

# Expanding the 5E Model

*A proposed 7E model emphasizes “transfer of learning”  
and the importance of eliciting prior understanding*

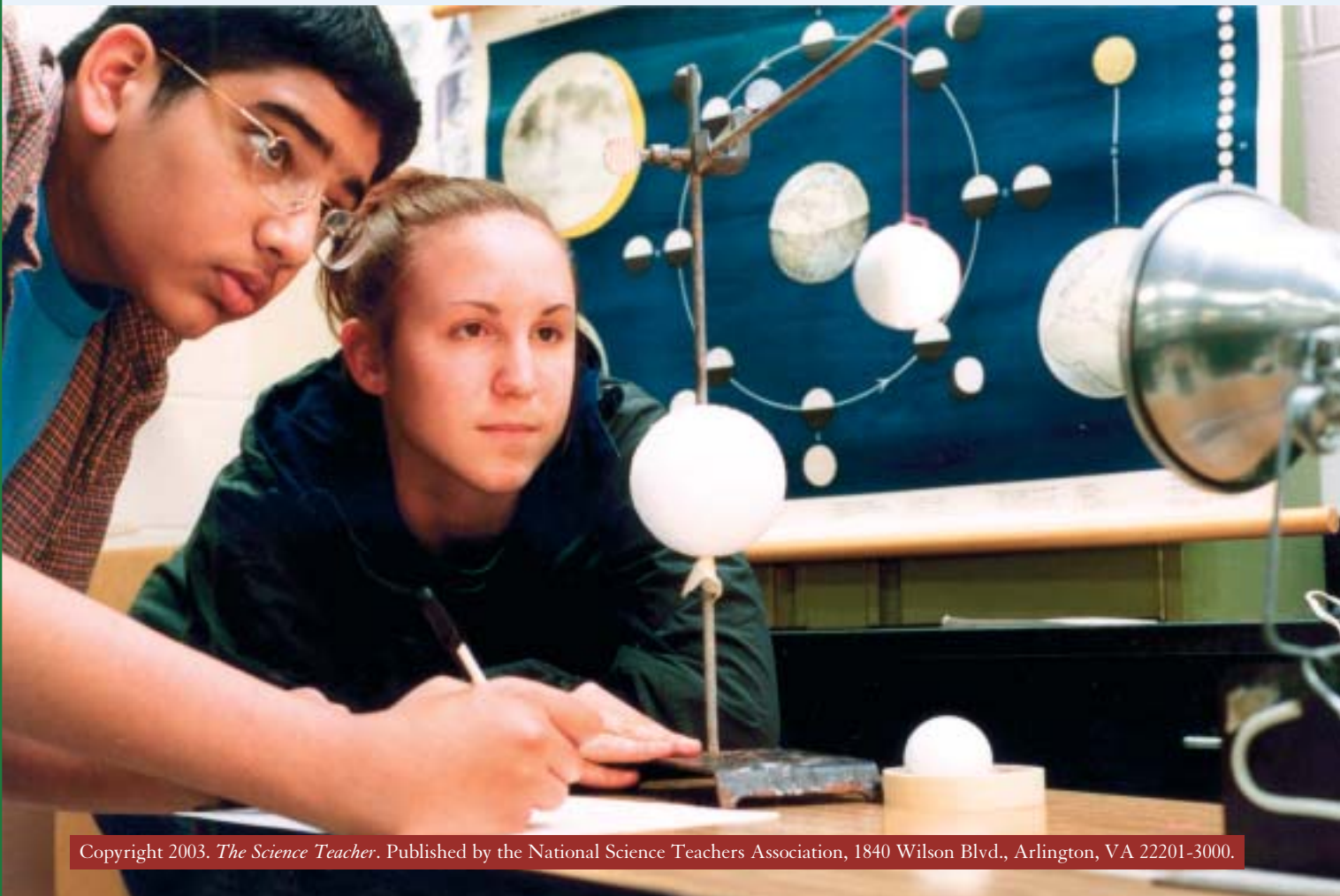
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— Arthur Eisenkraft —

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**S**ometimes a current model must be amended to maintain its value after new information, insights, and knowledge have been gathered. Such is now the case with the highly successful 5E learning cycle and instructional model (Bybee 1997). Research on how people learn and the incorporation of that research into lesson plans and curriculum development demands that the 5E model be expanded to a 7E model.

