

## **PEDAGOGIES**

### **THE USE OF LEARNING STYLES THEORY IN THE HUMANITIES: TOWARDS INSTRUCTOR-FRIENDLY SOLUTIONS?**

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#### **Introduction**

Although educational psychology has done a great deal to enhance the learning experience of university students, the success or failure of its teachings depends not on educational psychologists themselves but on the performance of educators across all the taught disciplines in university departments around the world. At the heart of this implementation is the use of learning styles theory as an aid to teaching. The aim of this paper is to discuss and question some of the current beliefs regarding the use of learning styles theory in university education and especially in the humanities, where the expertise of the author is. There are many different theoretical models attempting to categorize learning styles but for the purposes of this paper a simplification of Howard Gardner's model (visual, auditory, kinesthetic learning styles) will suffice.

#### **Current work**

Much valuable work has been done on teaching styles and methodologies as practiced by university instructors as well as on students' response to it. Some of it has been specifically aimed at a learning group (undergraduate / postgraduate), some at a particular issue (e.g. ethnicity, disability, technology), and some at a particular discipline. In this latter case much of the work has been conducted outside the humanities. Geographers, leisure and medical professionals have written papers discussing the adaptation of learning style theories to benefit their particular disciplines. Practitioners across disciplines have looked at the use of constructivist ideas in relation to the use of technology in the classroom. Some have questioned the effectiveness of technology in improving learning outcomes.

Even before university education, pupils are sometimes exposed to learning theory principles. In the UK, workshops across London, Birmingham and Manchester in the last few years have been introducing the ideas of Bloom and Kolb to teenagers participating in the Gifted and Talented Programme (a programme seeking to advance the success rate of university entry amongst high calibre pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds). The author's experience in historical, critical, literary, musical and performative methodologies suggests that both pupils and practitioners benefit from exposure to learning theory. The fact that undergraduates entering their first year of study are already aware of learning styles may help their communication of their learning needs to their lecturers.

### **The twist**

The twist of this paper is the suggestion that practitioners perform at their best when they follow not the students' but their own learning styles in their work, inside and outside the classroom. What is meant by interaction inside the classroom beyond the obvious traditional instruction can include student-led presentations and initiatives and the planning of field-trips and extra-curricular programmes. Interaction outside the classroom can also be termed non-contact time and concerns the communication between practitioners and students regarding delivery of work, the meeting of standards and deadlines, application of discipline-specific or interdisciplinary methodologies or the initiation of new projects. The question raised in this paper is whether instead of leading the practitioner/course leader to believe that they ought to accommodate student learning styles and behavioural patterns in order to succeed as a teacher, there may be room for allowing them to teach in their optimum style. Given the greater awareness amongst the student population of learning styles, study skills and different teaching approaches, would students today be able to interpret and respond to an instructor's individual teaching style and use it to their advantage? In other words, would they be able to accept the in-class instruction as it is given and tailor their study out of class in a way that suits their learning style best? It is the author's belief that they do indeed have that capability.

From a teacher's point of view in any case, when working with large numbers of students trying to respond to varying learning style preferences can be impractical and distracting. Additionally, the pressure on lecturers to conform to received wisdom or to aggressively marketed orthodoxies can undermine their confidence and impair their ability to

adjust to the ever-greater expectations of them. What is suggested here is that the lessons of educational theory are used as study tools for the student population both in order to determine their own mode of best performance and to make the most of attending their lectures. Further, as it is believed that most people are visual learners, an excessive effort to accommodate this learning style can lead not to the enrichment but the stultification of teaching practice, resulting in the decline of the other categories of learning styles.

### **Additional points**

Another important consideration is awareness of the whole range of learning difficulties and physical disabilities that effect the student population and the skills and strengths we can derive from them. For instance, in the author's experience as a musician, blind instrumentalists have developed much sounder practices of deep-structure learning than their fully-sighted colleagues through the need to memorize a work of music before executing it physically. This gives them several advantages as it firstly trains their memory and capacity to grasp longer works of music and secondly offers them a better understanding of musical structure (at foreground, middleground and background level). Such practices can be fed back into the entire body of the student population with the view of improving study habits.

As an additional point, the author would like to propose that extensive student involvement in educational theory projects may be encouraged throughout Higher Education departments. This can be done with the establishment of a focus group that aims to educate interested members in this respect and seeks to assist them in producing their first educational paper, irrespective of their particular specialism. This may have a positive impact on their later career development as it will give them both a publication in a recognized peer-reviewed journal and a deeper encounter with current teaching practices. They will not only see the teaching experience from the perspective of their instructor but they will be better placed to develop their own long-term teaching capabilities and competencies. Further, awareness of multiple intelligences in learning is needed not only within the Higher Education teaching staff but also by those who distribute resources within an institution and create policies.

## FURTHER READING

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