

Build Connections for Classrooms: Overview

CURIOSITY

WHAT IS BUILD CONNECTIONS?

Build Connections is an activity that helps students understand how their existing interests relate to the content they learn in school.

In other words, Build Connections taps into students' intrinsic curiosity. What's more, it encourages that curiosity to flourish in class.

The benefits of this 30-minute activity are manifold. Day to day, students engage more in school. And in the long term, students who build connections take more challenging classes in the subject and pursue related careers.

WHEN CAN I USE IT?

You can introduce Build Connections after covering the first major topic of your course. It shouldn't be the very first activity, though; students first need to understand enough content to create meaningful connections.

The frequency will depend on your content and pacing. There isn't a "best" number of times to use Build Connections in a year, but many teachers use it once per unit. For instance, you could have students Build Connections to review before a unit exam, or you could use it to consolidate new learning after the unit performance task.

Keep in mind that it's possible to overdo it. Build Connections loses effectiveness if it becomes rote.

WHO SHOULD USE IT?

Build Connections is flexible enough to use with any subject. So far this activity has only been tested in core subjects, but we hope educators use it to support learning and engagement in non-academic classes and even outside of school.

One of the most exciting findings is that the students who benefit most are those student who don't expect to succeed. For students who see little value in school and often struggle to engage, Build Connections is particularly potent.

WHY IS IT EFFECTIVE?

To make content relevant, many teachers use news stories, hooks, and real-life examples. But in these cases, it's usually the teacher doing the thinking, and no single example applies to every student.

Build Connections is different because it's student-centered. It creates an opportunity for students to make meaning on their own terms.

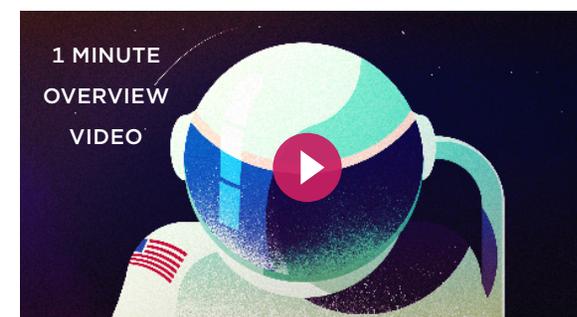
WHAT'S THE SCIENCE?

Build Connections was developed at the University of Virginia by Dr. Chris Hulleman. In randomized, controlled field experiments, Dr. Hulleman and colleagues have shown that this personal connections can help students see how what they're learning is something that matters to them.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO WORK?

Like any skill, Build Connections takes time to learn and teach well. At first, it might seem like students aren't making effective connections, but evidence shows that simply being encouraged to connect life with school improves student outcomes. So be patient when introducing it to students, and try, try again.

RESOURCES:



FACILITATION
GUIDE

STUDENT
ACTIVITY

PREP
ACTIVITY

EXAMPLES

Build Connections for Classrooms: Facilitation Guide

HOW TO USE

Before using Build Connections, students should understand the *purpose* and unpack examples. We recommend this sequence:

1. Prep Activity
Includes student stories, or you could develop your own.
2. Animation
www.characterlab.org/build-connections
3. Examples (Student + Teacher)
4. Student Activity

FAQ

HOW SHOULD I PREPARE TO LEAD THIS ACTIVITY?

Before you lead it with students, try the activity yourself. While you practice, reflect on your own process and the type of thinking you use. This will help you model the activity and coach students.

WHAT HELPS STUDENTS BUILD THE STRONGEST CONNECTIONS?

Students will grow from practice. But if they seem stuck, keep in mind these tips:

1. Students might feel “locked in” to the first connection they make. Encourage them to branch out and be creative.
2. Connections can start with personal interests OR class content. Encourage students to approach it from both sides.
3. Connections might be important now or in the future. Consider both when brainstorming.

WHAT SHOULD I DO AFTER THE ACTIVITY?

Reviewing student responses is a great opportunity to learn more about students and to see what content is meaningful for them.

If you give feedback on their connections, focus on helping students elaborate or clarify.

Going forward, you could use student connections in lesson openers and examples.

HOW CAN THIS ACTIVITY BE EXTENDED?

These student connections are great starting points for individual research and project-based learning. Encourage students to pursue and deepen their connections.

You can also deepen connections by having students write a letter to someone else who would benefit from the connection.

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT AS I ADAPT THIS FOR MY CLASSROOM?

The core of Build Connections is making space for students to reflect on how school can connect to their own passions. Details might change, but at the end of the day, if students make school meaningful on a personal level—or even just start this process—this activity will be a success.

Not every student will make a connection every time, but just offering the activity can benefit students.

SAMPLE SCRIPT

Try saying something like this to the class. Give sufficient wait time between steps.

