



Accessing Prior Knowledge by Understanding High School Again

Secondary education is a common experience among college students. Less common, however, are the *types* of experiences students had in high school. In order to be inclusive, leaders on college campuses must seek to understand the perceptions and realities of students, which includes understanding that students come from different high schools and socioeconomic backgrounds, but also that the secondary education experience even in similar high schools can produce a variety of outcomes in students' grasp of academic norms.

I have observed the relationship between high school experiences and college preparedness. I am an adjunct English instructor at two community colleges in the greater Detroit, Michigan area, but I am also a full-time high school English teacher. For the last five years, I have watched where pathways break down in the transition from high school to college. Because each student undergoes a unique educational experience, it is impossible to guess what students know, retain, expect, or understand about the regulation, content, or skill needed to be successful in a collegiate setting. I explain below how to gain an appreciation of such student diversity and I share the strategies I use to expand student learning by tapping into their prior knowledge.

Prior Knowledge Is Unique

Accessing prior knowledge is a powerful tool for engaging students in their learning and promoting their success. The issue, however, is that prior knowledge is as personal as the person who owns it. Though the high school experience may seem fairly uniform on the surface, classroom and campus norms are constantly evolving. For instance, the policies on student cell phone use in the classroom can be incredibly different from one high school to another. Some high schools ban it altogether, while other schools encourage incorporating cell phones into the classroom to help students learn and perform better. In turn, these policies trickle down into students' knowledge of academic and classroom expectations and diversify the high school experience across student populations.

Most important to drawing upon prior knowledge for teaching at the college level is appreciating the gaps in academic experiences as a result of differences in high school curricula and socioeconomic cultures. It is easy to spot these differences in collected assignments, group work, and class discussions. Therefore, not finding out

what students know before beginning a college course is a missed opportunity. The following three techniques will help you draw upon students' prior knowledge and make your classes and instruction more relatable for students, regardless of their secondary education experience.

Technique 1

Have students complete a quick reflection on a single question in class or as a take-home assignment. The question should aggregate responses for a practice or content awareness you hope to develop in the course so it helps establish class expectations or benchmarks for students' prior knowledge. For instance, ask students to reflect on their prior classroom experiences with cell phones in order to recommend how cell phones should be used in your class, if at all. This can help instructors more effectively enforce a technology policy or understand what students find to be practical, justified, or needed. A content awareness example is asking students what they remember most about grammar or essay organization from high school—what did their high school English teachers emphasize most? These concept-based questions engage students' prior learning and help instructors develop better pedagogy.

Technique 2

Asking students to reflect on past experiences and practice in small, in-class groups can fill gaps in student knowledge and encourage a diversity of experiences for learning. Group assignments can be as simple as asking students to collectively determine the three to five most important aspects of lab work that can then become classroom norms or expectations. Assignments can also be content-driven, for example posting a math problem on the board and asking groups to determine how to best approach such a problem before solving it. Group responses to content-based questions can reveal gaps in concept knowledge that instructors might not observe during lecture or direct instruction.

Technique 3

A final technique is to simply ask students about their previous experiences. This may already be a part of your toolkit, since inviting reflection and response allows for more meaningful interactions with students. This type of inquiry can open up class discussions, allowing the instructor to facilitate critical thinking by injecting thoughts and questions along the way. It can also be accomplished by asking for a show of hands for

who recognizes any part of the content being delivered to the class. Alternatively, asking students to raise their hands (instead of requiring a specific, verbal response) if they see the resolution to a problem before it is finished increases confidence in participation once students can privately gauge they have the necessary knowledge.

Final Thoughts

These three techniques are best used early in a course to gauge classroom baselines or before introducing a new concept or classroom norm. Since instructors should routinely survey students for differences in prior knowledge, implementing these techniques for more information can be used whenever necessary. Often students know more than they think they do, but it is impossible to assess the appropriate level of rigor for a classroom without accessing students' prior knowledge.

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