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Project Title: Challenging What We Think We Know: Moving Beyond the Obstacles of Prior Knowledge

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WRITING RESEARCH FELLOWS CO-INQUIRY BRIEF

Researchers' Names/Department:

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Project Title:

Challenging What We Think We Know: Moving Beyond the Obstacles of Prior Knowledge

Research Question:

In what ways does prior knowledge affect students' writing?

Method & Data Studied:

During the final weeks of the fall 2008 quarter a survey was made available to the students in the American Foreign Policy course on Blackboard Academic Suite. The survey contained seven open-ended questions that prompted students to reflect on the assignments and evaluate, in particular, the way in which they chose to engage biases in assigned materials and their own preconceived ideas about foreign policy topics when completing writing assignments.

Key Findings:

1. Prior knowledge affected the manner in which most students engaged with the course material by either biasing students against certain topics or making them more receptive. Either way, prior knowledge predisposes students to respond in a particular manner, which might limit their ability or willingness to see multiple perspectives on a given topic.
2. The students had an array of definitions for "bias."
3. The students had a wide range of methodology for tackling their notion of "bias."
4. Presenting the students with well-balanced lectures and assigned readings caused them to feel challenged in their personal points of view.
5. The course facilitated a shift in the way some students approached the writing process.

Implications for Further Study:

We are interested in learning more about how students' attitudes about topics affect their willingness to be objective and also how students' attitudes about their writing affects their willingness to move beyond the obstacle that prior knowledge poses.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

We recommend that the completion of an exercise on identifying bias is required of students in the first couple of weeks of the course. The students could write a one-page handout that defines bias and provides tips for identifying bias when reading course material, their own biases, and how to use this information to write balanced papers. Additionally, the handout could provide tips on how to find appropriate outside sources, and things to avoid when researching information and when writing papers. Such an exercise will allow students to think critically about bias early in the quarter, as well as provide the instructor with an idea of the students' understanding of bias.

We also recommend an in-class debate to help spur discussion about the topic and assist students in thinking critically. This may take place in the last twenty minutes of the class, after the professor has given his or her lecture. Students will not know ahead of time which day they will be called on to participate in the discussion group, encouraging students to analyze all arguments surrounding the topic.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we recommend that the issue of prior knowledge is addressed in the core courses of the discipline. For political science, it is most fitting that prior knowledge is addressed in the International and Comparative Politics field core courses, as these courses integrate material that is often ethnocentric, disputed, controversial, ideological, etc. By addressing the issue of prior knowledge in these core courses, students gain the skills needed to generate unbiased, objective written documents as well as enhance their ability to question and be open to ideas other than their own.