

Using Background Knowledge Probes

In the classic book, *Classroom Assessment Techniques* by Angelo and Cross (copies in most college libraries), the authors share several methods for ascertaining what students know and what they don't as a way for guiding faculty in planning course content or tutorial support for students who do not have adequate prerequisite knowledge for a course. The Background Knowledge Probe (BKP) is one of those methods. It is particularly useful in disciplinary areas where students are likely to have had courses in high school or are required to have taken another course as a prerequisite to yours. They are also useful in documenting pre-post knowledge gains. For example, you can give them a host of multiple-choice or open-ended questions (copy of your comprehensive final exam?) and have them code each question as follows:

1. I don't even recognize the content of this question.
2. I can't answer the question but know where I can look it up.
3. I know the answer to this question.
4. I know the answer and could give at least one example.
5. I know this well enough to teach my classmates about it.

When using a BKP on the first day of class, collect them for a whole-class analysis on what students know – this can be enlightening and helpful in knowing where to start.

Alternatively, BKPs can be useful to students in helping them identify which areas they are weak in and need to devote study time in preparing for a final exam. In this case, you can give them randomized questions from a test bank over the same content your test items measure and have them rate the questions as above. Next, the students can work in study groups to locate the information for each item in the textbook, class notes, etc., marking page numbers on the BKP for later studying. Active discussion of the items and sharing notes can be a good review also!

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