledge develops. Thus, this research utilized qualitative methodological strategies in order to investigate this process. Data collection methods included field notes, student artifacts, and participant interviews. Constant comparative methodology was employed to analyze data. The theoretical framework of constructivism, espousing that newly acquired information is

connected to prior knowledge forming complex, organized networks of conceptual understanding, guided this qualitative study.

Findings resulted in emergent themes including student motivation, simplicity, efficiency, visual hierarchical organization, reconstructing knowledge, and cooperative socialization. Documentation of the learning process as opposed to a comparison of pre/post measurements clearly indicated that student thinking gradually became more complex and organized in nature. As students worked with graphic organizers, and participated in study activities, their knowledge moved from a form of listing facts to resemble more complex, interconnected networks.

Implications of this study for practice include appropriate instruction and practice for students with graphic organizers as a strategy and a tool, value as an assessment tool, and potential for use with complex classroom populations. Suggestions for future research are given for teacher training on how to use graphic organizers effectively, interdisciplinary use of graphic organizers within one context, potential benefit for struggling and diverse learners, a continuing focus on process as opposed to product, and an examination of the connection between graphic organizer activities and sorting.

Contents