

Three Ways To Get Your Students Thinking about Thinking

In academic pursuits, students often focus on the result, or end product—the solution to the equation, the completed persuasive essay, the finished lab report. But what about the process? How can you encourage students to critically examine and analyze their own thinking as they learn and perform? Metacognition, or thinking about thinking, encompasses a number of skills and strategies that allow students to better understand themselves as learners and thus better acquire, retain, and transfer knowledge. Here are three ways to cultivate metacognitive thinkers in your classroom:

Show

Model metacognition for students by displaying a problem or prompt and talking through your thinking as you work to solve or respond to it. For example, you might display a prompt asking students to describe symbolism in *The Secret Garden* and say, “I know that a symbol is usually an item or object that represents a larger idea. The flag of a country, for example, is a symbol of that country. That’s how I normally define symbols. Now let me think about what symbols might be in *The Secret Garden*. What objects in that novel stand for a larger idea? Maybe the garden itself is a symbol. After all, it’s in the title! At the beginning of the story, the garden is empty. The trees and flowers are brown and dead. By the end, though, the garden is bright and vibrant. The flowers and trees are in bloom. Since the garden literally comes to life, maybe the garden is a symbol of new life, or rebirth. That connects to what we talked about in class yesterday—how Mary almost becomes a new person after she discovers the garden. So by thinking about how I define symbols, and then thinking about one of the main parts of the novel, I was able to identify a symbol in the novel. Then I was able to figure out what it might represent by thinking about the change that happens, and by connecting the garden to the character we discussed yesterday. I might be able to use a similar strategy to respond to a lot of my writing prompts.” Explain to students that thinking carefully about their thinking can help them work through problems and gain a deeper understanding of how their own mind works.

Act

Distribute red, yellow, and green cards to students. Throughout the course of a lesson, discussion, or seminar, have students raise the red card if something that is said conflicts with their thinking; the yellow card if something that is said confuses their thinking; and the green card if something that is said agrees with their thinking. As time permits, call on students who have raised cards to explain their thoughts and work as a class to resolve any conflicts or confusion.

Reflect

Have students maintain a reflection journal throughout the year. Open lessons or units by having students reflect on their current thinking around the given concepts or topics: What do they know and think already? How did they gain this knowledge? What do they hope to learn? Close lessons or units by having students write entries reflecting on their learning: What have they learned? How were new skills or knowledge built over time? How did they inform each other? How has the new learning changed or augmented prior understandings? What are they still curious about?

