

Concept Formation At a Glance

Source:

Silver, H., & Strong, R. (2007). [Chapter 7: Concept Attainment](#). In *The strategic teacher: Selecting the right research-based strategy for every lesson*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

What Is It?

Concept Formation is an inductive teaching strategy that helps students form a clear understanding of a concept (or idea) through studying a small set of examples of the concept.

Rationale

Concepts are the “furniture” of our minds. A well-furnished mind is a source of joy, academic success, citizenship, career satisfaction, and lifelong learning. When a student forms a concept from its examples, he or she knows more than the definition of a term (e.g., *river*: he or she also knows some vivid examples of the concept that add flesh to a bare-bones definition, such as the Mississippi, the Amazon, the Yangtze, and the Volga). This is deep conceptual learning rather than superficial knowledge of a vocabulary word.

Description

A concept is defined by critical characteristics shared by all examples of the concept. For something to be an example of a concept, it must contain all these critical characteristics. To help students form the concept, the teacher helps them first to see these critical characteristics across different examples and, then to summarize those characteristics in a definition that students themselves write. There are two key parts to Concept Formation. Students begin by studying multiple examples of the concept to be learned, and then the teacher helps them see the similarities across these examples. When these similarities are established in students’ minds, they form the concept.

Teacher Preparation

1. **Select a concept.** Choose one that is at the core of your curriculum.
2. **List the critical characteristics of the concept.**
3. **Assemble a good set of examples.**
4. **Make a data-organization chart.**
5. **Assemble a good set of non-examples.**

In the Classroom

1. **Interest building.** Reminds students of a recent experience that could be related to the concept
2. **Assess** your students’ pre-instructional understanding of the concept.
3. **Studying multiple examples.** Create a data-organization chart that contains four examples down the left column and focus questions across the top. These questions focus students’ attention on the critical attributes.
4. **Noting differences.** The next day, verify that students have completed the chart. Then ask students, “In what ways do these differ?”
5. **Noting similarities.** Ask, “In what ways are these all alike?” Record students’ responses on the chalkboard for use in the next step. (*Note:* This is the phase of the lesson when students themselves identify the critical characteristics of the concept, which are the similarities across the examples.)
6. **Summarizing.** Direct students to “take a few minutes now to jot down a summary of these similarities in one complete sentence. Let’s begin the summary with, “These are all ways of governing that. . . .” Students compose their own definition of the concept, working with the list of similarities still on the chalkboard from Step 5. Allow time for sharing and listen carefully to the concepts they have formed. Provide feedback and correction as needed. Students then compose a second draft, taking more care to include all the critical attributes of democracy in their summaries.
7. **Labeling.** Ask, “What is a word you might use to describe governments like these? Be creative—invent a word if you like. Make sure it captures the essence of this kind of government.” After eliciting several nicknames, tell students that the conventional label for this kind of government is *democracy*. Then use a good dictionary to read aloud the etymology of this Greek term for “rule by the people.”
8. **Application.** Now that students have built a rough idea of democracy, it is time to reinforce and practice it with a classifying activity.
 - **Classifying type 1.** Ask students to read the brief description of the example and then to decide whether it is an example of the concept.
 - **Classifying type 2.** Give students information about two or three other examples and ask them to decide which of them, if any, is an example of the concept. This time have them write down their reasons. Call on several students to share their decisions and reasons

- *Classifying type 3.* Form teams of three to four students and direct each team to brainstorm a fictional example of a the concept.
 - *Classifying type 4.* Tell students that you will describe a non-example of the concept. The students' task is to describe the changes that would be needed to make it into the concept.
9. **Summary.** Ask a sample of students to review the critical characteristics of democracy.

Assessment

Any of the four types of classifying in Step 8 will serve as a good assessment of the extent to which students have formed the concept. The proof is not in the decisions they reach (thumbs up; thumbs down), but in the reasons they give.