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The 5E learning cycle model requires instruction to include the following discrete elements: *engage*, *explore*, *explain*, *elaborate*, and *evaluate*. The proposed 7E model expands the *engage* element into two components—*elicit* and *engage*. Similarly, the 7E model expands the two stages of *elaborate* and *evaluate* into three components—*elaborate*, *evaluate*, and *extend*. The transition from the 5E model to the 7E model is illustrated in Figure 1.

These changes are not suggested to add complexity, but rather to ensure instructors do not omit crucial elements for learning from their lessons while under the incorrect assumption they are meeting the requirements of the learning cycle.

### Eliciting prior understandings

Current research in cognitive science has shown that eliciting prior understandings is a necessary component of the learning process. Research also has shown that expert learners are much more adept at the transfer of learning than novices and that practice in the transfer of learning is required in good instruction (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000).

The *engage* component in the 5E model is intended to capture students' attention, get students thinking about the subject matter, raise questions in students' minds, stimulate thinking, and access prior knowledge. For example, teachers may engage students by creating surprise or doubt through a demonstration that shows a piece of steel sinking and a steel toy boat floating. Similarly, a teacher may place an ice cube into a glass of water and have the class observe it float while the same ice cube placed in a second glass of liquid sinks. The corresponding conversation with the students may access their prior learning. The students should have the opportunity to ask and attempt to answer, "Why is it that the toy boat does not sink?"

The *engage* component includes both accessing prior knowledge and generating enthusiasm for the subject matter. Teachers may excite students, get them interested and ready to learn, and believe they are fulfilling the *engage* phase of the learning cycle, while ignoring the need to find out what prior knowledge students bring to the topic. The importance of *eliciting* prior understandings in ascertaining what students know prior to a lesson is imperative. Recognizing that students construct knowledge from existing knowledge, teachers need to find out what existing knowledge their students possess. Failure to do so may result in students developing concepts very different from the ones the teacher intends (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000).

A straightforward means by which teachers may elicit prior understandings is by framing a "what do you think" question at the outset of the lesson as is done consistently in some current curricula. For example, a common physics lesson on seat belts might begin with a question about designing seat belts for a racecar traveling at a high rate of

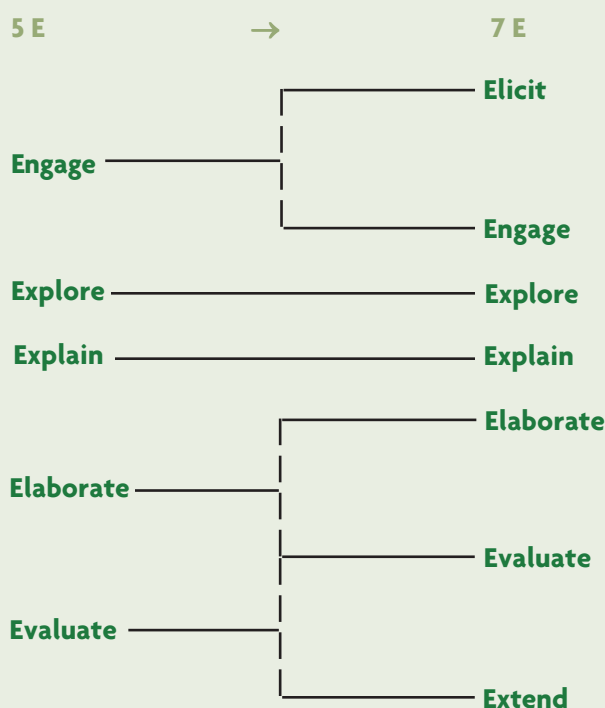
speed (Figure 2, p. 58). "How would they be different from ones available on passenger cars?" Students responding to this question communicate what they know about seat belts and inform themselves, their classmates, and the teacher about their prior conceptions and understandings. There is no need to arrive at consensus or closure at this point. Students do not assume the teacher will tell them the "right" answer. The "what do you think" question is intended to begin the conversation.

