

CETL Weekly Teaching Tips presents

Techniques to Help Students Think About Their Learning

An essential lifelong skill for students is to think about their learning, or be metacognitive about it. Although metacognition ties directly to student success, it is often not taught, and it is a skill that many college students lack. Structure courses to help students focus on and be more aware of their own learning.

ConceptTests during class



During a break in lecture, students individually answer multiple-choice questions (anonymously), then debate the answer with their peers, and they vote again.

Online Quizzes after class

What did I learn in class today?

Multiple-choice quizzes test the students on concepts they learned in class, but are completed by students on their own time outside of class. Allowing multiple attempts emphasizes mastery over grading.

Exam Wrappers after an exam



After each exam, students reflect on how they studied as well as how they could have studied smarter, allowing them to think about what they will change or keep the same for the next exam.

For more metacognitive connections and tips on how to make these activities collaborative

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Techniques to Help Students Think About Their Learning

An essential lifelong skill for students is to think about their learning, or be metacognitive about it. Although metacognition ties directly to student success, it is often not taught, and it is a skill that many college students lack. One of my goals is to purposefully structure my courses to help students focus on and be more aware of their own learning.

The three strategies I use most often to foster metacognition are:

1. **ConcepTests (or clicker questions)**—These multiple-choice questions are asked during a break in lecture, students individually answer them (anonymously), they debate the answer with their peers, and they vote again. These questions allow students to find out how well they understand concepts as they are taught in class.
2. **Online Quizzes**—These multiple-choice quizzes test the students on concepts they learned in class, but are completed by students on their own time outside of class. Students can retake them up to three times, with a different selection of questions each time. Students can use them as a way to self-test if they understand the concepts, which is useful both immediately after class as well as a way to study for the exam.
3. **Exam Wrappers**— I ask students after each exam to reflect on how they studied as well as how they could have studied smarter. This technique allows students to think about how their studying was effective and how they might want to study differently to be more successful on the next exam. I also give students time to give feedback to each other, so they can learn from others in the class as well.

I explain to the students that these techniques give them immediate feedback on how well they understand concepts, help them to realize that they are in charge of their learning, and determine what topics they need to spend more time on. Another strength of these methods is that they are easy for the instructor to implement. After the initial set up, none of these methods takes much time, and there is no manual grading.

A challenge to these techniques is the initial time commitment, which varies. Good ConcepTest questions are difficult to write, but there are some websites where instructors share questions, and you can reuse them in following semesters. Setting up and writing good online quizzes also takes time initially, but they can be reused (and some quiz questions can be used again on exams).

I have several indications that these techniques are effective with my students. When I ask students to reflect on how they studied, students report using many of the strategies I provided, such as reviewing quizzes and focusing their studying on where their weaknesses were. When I've had students who have taken a class in which I used the online quizzes then take a class where I have not yet developed them, they unanimously asked for the quizzes, even though they require more work from the student. Although some students complained about the time involved, they also saw how valuable the quizzes were to their learning. Finally, as measured by the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire survey instrument, students in my classes do not experience a decline in motivation and attitudes during the semester, as is commonly seen in other introductory classes, which is significant because research is increasingly showing the importance of student affective domain (motivation and attitudes) on their learning.

Resources:

Pintrich, R. R., & DeGroot, E. V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82, 33-40.

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