

EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS:
STYLES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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A Project Submitted for the Course

EDU 6550

Special Topics in Education: Current Issues in Education

June 25, 2003

Of all the careers that one could choose to enter, there is none more rewarding, and possibly none more frustrating, than being a professional educator. As teachers, we are responsible to take the individuals who enter our classroom, analyze and educate them in our course subject, overcome obstacles to the learning process, and see that they are able to comprehend and eventually use that material in their future endeavors. How many students have we come across in our years in the classroom, taught them diligently, only to find that they were unable to comprehend the subject matter? In our conference with the parents, we heard them say, “I don’t know what the problem is either. They’ve just always been like that.” Or even more exasperating to hear them exclaim, “You are the educator; that’s what we pay you to do. You figure it out because we can’t be bothered” (Ebell, 2001).

But then there are those situations that seem so insurmountable with those pupils, and then we “see the light” go on above their heads, and they finally “got” what we were trying to explain. Ah, those wonderful moments; and even more joyful when we have the unwavering support of the parents who stand side by side with us who desire that their children finally comprehend the principles even more than we could want. This is the career that educators have chosen, with all of its pitfalls, challenges, and setbacks; but with all its rewards, thrills, and joys.

Haidee Allerton (2001) gives insight into the Y Generation (also known as the Millennial Generation or the Echo Boomers) concerning what is different about them. Demographics experts indicate that they were born between 1979 and 1994 (this group would be as young as seven and as old as twenty-two). Their numbers total over 60 million, more than three times that number of the Generation Xers. Most have yet to transition into adolescence, which makes it a testing time for them at home, as well as in the classroom. Statistics indicate that one in three is

non-Caucasian; one in four has a single parent providing the sole source of income for the home; a majority have been using the computer since pre-kindergarten.

In seeking to effectively work with this group, some recommended strategies are as follows:

- Truly challenging work is what matters to them, and it must be provided. Eighty-five percent are hard workers and they are defined as loyal when there is value in what is being accomplished. In light of that, more than three out of four have specific goals for the next five years, and they are firm proponents that those goals will be achieved.
- Inter-personal relationships must be built. We as educators must listen to them and show that we are concerned and that we care about their successes, and about them personally.
- Technological savvy is a must. Technology, because it has been around them all of their lives, is interwoven into their being. Therefore tools must be given to them that reflect that technology, and its use must be encouraged.
- Show them the money. American youth were responsible for \$125 billion in sales in 1999, so they represent a significant source of advertising revenue and available money.
- Rewards and recognition are still important to them. They are involved in athletics and academics, and it seems to be the case that such an ethic will continue into adulthood. Consistent feedback, challenging goals and meaningful rewards are expected.

This is the background of the culture we as educators are influencing today. As a backdrop, how can we reach this same culture in the classroom? Are there learning styles that can be used effectively, so that we can become more effective in reaching and teaching them? How do our students learn, and what must we be prepared to do to see that our classroom teaching strategies are effective?

What are the factors that should describe the educational environment? Motivation from the teacher cannot be over-emphasized too strongly. Preparation and teaching our subjects with vigor and excitement will keep the attention spans of our pupils and help improve the information we are seeking to give them. However, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of

the “brain dump”: the push to teach everything in a specific class lesson in one sitting, with little or no break for student interaction or participation. Our students must be given ample opportunity in the class to share what they are learning with one other. A cooperative learning environment increases their motivation; encouragement of feedback from the class indicates that a class is learning; and both aspects point to a well-prepared teacher (Hutchinson, 2003; Carpenter, 2001).

Physical factors are also important to the classroom. A room that is too hot, too cold, chairs that are uncomfortable, and a plethora of other miscellaneous ills detract from learning. There must also be a sense of physical and emotional safety in which students are free to voice concerns, what they have learned, and not be concerned with what violent act may be perpetrated. Words of praise, when coupled with constructive criticism (as needed), is a point that must be actively pondered and implemented quickly.