The proposed expansion of the 5E model does not exchange the *engage* component for the *elicit* component; the *engage* component is still a necessary element in good instruction. The goal is to continue to excite and interest students in whatever ways possible and to identify prior conceptions. Therefore the *elicit* component should stand alone as a reminder of its importance in learning and constructing meaning.

### Explore and explain

The *explore* phase of the learning cycle provides an opportunity for students to observe, record data, isolate variables, design and plan experiments, create graphs, interpret results, develop hypotheses, and organize their findings. Teachers may frame questions, suggest approaches, provide feedback, and assess understandings. An excellent example of teaching a lesson on the metabolic rate of water fleas (Lawson 2001) illustrates the

**FIGURE 1**  
The proposed 7E learning cycle and instructional model.



**FIGURE 2**

## Seatbelt lesson using the 7E model.

### Elicit prior understandings

- ◆ Students are asked, “Suppose you had to design seat belts for a racecar traveling at high speeds. How would they be different from ones available on passenger cars?” The students are required to write a brief response to this “What do you think?” question in their logs and then share with the person sitting next to them. The class then listens to some of the responses. This requires a few minutes of class time.

### Engage

- ◆ Students relate car accidents they have witnessed in movies or in real life.

### Explore

- ◆ The first part of the exploration requires students to construct a clay figure they can sit on a cart. The cart is then crashed into a wall. The clay figure hits the wall.

### Explain

- ◆ Students are given a name for their observations. Newton’s first law states, “Objects at rest stay at rest; objects in motion stay in motion unless acted upon by a force.”

### Engage

- ◆ Students view videos of crash test dummies during automobile crashes.

### Explore

- ◆ Students are asked how they could save the clay figure from injury during the crash into the wall. The suggestion that the clay figure will require a seat belt leads to another experiment. A thin wire is used as a seat belt. The students construct a seat belt from the wire and ram the cart and figure into the wall again. The wire seat belt keeps the clay figure from hitting the wall, but the wire slices halfway through the midsection.

### Explain

- ◆ Students recognize that a wider seatbelt is needed. The relationship of pressure, force, and area is introduced.

### Elaborate

- ◆ Students then construct better seat belts and explain their value in terms of Newton’s first law and forces.

### Evaluate

- ◆ Students are asked to design a seat belt for a racing car that travels at 250 km/h. They compare their designs with actual safety belts used by NASCAR.

### Extend

- ◆ Students are challenged to explore how airbags work and to compare and contrast airbags with seat belts. One of the questions explored is, “How does the airbag get triggered? Why does the airbag not inflate during a small fender-bender but does inflate when the car hits a tree?”

effectiveness of the learning cycle with varying amounts of teacher and learner ownership and control (Gil 2002).

Students are introduced to models, laws, and theories during the *explain* phase of the learning cycle. Students summarize results in terms of these new theories and models. The teacher guides students toward coherent and consistent generalizations, helps students with distinct scientific vocabulary, and provides questions that help students use this vocabulary to explain the results of their explorations. The distinction between the explore and explain components ensures that concepts precede terminology.

### Applying knowledge

The *elaborate* phase of the learning cycle provides an opportunity for students to apply their knowledge to new domains, which may include raising new questions and hypotheses to explore. This phase may also include related numerical problems for students to solve. When students explore the heating curve of water and the related heats of fusion and vaporization, they can then perform a similar experiment with another liquid or, using data from a reference table, compare and contrast materials with respect to freezing and boiling points. A further elaboration may ask students to consider the specific heats of metals in comparison to water and to explain why pizza from the oven remains hot but aluminum foil beneath the pizza cools so rapidly.

The elaboration phase ties directly to the psychological construct called “transfer of learning” (Thorndike 1923). Schools are created and supported with the expectation that more general uses of knowledge will be found outside of school and beyond the school years (Hilgard and Bower 1975). Transfer of learning can range from transfer of one concept to another (e.g., Newton’s law of gravitation and Coulomb’s law of electrostatics); one school subject to another (e.g., math skills applied in scientific investigations); one year to another (e.g., significant figures, graphing, chemistry concepts in physics); and school to nonschool activities (e.g., using a graph to calculate whether it is cost

effective to join a video club or pay a higher rate on rentals) (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000).

