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Using the VARK: A Writing Department's Commitment to "Turning the Light Bulbs On"

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to "Turning the Light Bulbs On"

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Using the VARK: A Writing Department's Commitment to "Turning the Light Bulbs On"

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As the new Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program, one would think I would be busy enough hiring and mentoring new writing faculty, doubling the capacity of our Appellate Advocacy Program, and working on various faculty committees. Somewhere during the summer, however, several members of our department decided this would be the year we were going to make a department-wide commitment to adapt our classroom teaching styles to more fully engage our students through their personal learning style preferences.

St. Louis University School of Law purchased the VARK software package from www.vark-learn.com. This package allowed each of our incoming students to take a brief, thirteen question quiz. The software lets the students know their preferred method of learning, based upon the answers chosen. The results given are: visual, audio, reader/writer, kinesthetic, or multimodal. We required each member of the incoming class to log-on and take the quiz. Over eighty-five percent, which is almost 300 students, completed this task in a three-day period.

The information gathered has allowed writing faculty to tailor how they deliver the material they are teaching. Many of us have started identifying exercises or methods of teaching which will impact different learning styles. We choose to present materials in more than one way to assure that more students get the concepts in their own "language." For example, self-editing exercises for visual learners utilize various highlighter colors to show the students the flow of the assignment on a large scale and small scale basis. Cutting up "good student samples," i.e. manual manipulation of the samples, seems to allow kinesthetic learners to feel how an

analysis should be put together and flow.

For the first time this fall, we also offered a VARK/CREAC workshop. It was strategically scheduled during the semester after each faculty member had introduced the format, but before the students' first assignment was due. This allowed students who were struggling to understand the formula, to come to a twenty-minute presentation taught by one of the faculty who where masters at

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presenting the information in one specific way: visual, audio, reader/writer or kinesthetic. For example, auditory learners were presented with a way to hear how fact-to-fact comparison paragraphs should flow: precedential fact—compared to current fact—and then tell me why a court would care...precedential fact—compared to the current fact—and then tell me why a court would care...

In addition, the Department has collaborated with Academic Support faculty. While the

Academic Support faculty have for years talked to students about learning styles and spent hours presenting materials in various ways, this year they know their audience has taken the quiz and received feedback on learning preferences. Workshops are planned which are tailored to the various learning styles. For example, the workshop on creating outlines has suggestions for each learning style to create an outline that would be more helpful to the way they take in, organize, and reproduce material.

There are many tools available to assist students and faculty to assess their learning style preferences.¹ We would recommend using one to learn about yourself and your audience. Once students and faculty are armed with this information, each can make choices to "turn the light bulbs on."

1 Another such test is the Index of Learn Styles. To access see <http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/ILSpa.html>.

