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**First-year students' use of prior knowledge in the learning of
acids and bases**

by

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Abstract

Title: First-year students' use of prior knowledge in the learning of acids and bases.

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Science has been perceived as difficult to learn because of its nature and the methods by which it is usually taught. Most first-year science students entering higher education in South Africa today come from disadvantaged teaching and learning backgrounds. These students bring different “knowledge, skills or abilities” into the learning process. This knowledge, referred to as prior knowledge – or what the student already knows – is the single most important factor influencing learning (Ausubel, 1968). It is on the basis of this influence of prior knowledge on learning that the focus in this study is on understanding its manifestation in learning. Prior knowledge has both facilitating and inhibiting effects in learning. However, the focus in this study was only on *inhibiting effects* of prior knowledge on learning. To better understand prior knowledge qualitative methods (interview, observation, document review and the prior knowledge state test) were used. The aim was to specifically establish how students used their understanding of selected acid-base concepts and processes to *construct understanding* and to *generate meaning* of new concepts and/or knowledge. The study managed to highlight important aspects of the quality of prior knowledge and their manifestation in learning. The findings generally indicated that:

- The quality of the knowledge that students possessed was in most instances incomplete. That is, in their description of concepts, students preferred to use *summary* and *informal* descriptions without understanding the meaning of the concepts they were describing.
- The quality of knowledge (e.g. incomplete knowledge) affected their ability to construct understanding and/or generate meaning as this knowledge

was insufficient to access for the construction of scientifically valid meanings of concepts.

- The quality of students' knowledge impeded their ability to *reflect* and/or to be *aware* of the knowledge they possessed. This made it difficult for students to access knowledge and to restructure it in order to construct new knowledge or prevent errors in their learning.

The study culminated in the development of a framework that may in future be used to assess prior knowledge and enhance meaningful teaching and learning based on the quality of students' prior knowledge.

Key terms

Prior knowledge; inhibiting effects; knowledge construction; generate meaning; quality of knowledge; incomplete knowledge; knowledge restructuring; accessing knowledge; error prevention; and types of knowledge.



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Signature:

T. D. T. Sedumedi.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
CHAPTER ONE	1
General orientation of the study	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Background and rationale.....	3
1.3 Purpose statement	8
1.4 Research question(s)	9
Major question	9
Research sub-questions	9
1.5 Aims and objectives of the study	9
1.6 Significance of the study.....	11
1.7 Literature review	12
1.8 Research methodology.....	14
1.8.1 Research design	15
1.8.2 Instrumentation	15
1.9 Summary	23
CHAPTER TWO	24
Making sense of prior knowledge and learning	24
2.1 Introduction.....	24
2.2 Understanding learning	25
2.2.1 Behavioural view on learning	26
2.2.2 Cognitive view on learning.....	26
2.2.3 Constructivist view on learning	27
2.3 Understanding knowledge	29
2.4 Knowledge acquisition.....	31
2.4.1 Knowledge construction	32
2.4.2 All meaning is relational	38
2.5 Origin, nature and learning of science	38
2.5.1 The nature of science	39
2.5.2 Nature of chemistry.....	41
2.6 Learning science: A constructivist view	43



2.7	Teaching science.....	46
2.7.1	Understanding the process stage of teaching.....	49
2.7.2	Culture of science teaching.....	51
2.7.3	The language of science and the language of scientific teaching.....	52
2.8	Practical work in science teaching.....	54
2.8.1	Aims of practical work.....	55
2.8.2	Practical work as a teaching strategy.....	57
2.8.3	Cognitive goals: intellectual development.....	58
2.8.4	Creative thinking and problem solving.....	59
2.8.5	Practical goals.....	59
2.8.6	Affective goals: attitude and interest.....	60
2.9	Conceptual framework.....	61
2.9.1	Mapping prior knowledge.....	62
2.9.2	Prior knowledge as a bridge and/or barrier in learning.....	67
2.10	Summary.....	72
CHAPTER THREE.....		73
Research design and methodology.....		73
3.1	Introduction.....	73
3.2	Research methodology.....	73
3.3	Research design.....	74
3.3.1	Instrumentation.....	75
3.3.2	Defining the content.....	75
3.3.3	Obtaining information about student conception.....	76
3.4	Data collection methods and procedures.....	76
3.4.1	Data collection methods.....	77
3.4.2	Explaining data collection instruments.....	81
3.4.3	Data analysis process.....	89
3.4.4	Specification of analysis.....	91
3.5	Addressing issues of trustworthiness.....	94
3.5.1	Pilot study.....	94
3.5.2	Triangulation.....	95
3.5.3	Member checks.....	95