In addition to a safe classroom environment, there is yet another factor to consider. The teacher is the role model in the classroom. What our students do can be a direct reflection upon us, as well as affecting the listeners directly (Hutchinson). Our words must be chosen with great forethought; it is these words that come from our minds, and we must exercise great caution to the influences that would seek to implant thoughts which do not reflect the character of Christ.

But in what ways can we determine teacher effectiveness? Is it a result of high marks on an evaluation sheet toward the end of the school year when a contract is on the line? Is it because good marks go to those who are the “easy” or “popular” teachers? One of the tell-tale indicators of successful teachers is that they are vitally interested and concerned not only that their students succeed, and conveys this to their pupils, but also about the students as individuals as well (Carpenter). A statement was shared recently in my Models of Teaching class that “if your

students are successful, then you are successful. If your students are a failure, then you are a failure, until you find out why they failed.” What a powerful statement!

Voice inflections, changing facial expressions, and humor go a long way to improvement in student morale; the teacher that can laugh at their own jokes is perceived (especially in the middle school classroom) as being much more human, and the students will react more favorably to an open, inviting classroom. Indeed, the students will flourish in such an environment (Hutchinson).

Instructional objectives are an absolute necessity if students are to accomplish what is expected of them. While students may balk at harder exams, there will be an increase in scores overall, and that is what we can see happen. Objectives are intended to present a clear picture and the steps needed to accomplish the end goal, and students are much less likely to complain if they have had those goals and objectives presented in a logical manner (Hutchinson).

It is necessary to examine the qualities needed for a successful learning environment. However, we must also closely analyze and scrutinize the learning styles of our students. In recent years, more attention has been focused on the Learning Styles Theory. Let us focus our attention to this area.

The actual theory has very little to do with student intelligence. In fact, it is paramount that the teacher asks, “How are our students smart?” From there, the impact that is made on the educational process can be more closely guided into what our students will learn and the way they will learn it (On Purpose Associates, 2001).

The curriculum is affected because educators will place a greater emphasis on intuition, sensing and imagination, in addition to those traditional skills of analysis, reason and sequences in problem solving. Instruction will be affected because a vast array of elements can be

introduced, some of which include sound, music, visuals, movement; even talking is essential!

The assessment outcome should be focused on the entire brain, and how it can be further developed (On Purpose Associates).

The individuals most notable for their research in learning styles are Rita and Ken Dunn; collectively, they have authored in excess of 20 books and 300 articles regarding this process. Their primary philosophy is that people of all ages learn in their own unique way. When relevant documentation was presented as it related to lower achievers and statistically higher improvement in standardized scores, the educational approach was more closely analyzed; the method of approach was somehow different from previous experiences. Class material was presented in a way that enabled the students to perform to a higher standard. Therefore, because curriculum is learned differently by individuals, it should be taught differently to individuals (Dunn, Denig, and Lovelace, 2001).

According to Dunn, Denig and Lovelace (2001), students generally ranging from ages six to fourteen are affected by twenty-one elements; these have been classified into five broad, primary areas: environment, emotional, social, physiological, and psychological.

- Environment: effects of sound and light, formal versus informal seating arrangements, as well as room temperature.
- Emotional: motivation to complete tasks depends on internal motivation to completion (persistent) versus the need for structure and/or teacher directives. Still others do as opposite in the manner requested (conformity versus non-conformity).
- Social: independent versus group study (as in pairs), while others study with a respected figure.
- Physiological: auditory stimulation (hearing); visual stimulation (reading or seeing); tactual (“doodling,” taking notes, manipulatives usage); and kinesthetics (movement combined with concentration, such as tapping their feet or walking).
- Psychological: Analytically (step-by-step procedures); globally (initial overview and relevancy, focus on facts); integration (learn anything in which interest is piqued).

Based on these learning profiles, it is important to ascertain the style of learners in one’s classroom. Learning style is the way each person absorbs, understands, and uses new

information. Some learning styles may be inherited. This means one is born with certain traits that affect how learning takes place. Some aspects develop over lifetime. When it comes to describing people's learning styles, one facet is clear: Because every brain is different, learning styles vary widely. Once prepared with these ideas, then it is much more probable that our pupils will learn the material we have for them, and it will become more relevant for their lives (Kowalski, 2001; Ebelling).