1. *First, we’ll brainstorm things that are important and interesting to you. List them in section ①. Think about what you do for fun, what you like to learn about, or what you want to do in the future.*
2. *Now we’re going to think about the things you’ve learned in this [unit/lesson]. In section ②, list major topics you remember. Include specific vocabulary and details.*
3. *Next we’ll think about POSSIBLE connections. This section can be challenging at first, so be patient. Looking at columns ① and ②, think about how parts of your life in the first section might connect to the content in the second section. Draw a line when you think of a possible connection and try to think of more.*
4. *Review the connections you brainstormed and pick one that feels significant to you. Summarize it in section ④. The more specific you can be, the better.*
5. *Now, think more about your connection and how it’s important to you. It could be important now or in the future. In section ⑤, summarize why it’s important.*
6. (Optional, recommended) *Now we’re going to share our connections with each other. This is a chance to learn about each other and think more about the content we’re learning. (Use discussion structures that make the most sense for your classroom.)*

Build Connections for Classrooms: Prep Activity

Name _____

1. Sometimes we don't realize how school content is helpful until later in life. Read the following stories from recent graduates about things they learned in school. **Circle the one you relate to most.**

“ Growing up, my mother had her own business. I was always excited when she'd get the merchandise she ordered. She'd always know how much she paid for it, which determined how much she'd need to sell it for in order to make a profit. From the second she ordered the merchandise she was calculating her potential income. Now I realize that if she made a mistake in her math, then she could lose a lot of money!” —KAI

“ During August of last year, I had an eye injury. If I didn't go to the doctor, I would have lost my vision. After my surgery, my parents and I went to many doctor visits. Having learned about vision and the anatomy of the eye helped me a lot. I was able to better understand what the doctor was saying, and how the surgery would help me. I was even able to explain to my parents what exactly happened. They seemed really confused, and it felt good to be able to help them understand!” —JOSH

“ Air pollution is a significant problem in my city. It causes lots of people to have asthma and other respiratory problems. We learned in class that things like burning fossil fuels cause pollution, but we can offset this impact by using alternative energy sources, like wind and solar power, or just reducing energy consumption. This is good to know so we can make better choices about what types and how much energy we use. This information helps me understand the government's role in energy regulation, and how it's changing.” —RAMONE

“ I had an internship this summer at a company and was totally surprised at how often I had to write and present. The lessons I had learned about writing in my English classes were really important. I had to be able to make arguments or explain things clearly in order to communicate with people in the company and their clients. My teacher always talked about communication skills being important but it really hit me at that job.” —ALEXIS

2. Explain what you found interesting about the story you circled.

BUILD CONNECTIONS

Student Example: Math

Connect school topics to personal interests in your daily life.

① What are your interests, hobbies, and personal goals?

Basketball

Video Games

Texting

Hang out with team

Dogs

Sneakers

Basketball Scholarship

Design my own shoes

② What topics have you learned about in class recently?

Functions describe relationships b/w quantities

Inverse - one decreases as other increases

Example:
Higher altitude -> lower temperature

Linear - both variables increase at constant rate

③ Brainstorm connections. Draw lines between any interests in column ① and topics in column ② that you think are connected.

④ Develop a connection by filling in this sentence:

Video games and linear functions
interest from ① and topic from ②

are connected because I can use a function to decide if I should rent a video game (linear function) or buy it (fixed cost) based on how much I will use it.

⑤ Think more about your connection by filling in this sentence:

Linear functions could be important to
topic from ④

my life because I can use them to determine the exact usage over time that would make buying something cheaper than renting it.

BUILD CONNECTIONS

Student Example: English

Connect school topics to personal interests in your daily life.

<p>① What are your interests, hobbies, and personal goals?</p> <p><u>Movies!</u> _____</p> <p><u>Music</u> _____</p> <p><u>Dancing</u> _____</p> <p><u>Make dance team!!</u> _____</p> <p><u>Q2 Honor Roll</u> _____</p> <p><u>Help abandoned animals</u> _____</p> <p><u>Learn to play guitar</u> _____</p> <p><u>Become a vet</u> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>② What topics have you learned about in class recently?</p> <p><u>Great Gatsby</u> _____</p> <p><u>Symbolism - shirts=wealth</u> _____</p> <p><u>Theme - greed as fatal flaw</u> _____</p> <p><u>Is the American dream possible?</u> _____</p> <p><u>Details - clothes</u> _____</p> <p><u>Daisy hair/voice, material goods</u> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>③ Brainstorm connections. Draw lines between any interests in column ① and topics in column ② that you think are connected.</p> <p>④ Develop a connection by filling in this sentence:</p> <p><u>Dancing</u> _____ and <u>narrative theme</u> _____ <small>interest from ①</small> <small>topic from ②</small></p> <p>are connected because <u>both express important ideas indirectly - dance uses movement, novel uses story</u> _____.</p> <p>⑤ Think more about your connection by filling in this sentence:</p> <p><u>Narrative theme</u> _____ could be important to <small>topic from ④</small></p> <p>my life because <u>I can think about what messages my dance routines communicate and pick important themes to express</u> _____.</p>
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BUILD CONNECTIONS

Student Example: Social Studies

Connect school topics to personal interests in your daily life.

