

Setting the Stage:
Constructing Meaning on a New Topic
CETL Capstone Project
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I like to assess students' knowledge of the content in a course very early in the semester. Over the years I have done this in a variety of ways from short reflection papers, to setting goals for the term, or conducting a general discussion. This semester I applied a slightly different technique in CSP 662, The American College Student a core course in the Student Affairs track of the Master's of Science in Counseling and Student Personnel.

K-W-L: A technique for constructing meaning on a new topic

Originated by Donna Ogle (1986), the K-W-L technique is a simple way to determine students' general level of knowledge on a particular topic. It can serve a variety of purposes: it is a method by which faculty can determine the depth and breadth with which course content needs to be emphasized; it is useful in tapping students' knowledge to help them begin to develop their own learning goals in a course and identify areas of strength and weakness relative to the subject matter and; it can be used as a way to introduce a topic and focus attention with reading assignments. I am sure there are other uses as well.

Employing the Technique

During the first phase of the technique, students are asked to identify what they think they "Know" about a topic. This may be a single topic, a unit within a course or an entire course. For instance, the Counseling and Student Personnel course, the American College Student (CSP 662) explores the psychosocial and cognitive-structural development theories that form the basis of student growth and development during college. These theories provide the theoretical framework for professionals who work on college campuses in the various offices in the area of student affairs. This course covers a large body of theory and research--the volume of which can be quite intimidating. Having students identify what they Know about the subject is a non-threatening way to identify what they already understand and perhaps reduce some anxiety. It is also a way to generate excitement about what they will be learning.

For this phase, I had the students divide into groups to list what they know on sheets of newsprint. You can just as easily have the students write stories or draw pictures to demonstrate their knowledge. I used the list for ease of collecting all the responses. Dividing them into groups had the added benefit of helping them start to develop trust and rapport with their fellow classmates.

The second phase of the technique asks the students to identify what they "Want" to know about the topic. Again, I had the groups of students list their thoughts on sheets of newspaper. Students listed questions as well as statements.

In the final phase, students, in the same groups as earlier, were asked what they had 'Learned.' I conducted this phase of the technique late in the semester after we had covered all the theories for the course. The lists of what was learned were hung next to the earlier lists outlining what they knew and wanted to know about the subject. We reassembled as a class and engaged in a general discussion of all three lists.

Outcomes

The students made several observations. They noted how some questions were answered at the same time new questions were raised. Where appropriate, misconceptions and inaccurate beliefs or assumptions were corrected. Students were pleased with the degree to which prior knowledge was affirmed. The lists also provided a visual representation of just how much they had learned over the course of the semester and a way to articulate that knowledge.

After completing the general discussion I asked for feedback on the activity. All thought it was beneficial and helped them conceptualize prior and current knowledge. They provided suggestions for other uses and commented on the utility of the technique any time they approached learning new material. Several students commented on the usefulness of using the technique in other situations such as assessing a situation at work or analyzing a problem.

Overall, I think the experience was helpful and gives me yet another way of assessing prior knowledge and engaging students more actively in understanding new content.

Reference

Ogle, D. (1986). The K-W-L: A teaching model that develops active reading in expository text. *The Reading Teacher*, 39, 564-576.