There are practical steps educators can take in the process of implementing learning styles.

1. Plan lessons for the whole class. Be prepared for adaptations by writing down exactly what planning must be done and how our pupils are to learn it. Feel free to write down as many techniques possible, followed by an instructional goal.
2. Think the plan through with specific learners. Consider asking “What if there is a student who doesn't ‘get it’?” When adaptation is unneeded, then proceed. But if there are students whose abilities to follow through with an answer can be questioned, then adaptation must take place, followed by and targeting.
3. Analyze the lesson and one or more specific learners from nine angles. Size, time, angle, complexity, participation, environment, input, output, support, and goals must be considered. It is not essential to do this every time, but think through the lesson or concept until the ideas can be adapted to accommodate everyone.
4. Observe the adaptation when it is being worked. If it works, great; if not, then there is no cause for grief, because it was planned for. Adapting is a never-ending process, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work, and educators must realize that it is essential to customize lesson plans with learners in mind (Ebelling).

If it appears that learning style has been determined, parents can take practical steps at home to see how well it will work in the home, but only if the teacher shares with the parents what the child's style is! There are many creative ways to do this, and weaknesses can be turned into strengths. What are the specific intelligences associated with learning styles, and as an example, in what way can it be used with development of other skills?

- Linguistic: students who are strong with language skills will gravitate toward describing and explaining. Develop this by creating a story in which there are many characters to count. Paper, writing materials, different types of storybooks, and keeping a tape recorder handy are highly useful.

- Logical-mathematical: classification of items is strong here. The sounds of instruments are useful in exploring musical concepts, and a ready supply of puzzles, blocks, and small manipulatives are a necessity.
- Bodily-kinesthetic: movement games are especially effective, as students with this ability have an easier time with this than counting only. A good science experiment for these students would be comparing the ability of throwing different objects.
- Musical: songs and creating audio tapes are the most effective. For math concepts, counting drum beats or make musical patterns with an instrument are excellent. An ample number of instruments to explore (including kitchen utensils to bang!), a tape recorder, and a variety of songs and sounds to listen to are highly effective.
- Spatial: Pictures to look at and draw work more effectively than simply talking. Books with bright, bold graphics, as well as a variety of art materials for the child to explore, appeal to these learners.
- Naturalist: The great outdoors is the laboratory; cause and effect relationships are best shown to a naturalist in this way. Terrariums, microscope, and bird feeder are visually appealing as well.
- Interpersonal: group games and cooperative learning opportunities engage this learner. Enjoyment with puppets, dolls, and small figures appeal to this group.
- Intrapersonal: To explore on their own with a camera, drawing pad, or journal is an excellent way to find out about new experiences (Hoerr, 2002).

Fifty percent of the population would classify themselves as visual learners; fifteen percent prefer to listen (as opposed to visual), and one-fourth get clues from non-spoken and facial clues. With such statistics as these, it would seem that variety in making class presentations is essential (Englund, 2001). But with all this discussion about learning styles, how effective are they pertaining to students and their ability to do well in the classroom?

In 2001, Dr. Edward Beglane examined two geographically diverse, yet highly successful schools in North Carolina and Texas. In the first school scenario, the North Carolina school served economically impoverished, primarily single-parent homes. Testing was done with the annual California Achievement Test of Basic Skills (CAT). For years, scores ranked in the 30th percentile. The first year that the principal instituted learning styles (LS), CAT scores in both reading and math jumped to the 40th percentile. The second year of LS, CAT scores skyrocketed to the 70th percentile; in the third year, under State Education Department supervision, scores moved to the 83rd percentile.

In the second school scenario, the Texas school suffered with ethnic biases and predominantly low percentile, minority population. Within two years, every senior in learning style classes had passed statewide tests for graduation. Student relations improved noticeably, and a strong sense of community developed among students, faculty, and the community (Learning Styles Network, 2001).

