# Connecting to Prior Knowledge with Student Relevant Examples

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**Learning objectives/skills fostered**: (1)Connecting to prior knowledge is one of the [Five Gears for Activating Learning](http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/cielo/five-gears). Empirical studies have shown that if you connect a complex topic to something the student already has familiarity or experience with, this will improve the student’s ability to master the concept. (2) Beyond simply including more examples in your courses, you want to carefully select or invite culturally relevant examples that veer from a dominant oppressive viewpoint (e.g., traditionally white privileged) and allow the student to connect with the example in a meaningful and positive manner.

**How/why is this a *culturally relevant teaching practice* or *high impact teaching practice*?**

This technique addresses the culturally relevant teaching practice of **situating learning into the lives of students**. It allows students to relate the course content to their own cultural frame of reference by giving and eliciting examples that are relevant to a wide range of people. It also helps students to affirm identity by seeing themselves in the course content when they apply concepts to their own lived experience.

**Learning challenge addressed:** Introducing complex legal issues.

**Context best used for:** This technique can be adapted for any size class.

**Materials needed:** A creative mind and time either researching or talking with others to find appropriate examples.

**What to do/ how to do it:**

1. **Meet with students to learn about their lives and obtain better examples:** I work hard to create a safe community in my Business Law courses so that students can openly share their thoughts and perceptions about studying law. I’ve learned that since many did not grow up discussing the law in their homes (e.g., don’t know anyone in the field of law) and may not have watched courtroom dramas on television (which was originally an assumption I held), the students expressed concern that studying law would be too difficult for them; I learned they had real concerns. By meeting the students where they are, listening and learning about their lives, I discovered how to give examples to which they could relate thereby boosting their confidence. Once they believe they can succeed, they often do.
2. **Embed relevant examples:** Students frequently struggle with the complex concept of ***precedent***, so I needed a helpful example to make this clear to students and I wanted to know more examples that would be relevant to their lives.

One example was inspired by a student office hour visit. One day a student came to office hours but first disclosed that she was really upset with her parents. They firmly wouldn’t permit her, a junior in college (as she told me) to stay out past 11pm but didn’t enforce this family rule with her younger high school brother when he stayed out past midnight. Empathizing and listening was the main response. But this allows me to connect her story to the course content.

I now explain to students (through lecture & the Moodle glossary activity) that a **precedent** is a

decision that provides guidance or justification for a subsequent decision. I ask them, “*have you ever experienced a situation when a rule applied to you, but not other people? For example, if you had an older brother, did your parents allow him to do things when he was younger that you, now at that same age are not permitted to do? If you decided to argue this point (i.e., their subsequent decision to allow him to do something that you are not allowed to do) you would be using a precedent.*”

To generate student examples, during class I’ll turn this into a quick activity. I’ll prompt with this question: “*think of some specific examples when a rule hasn’t applied to you but previously was applied to another*.” I’ll ask students to write this on a 3x5 card and to exchange their card with 4 different people thereby scrambling cards throughout the class. Next I ask them to discuss the scenarios in pairs and to discuss how the concept of **precedent** is applied. At the end of this activity, I collect their cards, which allows me to bolster culturally relevant examples into my course throughout the semester.

**Tips for successfully implementing:**

In a small class, the professor could begin the year with a survey to learn about some of the students’ experiences so that they could be woven into the course throughout the semester.

Aim for examples that are NOT oppressive (e.g., confirming negative stereotypes). Once they understand the relatable definition, they can move on to the more complex definition. If used in class, this can launch a discussion of other personal precedents to confirm that the students have mastered the concept. If online, it could be a discussion board prompt, asking other students to share examples.

**Evidence, more information, citation, website, videos:**

[Five Gears](http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/cielo/five-gears)

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(chapter 7, page 117): <http://www.tcpress.com/pdfs/9780807752234_ch7.pdf>