<p>① What are your interests, hobbies, and personal goals?</p> <p>Comic Books</p> <p>Movies (Marvel)</p> <p>Music</p> <p>Draw my own comic</p> <p>Visit China</p> <p>Get new phone</p> <p>Get a summer job</p> <p>My cat</p>	<p>② What topics have you learned about in class recently?</p> <p>Civil rights leaders</p> <p>Gandhi - lawyer, satyagraha, independence for India, salt march</p> <p>Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - preacher, civil disobedience, Montgomery Bus Boycott, voting rights, equality under law</p>	<p>③ Brainstorm connections. Draw lines between any interests in column ① and topics in column ② that you think are connected.</p> <p>④ Develop a connection by filling in this sentence:</p> <p>Choosing a new phone <small>interest from ①</small> and civil rights leaders <small>topic from ②</small> are connected because many used economic choices, like not buying cloth or boycotting buses, to effect change. I can too.</p> <p>⑤ Think more about your connection by filling in this sentence:</p> <p>Civil rights leaders <small>topic from ④</small> could be important to my life because I should research what I buy (like phone) to know how my choices could help or harm others.</p>
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BUILD CONNECTIONS

Student Example: Science

Connect school topics to personal interests in your daily life.

① What are your interests, hobbies, and personal goals?

Cross country

Hiking with my family

Food!

Student government

TV (Spongebob)

Volunteering

Win Districts

Pass all my APs

Become a doctor

② What topics have you learned about in class recently?

Organ systems and homeostasis

Organs all have roles to meet needs

In cells, all parts have roles too

Homeostasis: body is in equilibrium

When body is NOT in homeostasis for too long, we get sick or die

③ Brainstorm connections. Draw lines between any interests in column ① and topics in column ② that you think are connected.

④ Develop a connection by filling in this sentence:

Becoming a doctor interest from ① and homeostasis topic from ②

are connected because I can find what is

threatening the balance in the body in

order to diagnose patients.

⑤ Think more about your connection by filling in this sentence:

Homeostasis topic from ④ could be important to

my life because I can best help patients if I

base decisions on many factors affecting

them, like stress and eating habits

BUILD CONNECTIONS

Annotated Exemplar: Math

Connect school topics to personal interests in your daily life.

① What are your interests, hobbies, and personal goals?

Basketball

Video Games

Texting

Hang out with team

Dogs

Sneakers

Basketball Scholarship

Design my own shoes

Be in a video game

Complete/robust range of interests

② What topics have you learned about in class recently?

Functions describe relationships b/w quantities

Inverse - one decreases as other increases

Example: Higher altitude -> lower temperature

Linear - both variables increase at constant rate

Includes content vocabulary

③ Brainstorm connections. Draw lines between any interests in column ① and topics in column ② that you think are connected.

④ Develop a connection by filling in this sentence:

Video games and linear functions
interest from ① and topic from ②

are connected because I can use a function to decide

if I should rent a video game (linear function) or
Describe connection clearly & precisely
buy it (fixed cost) based on how much I will use it

⑤ Think more about your connection by filling in this sentence:

Linear functions could be important to
topic from ④

my life because I can use them to compare
different options in the future, like buying
or paying a monthly fee for my phone

Importance is personal & actionable

BUILD CONNECTIONS

Teacher Example

Connect school topics to personal interests in your daily life.

① What are your interests, hobbies, and personal goals?

Travel

Running

Reading

Podcasts

Hamilton/Broadway

Trying new restaurants

Yoga class

Plan trip to Canada

② What topics have you learned about in class recently?

Poetry

Literature where feelings/ideas are expressed through style and rhythm

ex: Iambic pentameter

Fixed forms

Music as poetry

Alliteration

③ Brainstorm connections. Draw lines between any interests in column ① and topics in column ② that you think are connected.

④ Develop a connection by filling in this sentence:

Running interest from ① and Poetry topic from ②

are connected because both involve rhythm and pacing your performance to a beat

⑤ Think more about your connection by filling in this sentence:

Poetry topic from ② could be important to

my life because rhythm and pacing can help me pick music for running. Music with similar rhythm to my run speed can help me keep pace.