**Prior Knowledge**



**About Tapping Prior Knowledge**

For a student, new content can be overwhelming. There are new vocabulary words, ideas, and concepts that others seem to understand easily or have experienced before. Teachers can help their students make the transition from the unfamiliar by tapping students’ prior knowledge. Research shows that we can jump-start learning by accessing preexisting attitudes, experiences, and knowledge and bridge the gap between what is being taught and what is already known.  
  
Teachers can also use prior knowledge to make instruction more meaningful. Many researchers (Peshkin, 1992; Protheroe & Barsdate, 1992; and Lee, 1992) emphasize the importance of incorporating a student's cultural background into the curriculum. As the world changes, students must learn to understand and appreciate the experiences and contributions of people from different backgrounds. A culturally-responsive education links curriculum, instruction, and assessment to the students' experiences, language, and culture, in other words, to their prior knowledge.  
  
Additionally, this instructional strategy defines a proper starting place for instruction and the sequence of instructional activities. As stated by educational psychologist David Ausubel, “The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows.”

**Make it Happen in Your Classroom**

Exercises to access prior knowledge can be used at any grade level, with any content area, and with any subject. Prior knowledge is the proper entry point for instruction because it builds on what is already known, supports comprehension, and makes sense of new learning (Kujawa and Huske, 1995). Tapping students’ prior knowledge is an effective way to start a new unit or lesson and an even better way to get students involved right from the start. Referring back to this knowledge throughout a unit of study will keep students engaged in their learning and keep the material relevant.

**Examples Across the Curriculum**

From simply asking questions aloud to formally using a journal to document students' prior knowledge, there are a wide-range of activities teachers can use. The following examples can be used across the curriculum and at any grade level.  
  
[Written Activities >](http://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/program/education/us/en/documents/project-design/strategies/written-activities.pdf" \t "_blank)  
Activities that prompt students to write and reflect about what they already know about new content. These include quick writes, journals, and learning logs.  
  
[Know-Wonder-Learn Charts (K-W-L) >](http://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/program/education/us/en/swf/teach-elements/pbl/resources/Know-Wonder-Learn-How_Charts.pdf" \t "_blank)  
An instructional technique used to activate students’ prior knowledge, set goals, and record new knowledge gleaned from a unit of study.  
  
[Thinking Activities >](http://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/program/education/us/en/documents/project-design/strategies/thinking-activities.pdf" \t "_blank)  
Activities that tap students’ thinking by giving them an opportunity to make predictions, list and rank ideas, and make analogies based on their prior knowledge.  
 [Discussions >](http://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/program/education/us/en/documents/project-design/strategies/discussions.pdf" \t "_blank)  
Teacher to student and whole class discussions activate students’ prior knowledge by providing opportunities to orally share ideas and discuss opinions.

**References**

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Protheroe, N. J., & Barsdate, K. J. (1992, March). *Culturally Sensitive Instruction. Streamlined Seminar*, 10(4), 1-4.

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