The Way You Begin: Using Picture Books to Access Prior Knowledge for Student Learning

by Sarrah J. Grubb

It was the end of my first week on my new campus--a regional branch of a large public university. I had gathered my class of early preservice education undergrads into a discussion circle. After introducing ourselves, I pulled out a copy of my newest acquisition, The Day You Begin, authored by Jacqueline Woodson and illustrated by Rafael López.

As a former middle grades and high school English teacher, I look forward to sharing my love of text with each new group of students. A picture book brings ideas in a simplified, but engaging, form. It allows the students to intentionally access prior knowledge to facilitate discussion. Used at the beginning of a lesson, a picture book can create an environment where the instructor can facilitate a successful learning experience.

"There will be times when you walk into a room/and no one there is quite like you" I read (Woodson, 2018). As the words flowed, the students turned from their notes to view the pages, surprised that we would use a picture book in class that did not specifically have "literacy" in the title. After sharing, I ask students a question that becomes routine as the semester continues: "Why is this book in our current curriculum moment?"

Then we paused.

In this quiet moment, I encouraged students to write down their response before sharing our responses with the group. The intentional use of a participation technique termed "Think-Ink-Link" (Himmele & Himmele, 2017), can disrupt the pressured "call on the person with the first raised hand" in order "to move on to the next thing." A question important enough to ask is important enough for everyone to engage with. Writing before sharing gives all students in the class time to think (Himmele & Himmele, 2017), even more so than the more traditional and often used Think-Pair-Share. By taking the step to write, we establish that questions aren't a means to an end--getting the "right" answer. Instead, a written response shows that our thinking takes precedence and that there are a wide range of possibilities within the question.

Now that the question is asked, the pause taken, and the response inked, we begin to share. In a larger class, students break into pairs or triads to share their thinking. I circulate around the room, catching snippets of conversation before requesting teams share their ideas to the whole group. With smaller classes, sometimes we break into pairs before we share and other times, we move right to building our understanding as a group. Sharing their thinking is crucial, as not only do they get feedback from me, but they also consider their thoughts and the thoughts of their peers in the context of the course at the time. This metacognition is deeply important—and often engaging. Students segue into the goal of instruction for the day as they make meaning and connect to their background knowledge, which is the point of intentionally accessing prior knowledge in the first place. Their brains become more ready for new instruction as "neurons fire" (Pollock, 2021).

In his landmark book, Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement (2008), Hattie shares that the effect size of accessing prior knowledge during instruction can significantly increase student achievement. Learning is simply more "successful when teachers succeed in activating prior knowledge" (Hattie, 2018). Much more than a lesson "hook" or review of previous instruction, activating prior knowledge definitively helps students make sense of the instructional goal.

Accessing prior knowledge at the beginning of a period of instruction has many benefits. The picture book is an ideal medium with condensed or absent text, expressive art, and possibilities for interpretation. Paired with an intentionally designed question (and an expectation of total participation) using a picture book to quickly "fire the neurons" (Pollock, 2021) before instructing over new information will deepen student learning.

In this case, our purpose for instruction was to build our classroom community. The students answered that because we were newly working together, Woodson's book reminded us to create space for each other and to value our work together. By the end of our period of instruction, we had accomplished our goals. We had decided on our agreements and semester outcomes. Our hopes, fears, and expectations were established.

As they left, I overhead a student outside the classroom remark, "I wonder what picture book we're going to read next week?" Another answered, before I moved far enough away to not overhear, "I think this class is going to be different." I thought about the words of Woodson's book, which reaffirmed my belief in the way you begin. Not only to build space with a new group of co-learners that deserve to be seen and heard in the classroom, but also in the necessity of deepening their learning by intentionally accessing prior knowledge.

References

Hattie, J., & Zierer, K. (2018). *10 Mindframes for visible learning: Teaching for success*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.

Himmele, P., & Himmele, W. (2017). *Total participation techniques: Making every student an active learner.* ASCD.

Pollock, J. E., & Tolone, L. J. (2021). *Improving student learning one teacher at a time*. ASCD.

Woodson, J., L., R., & López, R. (2018). *The day you begin*. Nancy Paulsen Books.

Author Information

Sarrah Grubb serves as an Assistant Professor of Education at Indiana University, Kokomo. She earned her Ph.D. in Educational Administration from the department of Educational Leadership at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She has varied experience in education, including teaching at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels, and coordinating curriculum, instruction, and professional development across all levels of schooling. She rediscovered teaching as soul work through an appointment at a rural work college in the hills of eastern Kentucky, where she became dedicated to collaborating and co-creating curriculum with preservice teachers as they develop their teacher hearts.