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Knowledge Surveys: Helping Students Self-Assess

In our subject areas there is an obvious desire to increase the degree to which students are able to transfer acquired knowledge and skills to new tasks or events. Recent developments in active learning theory point to the importance of helping students take control of their learning, monitor their level of understanding and assess learning strategies in order to achieve this transfer. How can we make students more aware of themselves as learners (e.g., "go meta")? How can we help students assess their own progress towards meeting course objectives? Do student's self-assessment skills vary with the kind of task being assessed? We will present our experience with and research into knowledge surveys as a tool addressing these questions.

Knowledge surveys consist of questions that cover the breadth of course material. Rather than soliciting content-based answers, students are asked to rate their level of confidence in attempting to answer. Surveys are administered at the beginning of a course (or unit within the course) and re-administered shortly before an exam covering the surveyed material. The benefit of knowledge surveys for students is that they make course objectives clear and allow students to assess their own learning and gain formative self-assessment skills. (Wirth and Perkins 2005).

We will present the results of a year-long study on the relationship between student self-assessment and different cognitive levels. We will also discuss the ways using knowledge surveys have improved our own teaching. In our presentation we will model the mechanics of a knowledge survey as we have administered them in our classes: participants will take knowledge surveys at the beginning and end of our presentation.

The presentation itself will include a description and examples of knowledge surveys with an overview of the role of Bloom's Taxonomy and other schemas that categorize cognitive development. We plan to also solicit input from participants regarding discipline-focused schemas that they have found useful. In the final phase of our presentation we will focus on the particular question that we are exploring in our project: "How able are students to assess their abilities to perform at different Bloom levels?" At this point we will administer the survey again. We will end by discussing students' reception of knowledge surveys and leave ample time for questions and discussion.