



How People Learn

Module 2: Cognitive Processes of Learners

Schemas, Assimilation, and Accommodation

A “schema” is an organized pattern of thought that establishes a mental framework that represents some aspect of the world. We develop schemas for all types of items and activities, from simple items -- such as a chair, car, fish, bird, or house -- to complex, like the chemical bonds between atoms or the seating in the House of Representatives. In short, we develop cognitive patterns for many things. We then use the schema we have developed as a means to compare new information against.

Here's an example. You have a schema for a chair, a bed, and a sofa. The first time you see a futon, you immediately search your stored schema to see if it fits with anything you have already encountered. If it comes close, you make subtle changes to your schema to include the new item. In this example, you now have a schema of a sofa that includes the traditional characteristics along with those of a futon.

So when you can add new information into an existing schema with little effort, you have experienced the cognitive process known as “assimilation.”

When you need to store new information that conflicts with the schema you already have in place, a schema overhaul is in order. The process of “accommodation” involves the altering of schemas as a result of new information or new experiences, and new schemas may be developed during this process.