

Checking Assumptions about Students

Holding faulty assumptions about student comprehension and motivation emerged as

the
2nd
most common
mistake

made by instructors of large lecture classes.
(Richards & Velasquez, 2014)

Faculty with these assumptions might

1 overestimate the quantity and quality of prior knowledge

2 assume students understanding when moving on to new material

3 over- or underestimate motivation to learn content.

How do we correct these assumptions?

1 Survey students on knowledge, comfort level, and expectations.

2 Evaluate student understanding in class.

3 Request feedback on what helps, hinders, and might improve learning.

For activities ideas, visit
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How Accurate Are Your Assumptions about the Students in Your Class?

How much do you know about the students enrolled in your class? When was the last time you checked your assumptions about how much time your students spend studying versus working or playing, how motivated they are to learn, or how well prepared they are to tackle the content and skills in your course? Even if you reviewed the most current [Beloit Mindset list](#), how well do the descriptions of students from the current entering class of students align with the students sitting in your classroom?

Holding faulty assumptions about student comprehension and motivation emerged as the second most common mistake made by instructors of large lecture classes (Richards & Velasquez, 2014). Faulty assumptions can misrepresent the actual characteristics of students and undermine an instructor's ability to build rapport with students; worse, faulty assumptions can interfere with the learning process.

Faulty assumptions might include:

- Instructors overestimate the quantity and quality of prior knowledge, particularly for first-year students in introductory level courses. They may cover basic material too quickly (or not at all), believing this is a review. In fact, students might be experiencing this material for the first time.
- Instructors assume that their explanations are understood by students and move on to new material before students fully understand the content and the explanations.
- Instructors over-estimate or under-estimate student interest and motivation to learn the course content.

How to correct faulty assumptions?

Use a pre-class survey to gather information about students' previous learning experiences, determine how comfortable they now are with course content and learn about their expectations for the course. Include a few questions to identify students' other interests. When it makes sense to do so, connect course content and skill to these interests to highlight the relevance of the course to things that students already find motivating and interesting.

Use in-class writing assignments or clicker questions to directly evaluate how well students understand key concepts. Ask students to spend 5 minutes writing a paraphrase of an explanation of a key concept you've just discussed in lecture. Or ask students to take 5 minutes at the end of class to describe any concepts discussed in class that continue to confuse them (muddiest point paper). If you discover that large numbers of students are still confused, you will only lose them permanently if you do not take some time and attempt to clarify the concept.

Request formative feedback from your students about the class with three questions:

- What am I doing in class that *helps you learn*?
- What am I doing in class that *does not help your learn*?
- What might I do differently to *improve your ability to learn*?

Resources

Richards, K. A. R., & Velasquez, J. D. (2014). First-year students' perceptions of instruction in large lectures: The top-10 mistakes made by instructors. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 25 (2), 25-55.

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