



Bringing What You Know to Your Learning¹

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You bring valuable knowledge to your education—from your career, family responsibilities, community involvement, and everyday life. Your experience isn't separate from your learning; it's the foundation for it. What you've already figured out gives you a head start in connecting new ideas to what you already know.

At the same time, experience also shapes how we see the world. We all carry assumptions about ourselves, others, and how things work. Some of these assumptions help us; others can get in the way without us realizing it. Part of growing as a learner means noticing those assumptions and deciding which still serve you—and which might be holding you back.

When you connect your experience to your coursework, it helps you:

- Understand new concepts more deeply by linking them to what you already know
- Contribute unique perspectives that enrich classroom discussions
- Build confidence in your ability to succeed
- Prepare for workplaces that value diverse approaches to problem-solving

The key insight is that **your background knowledge, skills, and experiences matter**. They can help you grow your understanding when you actively make connections and test them against new knowledge.

Putting Your Experience to Work

Making the most of your background knowledge requires your active participation. Four practices can help you recognize your strengths while remaining open to growth.

¹ Content developed with AI, based on [the CAST UDL Guidelines™](#), scholarly sources, and web resources. Icons courtesy of [Flaticon.com](#) contributors and others.

1. Recognize What You Bring

Your life has taught you things that textbooks can't. Recognizing this knowledge helps you see yourself as capable and prepared.

Strategies:

- Before starting a new topic, ask: "What do I already know about this from my life or work?"
- Look for connections between course material and your experiences—managing people, solving problems, caring for others, or navigating challenges
- Share your perspective in discussions; your experience adds value that benefits everyone

2. Notice Your Assumptions

We all carry beliefs about ourselves, others, and how things work. Some help us, others may hold us back without our realizing it.

Strategies:

- Pay attention when you think "I already know this" or "This doesn't apply to me"—these reactions can signal assumptions worth examining
- When you encounter an idea that feels wrong or uncomfortable, pause and ask: "What am I assuming that makes me react this way?"
- Challenge thoughts like "I'm not a math person" or "People like me don't succeed here"—these thoughts limit possibilities

3. Stay Open to Different Approaches

There's rarely one "right" way to understand something. People learn through observation, hands-on practice, stories, logic, and relationships with others.

Strategies:

- Remember that struggle doesn't mean failure—it means you're building a new understanding
- When a topic feels difficult, try a different approach—watch a video, discuss with classmates, draw a diagram, or relate it to something familiar
- Listen to classmates whose backgrounds differ from yours; their perspectives can reveal aspects you might miss

4. Apply and Reflect

Learning becomes meaningful when you use it. Applying your learning helps you to see its usefulness. Reflecting on what you're learning enables you to see how your thinking has developed.

Strategies:

- Ask yourself: "How does this new information fit with—or challenge—what I thought I knew?"
- Look for ways to apply what you're learning to real situations in your life, work, or community
- When your perspective shifts, take note—this is evidence of growth

Key Takeaway

Your **life experience is real knowledge**. It shapes how you approach problems, ask questions, and make meaning of new ideas. At the same time, growth requires openness—the willingness to examine your assumptions and consider new possibilities. Both honoring what you know and remaining curious about what you don't yet understand are essential to your success.

Resources

Anthropic. (2025). Claude Opus 4.5 [Large language model]. <https://claude.ai/>

CAST. (2024). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0*. <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>

Knowles, M., Robinson, P. A., & Caraccioli, C. (2025). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (10th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003387671>

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>