

Understanding Students' Readiness to Learn

Last spring's move to emergency remote teaching was hard on both faculty and students. In the midst of an unfolding, global crisis and a sudden displacement away from campus, faculty scrambled to move courses online in a matter of days while students attempted to stay connected to their courses and their peers. Given the level of disruption, it's amazing that things turned out as well as they did. Perseverance on the part of faculty and students played a big role in that.

At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that students' experiences from the spring may impact how ready they are to learn coming into your classes this fall. Some students may have knowledge gaps related to important elements of your course. Some may have the prerequisite knowledge to be successful but are disenchanted with the idea of online learning. Others may be apprehensive about how they'll connect with you and their classmates remotely. Still others may feel overwhelmed by current events or by trying to balance school and family responsibilities. All of these dimensions can influence students' capacity to engage with your course.

It's possible to find out more about your students' readiness to learn through short, simple activities. These are typically ungraded exercises that could still count toward participation. They can be stand alone or be appended to traditional homework or quizzes. Once you know where students are starting from in terms of their **knowledge, motivation, and feelings**, you can explore ways to adjust instruction to address any difficulties they might be having.

What do they know?

Students' prior knowledge can help or hinder their learning, depending on the degree of accuracy and completeness of their knowledge around a particular topic. Understanding where students have knowledge gaps will help you know if you need to build any review into your course or otherwise make adjustments.

You can start by identifying the 2-3 most important things that students need to know or be able to do *coming into* your course in order to be successful in it. Are there critical foundational concepts? Specific background information? Particular technical skills? Gathering information from students about these 2-3 things will allow you to establish a baseline of where your students are individually and as a group as far as their prior knowledge or skills.

Things to consider...

- **Ask a colleague** who taught a prerequisite course to help you identify content or skills that may have been covered or practiced with less depth than typical.
- **Keep the stakes low** by using assessments that also serve as learning activities. Using concept mapping, for example, can help illuminate students' current conceptual understanding as well as push their thinking about a particular concept, particularly when done with peers and guided by the instructor.

How motivated are they?

As the reality of online courses and social and physical distancing has set in this fall, students' engagement in college may be waning. Additionally, students studying from home are faced with a range of distractions and barriers to access they don't typically face while on campus. Understanding more about the obstacles your students must overcome in order to stay engaged in your course can help you think about the ways you may need to accommodate their diverse and fluctuating needs as well as the ways you can encourage them to stay motivated.

Things to consider...

- Poll students about ***what worked (and didn't work) in the spring*** will give them the opportunity to share what kept them motivated and when they had problems.
- ***Ask students about their goals*** and what they are interested to learn to help you understand their expectations and incorporate learning activities that boost relevance.
- ***Clearly articulate learning objectives*** at the start the semester and explain how course materials, activities, and assessments are designed to help them achieve those outcomes.

What are they feeling?

The idea of surfacing students' emotions can be daunting, especially given the enormity of recent challenges such as COVID-19 and racialized violence. But students are grateful when faculty acknowledge in class the kinds of "communal crises" they've been experiencing.

Students' sense of belonging, their perceptions of faculty as caring about their learning and development, and their emotional state can play a role in their success. Assessing such non-cognitive factors can provide insights that can help you shape a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Things to consider...

- ***Do something*** – even just facilitate a discussion – rather than nothing at all. Failing to acknowledge a crisis has occurred may convey to students that you don't recognize the unprecedented moment we're in.
- ***Use one-word check ins or emoji roll calls*** to help you quickly get a pulse on where students are emotionally at a given moment in time. Starting this practice at the beginning of the semester can help communicate to students at the outset that their well-being is important to you.
- ***Provide resources to professional services*** that students may need for emotional support, such as contact information for campus counseling or action centers.

What else should I be thinking about?

Gather a mix of anonymous and non-anonymous feedback from students. Consider when it would be useful to follow up individually with a student about their particular readiness concern, and when it simply would be useful for you to have "a pulse" on where students are as a group. In the latter instance, you might consider a brief anonymous poll, for example, using an application such as Poll Everywhere.

Share results back with students. When appropriate and in ways that respect student privacy, consider sharing feedback with students to talk through what is going well and where the group might need to spend more time. By actively using the information you've gathered to make adjustments to your course and making this process transparent to students, you can demonstrate to them in a powerful way that you are prioritizing their learning and success.

Continue to build in regular checkpoints. Once you've collected some initial feedback from students related to their knowledge, motivation, and affect, you can continue to check in with them throughout the semester to note any shifts over time for the group and to flag any concerns with individual students before exams or major assignments take place.

Provide ongoing, timely feedback. Frequent, timely feedback helps students (and instructors) know how they are progressing in the course and allows for adjustments.

Give guidance on what to do when. Let students know how they can reach out if they have an issue or concern that arises between your check-ins.

Be prepared to assist students, including making referrals. Be prepared to assist students through virtual office hours, for example, when challenges are more idiosyncratic. Also be prepared to refer students to campus support services if you uncover impediments to learning, such as technology gaps, that are beyond the realm of your course.

Be Transparent and Empathetic. Being intentional, proactive, and consistent about how you communicate with students will make a big difference, as will flexibility and empathy. Be clear about your expectations for activities and assignments. Thoroughly explain each step of assignments so there is no confusion about what to do, where to post, and the like. Explain how you will handle due dates and assignment deadlines. Consider how you can introduce options for students that will mitigate anxiety by allowing flexibility when they have technical hurdles or experience other unforeseen disruptive events. Be ready to handle requests for extensions or accommodations equitably.

Visit <https://www.usmd.edu/cai/understanding-students-readiness-learn> for more techniques to gauge students' readiness to learn.