One of the ways in which implementation can begin is by inculcating dynamic writing exercises spanning the school year that begin with broad overview topics and gradually narrow to end with intensely specific topics. Topics can include the students' preferred mode in studying for quizzes, or as a compare/contrast exercise in class between two diverse topics and the manner in which they learned it (Prescott, 2001).

There are also quality self-evaluation instruments that students can answer. It is imperative, however, by whatever mode is selected, that learning styles are assessed and addressed. According to Wigle and Manges, "If students are to invest significant effort in school learning, they need to perceive that how they will learn has as much meaning, relevance and value as what and why they are asked to learn" (Mickel and Sanders, 2001).

There are two specific instruments that are to be utilized, according to the research which this writer found. The first is the CLSI (Choice Learning Styles Inventory). This model incorporated four questions, asking about feeling, thinking, doing, and watching/listening. Preferred styles were based upon responses on a scale from one to four. The other instrument is the BNSA (Basic Needs Self Assessment) in which students identified six items based on a scale from 1 (*very weak*) to 5 (*very strong*). Both instruments contained instructions that the assessment was not a test, and that there were no right or wrong answers (Mickel and Sanders).

Thus, it is essential that teachers evaluate their students, and themselves, when determining leaning styles. Recommendations would include

- a fuller understanding must be developed through additional research pertaining to teachers who are “average” or “marginally average”,
- how teachers develop their understanding of learning styles,
- in-service presentations be made with a stronger emphasis on learning styles, and
- understanding on how both teachers and students can assess themselves (Haar, Hall, Schoepp, and Smith, 2002).

There is merit in using learning styles for educational design and delivery. There is hope that educators can present lessons and topics that are diverse and conducive to individuals.

However, not all educators will use exactly the same methods from class to class. For as many students as there are, there can be meaningful developments and learning in every class (Delaho Ussaye, 2002).

With regard to technology in the classroom, what should be done, seeing that there is a visually-oriented society? There is a vast diversity of options available to anyone who is willing to avail themselves of it. Web pages, electronic libraries, instant messaging, chat forums, PowerPoint slides shows, and distance learning programs are but a few among the vastly diverse range of options.

In this time of state budget cuts, the teacher must wisely choose what will be utilized, because striving to stay ahead of the learning curve with current technology advances is a full-time job in itself. Hardware and software at this current trend can be considered obsolete, in some cases, after 2 years; in addition, it can be costly to replace.

Evaluation of technology should include testing of learning both before and after to determine if it contributed to the instructional outcomes. Past studies indicate that multimedia presentations should include both visual aids and verbal descriptions of the material. There have

been questions raised concerning students who have other learning styles, and inconsistent results have raised some concerns (Smith and Woody, 2000).

A PowerPoint slide show aids students with a visual learning style to process information better. It also provides visual novelty that our cognitive system needs to help us pay attention for extended periods. And, by highlighting important concepts, the slide show enables learners to capture important points easily. In effect, a PowerPoint slide show has much more conceptual depth than one would imagine. However, only a tiny minority of classroom teachers would consider adding it as a valid repertoire to their teaching skills (Grasha and Yangerber-Hicks, 2000).

Multimedia presentations can tremendously benefit those students with high visual orientation. However, based on testing results, students whose learning styles are visually oriented, rather than verbally, will benefit more. Verbally-oriented students may have difficulties and suffer because the presentation is visual; this is not working from a position of their strengths. The compromise that can be attained would be the traditional lectures, working in consort with multimedia usage (Smith and Woody, 2000).

What does all this mean for today's educators? Change. It necessitates a dramatic change in how we think about teaching, in how we create lessons, and in how we view children. It may mean returning to college for refresher courses in modern instructional techniques. It may mean on-going reading of current research in instruction and current trends. It may mean stepping out of our comfort zones to try something new and different. Most of all, it will mean being open to almost any concept that will make us the most effective teachers we can be to educate all students who enter our rooms. They are all precious, and they are all capable of learning, if we will but give them the tools needed, as well as implementing them ourselves (Mosey).

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