3.5.4	Peer reviews	96
3.6	Summary	97
CHAPTER FOUR		98
Data processing and management.....		98
4.1	Introduction.....	98
4.2	Data presentation	98
4.2.1	Context for data analysis.....	100
4.3	Data Analysis.....	100
4.3.1	Analysis: Case A (Exhibits 4.1 to 4.4)	101
4.3.2	Analysis: Case B (Exhibits 4.5 to 4.8)	124
4.3.3	Analysis: Case C (Exhibits 4.9 to 4.12)	142
4.4	Summary	159
CHAPTER FIVE.....		161
Findings, conclusion and recommendations		161
5.1	Introduction.....	161
5.2	Description of the analysis framework	163
5.3	Synthesis and explanation.....	167
5.3.1	Finding 1: Specification of a concept	168
5.3.2	Finding 2: Instantiation	171
5.3.3	Finding 3: Error prevention	173
5.4	Significance for instruction, instructional design and assessment ..	176
5.5	Framework for understanding prior knowledge for meaningful learning	180
5.6	Implications for further research	191
5.7	Reflections on the study	192
5.7.1	Reflections on the limitations of the study.....	193
5.7.2	Reflections on the significance of the study.....	196
5.8	Conclusion.....	198
References		200
APPENDIX A.....		218
Observation and Interview Schedule		218
APPENDIX B.....		218
Prior Knowledge State Test		219



APPENDIX C	221
Practical work task	221
APPENDIX D	222
Propositional statements representing knowledge of acids and bases and titration processes	222
APPENDIX E	227
Geographical map of South Africa	227
APPENDIX F	228
Approval to conduct interviews	228
APPENDIX G	229
Ethics clearance certificate	229

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Mathematics and physical science performance by group, 1991 (Kahn, 2005)	5
Table 2: South African grade 12 students: Mathematics literacy compared to selected countries (Adapted from Howie & Pietersen, 2001, p. 10).....	6
Table 3: Instrumentation questions.....	16
Table 4: Types of constructivism and their assumptions about teaching and learning	28
Table 5: Knowledge acquisition: Comparison of the equilibration theory and the information-processing model	35
Table 6: Research questions, objectives and methods	77
Table 7: Bloom's classification of cognitive skills (Adapted from Bloom, 1956)	83
Table 8: Summary on students' profiles.....	99

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The empirical study process	19
Figure 2: Students' personal mental models and/or scientifically valid conceptual models (Adapted from Glynn & Duit, 1995)	37
Figure 3: Parallelism between the origin and nature of science and Millar's two domains of knowledge.....	40
Figure 4: The triangular representation of the forms of matter in chemistry (Adapted from Johnstone, 1982).....	42
Figure 5: The three-phase model of teaching and learning (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974).....	48
Figure 6: The communication model (Schramm's adaptation of Shannon's model).....	53
Figure 7: A conceptual map of prior knowledge (Dochy & Alexander, 1995)	65
Figure 8: Interaction of qualities of prior knowledge as they affect learning ..	69
Figure 9: Interaction of inhibiting qualities and the facilitating effect of prior knowledge on learning	70
Figure 10: Selection of final sample for the study.....	81
Figure 11: Continuum of observation types (Evertson & Green, 1986).....	85

Figure 12: Data collection process	86
Figure 13: Framework for assessing prior knowledge and its usage.....	164
Figure 14: Prior knowledge framework for enhancing meaningful teaching and learning of chemistry	182