Too often, the elaboration phase has come to mean an elaboration of the specific concepts. Teachers may provide the specific heat of a second substance and have students perform identical calculations. This practice in transfer of learning seems limited to near transfer as opposed to far or distant transfer (Mayer 1979). Even though teachers expect wonderful results when they limit themselves to near transfer with large similarities between the original task and the transfer task, they know students often find elaborations difficult. And as difficult as near transfer is for students, the distant transfer is usually a much harder road to traverse. Students who are quite able to discuss phase changes of substances and their related freezing points, melting points, and heats of fusion and vaporization may find it exceedingly difficult to transfer the concept of phase change as a means of explaining traffic congestion.

### Practicing the transfer of learning

The addition of the *extend* phase to the *elaborate* phase is intended to explicitly remind teachers of the importance for students to practice the transfer of learning. Teachers need to make sure that knowledge is applied in a new context and is not limited to simple elaboration. For instance, in another common activity students may be required to invent a sport that can be played on the moon. An activity on friction informs students that friction increases with weight. Because objects weigh less on the moon, frictional forces are expected to be less on the moon. That elaboration is useful. Students must go one step further and extend this friction concept to the unique sports and corresponding play they are developing for the moon environment.

The *evaluate* phase of the learning cycle continues to include both formative and summative evaluations of student learning. If teachers truly value the learning cycle and experiments that students conduct in the classroom, then teachers should be sure to include aspects of these investigations on tests. Tests should include questions from the lab and should ask students questions about the laboratory activities. Students should be asked to interpret data from a lab similar to the one they completed. Students should also be asked to design experiments as part of their assessment (Colburn and Clough 1997).

Formative evaluation should not be limited to a particular phase of the cycle. The cycle should not be linear. Formative evaluation must take place during all interactions with students. The *elicit* phase is a formative evaluation. The *explore* phase and *explain* phase must always be accompanied by techniques whereby the teacher checks for student understanding.

Replacing *elaborate* and *evaluate* with *elaborate*, *extend*, and *evaluate* as shown in Figure 1, p. 57, is a way to emphasize that the transfer of learning, as required in the extend phase, may also be used as part of the evaluation phase in the learning cycle.

### Enhancing the instructional model

Adopting a 7E model ensures that eliciting prior understandings and opportunities for transfer of learning are not omitted. With a 7E model, teachers will *engage* and *elicit* and students will *elaborate* and *extend*. This is not the first enhancement of instructional models, nor will it be the last. Readers should not reject the enhancement because they are used to the traditional 5E model, or worse yet, because they hold the 5E model sacred. The 5E model is itself an enhancement of the three-phase learning cycle that included exploration, invention, and discovery (Karplus and Thier 1967.) In the 5E model, these phases were initially referred to as explore, explain, and expand. In another learning cycle, they are referred to as exploration, term introduction, and concept application (Lawson 1995).

The 5E learning cycle has been shown to be an extremely effective approach to learning (Lawson 1995; Guzzetti et al. 1993). The goal of the 7E learning model is to emphasize the increasing importance of eliciting prior understandings and the extending, or transfer, of concepts. With this new model, teachers should no longer overlook these essential requirements for student learning. ■

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The 5E Model of Instruction was exactly what I needed to streamline the process of planning and implementing a student-led inquiry-based learning method. It provides a template, a pattern for lesson planning, and guides the teacher in this better way of teaching science. Each stage of the model serves as a foundation to the next, creating a coherent model that frames lessons, activities, and units. The 5E Instructional Model was created in 1987 by the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS). In summary: The 5E Model is a constructivist science learning method involving 5 key phases: Engagement, Exploration, Explanation, Elaboration and Evaluation. Here's what you need to know about the 5E Model of instruction – what the phases are, their desired outcomes, and what it looks like in class – so you can implement it for your students. But first – A brief history of the 5E Model. In 1987, a team of science educators were tasked with developing a new program for elementary science and health. This model describes a teaching sequence that can be used for entire programs, specific units and individual lessons. The NASA Digital Learning Network supports the 5E constructivist learning cycle, helping students build their own understanding from experiences and new ideas. What are the 5Es? The 5Es represent five stages of a sequence for teaching and learning: Engage, Explore, Explain, Extend (or Elaborate), and Evaluate.