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ENGAGE TO ACHIEVE MORE

Metacognition for Digital Learning

Want to know how best to help your students meet their challenges? Want to identify the types of support they find most helpful?

Ask them.

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Introduction

Between pandemic education disruptions and an evolving political, social, and economic environment, the past few years have presented countless challenges for students. Every student challenge becomes an instructor challenge. Instructors are on the front lines of education, delivering courses. We're often the first and the last ones to learn about student challenges. Each new student challenge presents an issue that instructors attempt to resolve.

Student Challenges	Instructor Challenges
Engagement	Provide Engagement
Motivation	Increase Motivation
Connection	Create Connections
Concentration	Improve Concentration
Distractions	Reduce Distractions
Technology	Manage Technology
Study Space	Improve Study Space
Time Management	Prioritize Time Management
Anxiety & Depression	Recognize Anxiety & Depression
Academic & Emotional Support	Offer Academic & Emotional Support

One way to know what kind of support your students need is to simply ask them. I asked students what kind of support they found most helpful and here are a few of the responses that I received:

• Begin each class with a check-in. This allows students to open up when they might not feel they have space to do so elsewhere

• Prioritize group work, which allows classmates to interact and build relationships

• Polling–interactivity

• Project–to engage students

• Allow them to discuss what kind of learners they are

What is VARK?

Metacognition basically means thinking about thinking. In this context, it's what we ask students to do when we ask them to tell us what kind of learners they are.

VARK is a tool that helps students get a sense of their learning preferences.
The acronym VARK refers to four modalities, or learning preferences:
Visual
Auditory
Read/write
Kinesthetic

Like anything, VARK has limitations. It isn't a magic bullet. Even with VARK knowledge, students still may not choose to use study strategies that align with their learning style. Learning outcomes and student success may not improve when using study strategies that align with VARK learning preferences. VARK profiles aren't set in stone and can change over time. And VARK isn't designed to identify strengths and weaknesses— rather it reveals preferences.

Still, VARK is a great metacognitive tool because it can allow students to reflect deeply on their thinking and learning in a fun way.

Use VARK as a Launch Pad

- To build metacognition skills
- To engage students & personalize study skills
- To create connections between students
- To develop a targeted, actionable study plan
- To provide opportunities for group collaboration & learning

Focus on VARK as a Metacognitive Tool

The VARK Questionnaire helps students identify and better understand their learning style. It is only 16 questions long and available for free at vark-learn.com. Set aside a little bit of time for students to complete the VARK survey and expand it with a journal writing exercise. After each VARK survey question, ask them to respond to the following prompt: Why or how does your answer help you?

The purpose of this journaling exercise is to get students to pause, reflect, and consider what is drawing them to each answer. You and your students may be surprised by just how challenging this simple question can be to answer.

Engage Students and Personalize Study Skills

It is possible for students to score similarly on multiple modalities, in which case they'd receive a multi-modal preference from the VARK Questionnaire. Regardless of what the results are, it's important to encourage every student to learn and talk about their learning preferences.

Asking Students to Reflect

You can help your students explore what their VARK results mean and how they've impacted their learning experiences by inviting them to do journal reflections. Here are a couple of example:

Reflection 1: Do your VARK results make sense to you? Why or why not?

Reflection 2: Are there specific examples you can detail (from a class or when you study) that demonstrate the way this preference impacts your learning?

Creating Connections Between Students

So, the VARK questionnaire and reflection follow-ups are complete. What next? One great way to use VARK results is to create the much-needed connections between students that have been harder to build in recent years.

Try this group activity after your students have completed their reflections:

1. Break students up into groups based on their VARK learning preferences (students with similar preferences should be grouped together).
2. Have students start with the icebreaker of your choosing.
3. Ask each student to share their journal reflections. Meanwhile, other students in the group should identify aspects of the reflections that resonate with them.
4. Give each group a goal to detail 5-10 study strategies based on each learning preference.
5. Allow each group to summarize their preferences and strategies with the entire class.

As the instructor, you can create a list of study strategies based on what the groups present. You can also include additional strategies that may not have been mentioned by the groups.

Develop a Targeted, Actionable Study Plan

Students who are required to think through their learning preferences and identify potential study strategies are more likely to create effective study plans for their unique learning preferences. With that, now it's time for a little homework.

Sample Homework Assignment

1. Have the class study strategy handy.

2. Clock out study sessions in your planner.

3. Consider the classes you're taking. Write down one or two study strategies that you will use for each class.

4. Assess your study space by asking yourself the following questions.

   a. What distracts you from studying? Be specific.

   b. Does the space feel like a dedicated "office"?

   c. How often do you look at your phone/social media over the course of a 15-minute period when you are studying?
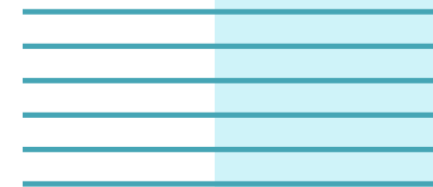
Provide Opportunities for Group Collaboration and Learning

At this point, students have done some independent work to plan how they will approach studying based on their learning preferences. This is a great time to bring them back together for full-class reflection or group work. Give students a chance to say whether or not they studied using the plan they developed in the sample homework assignment or not. If they didn't, let them share what prevented them from using their study plan. If they did, they should share what helped them stay on track. This can be done with the entire class or with the VARK breakout groups.

A Panel of Experienced Students
If possible, try bringing in a panel of students who have been through this entire exercise. These students might be more senior and can explain challenges they've overcome, how studying in college differs from studying in high school, and how VARK may have helped them.

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Emphasize the Basics

These exercises are meant to encourage students to connect, reflect, and help each other. Lofty goals, indeed. It's important to remember to emphasize the basics at every turn. Here are six basics that you'll want students to always keep in mind:

1. Use a planner and always keep a to-do list

2. Block out time to study by adding dedicated study sessions to your planner

3. Personalize your study time by using techniques that work for you

4. Incorporate critical thinking study strategies like practice tests, peer/instructor conversations, and more

5. Eliminate distractions away wherever possible

6. Create a dedicated workspace

Jamie Shushan is the Senior Student and Alumni Affairs Advisor at Harvard University where she was previously the Associate Director of the Crimson Summer Academy (CSA). She has worked to increase access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and helps them succeed once they arrive on campus. In her work at CSA and beyond, she teaches numerous classes focused on college success, engages students in career exploration fieldwork, and serves as an advisor and advocate for students at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Jamie is the author of *A Pocket Guide to College Success*.

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