

Building Background Knowledge (BBK) Workshop

Purpose

This protocol demonstrates how quickly people can become interested in a topic, build knowledge, and use that knowledge to become better and more informed readers of complex text. The protocol adapts easily to content in many disciplines, and the design ensures that all students read, think, and contribute. The protocol is particularly useful in introducing a topic because it fosters curiosity and builds in immediate feedback about learning. A BBK workshop, especially if it includes close reading of a common text, may comprise an entire class period or even multiple class periods (introducing different texts on successive days). When conducted and debriefed for educators, the protocol heightens awareness of key instructional and grouping practices.

Materials

- Chart paper
- Colored markers
- Various texts on a related topic

Procedure

1. Choose a topic and find several texts as described in the following steps.
2. Use a grouping strategy to shift students into groups of four or five.
3. To each group, give a set of four different-colored markers, a piece of chart paper, texts, and loose-leaf paper.
4. Share a “mystery text” with the whole class: Choose a relevant short text, poem, political cartoon, photograph, song, graph, map, etc., that sparks students’ curiosity about the topic. Display or provide copies of the text (remove the title if it gives away the topic).
5. Activate and share background knowledge:
 - Ask students to write down what they know about the topic of the mystery text.
 - Ask students, in their small groups, to number off, then share what they know about the topic, being sure that each person has a chance to speak.
 - Ask students to create a web or visualization of their collective knowledge/understanding of the topic on a piece of chart paper using just one of the colored markers. Number 1 in the group is the recorder for this part.
6. Provide a “common text”—an article or essay on the topic that is interesting, offers a solid introduction to the topic, and provides multiple perspectives. All students read this article. *continued*

7. Ask students to text-code (use symbols, letters/numbers, and shorthand to annotate) the article with “N” for new information.
8. Ask students to add their new knowledge to their web using a different color of marker. Number 2 in the group is the recorder for this part.
9. Distribute “expert texts”: Hand out a different text on the topic to each member of the group. This is an ideal time to differentiate texts if needed.
10. Again, ask students to text-code for new information.
11. After everyone has read, have each student share new knowledge with his or her group and capture key points on the chart paper using the third color. Number 3 is the recorder for this part.
12. Have on hand extra texts or additional media (drawings, maps, photos, graphs, etc.) for those who finish early.
13. Return to the mystery text. Reread the initial text or display it again.
14. Ask students to go back to where they had initially written about the mystery text in their journals; have students discuss what they now think about the mystery text, then record their new thinking on their web. Number 4 is the recorder for this part and uses a fourth color of marker.
15. Contrast the first and second reading/showing of the mystery text: “What was it like to hear the mystery text the second time?” “What made the experience so different?”
16. Ask a general question about what the process was like to read successive articles. Did they know much about the topic before? Had they been curious about the topic? What inspired their curiosity? If there is time, consider asking a question with four possible responses and having students with like responses group together in the four corners of the room. Ask follow-up questions for the groups to discuss together.

Variations

- Boxing (see figure below): Draw a box to create a fairly wide frame for the poster. Draw a smaller box inside the first. The boxes will create three spaces for representing learning. In the frame, have the group write their prior knowledge, or possibly what they want to learn about the topic. Next, read and discuss to build knowledge. Inside the second box, write about new learning. Finally, in the middle, either write a summary of the learning or create a graphic illustration that synthesizes the group’s understanding of the topic.
- Combine this protocol with a Poster Session to share webs or boxes among members of the class.
- Assign a “Roving Reporter” role to one or more students, having them view and report on group ideas to the rest of the class.

Boxing

