

June, 1995 - Henry F. Harty, Education

LEARNING/TEACHING STYLES

Learning style theorists describe learning styles as the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment. (Developed by National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1989)

The increased research on learning styles has led to a growing number of different learning styles. Curry (1987) suggests that learning style theories can be categorized as follows: personality dimensions, informational-processing, social interactions and instructional preferences. The educational implications of these theories are critical as related to the use of teaching/learning styles and study strategies as predictors of academic success. With an increasing variety of new teaching methods, teachers need to know how their students learn best. The students, in turn, need to know how to plan their study strategies for academic success. The specific implication for college students is their need to identify the micro-elements of studying based on their personal styles. For example, the first-generation college student needs to be more carefully counseled in developing strategies that help establish a study plan based on individual style and also needs a network of peers who study for success with similar styles.

Based on the extant research, the implications for teachers are both challenging and varied. The following are some suggestions based on results of a variety of studies:

- teachers confuse a mismatch of styles with a lack of ability;
- teachers who expand their teaching styles can expect greater academic success for their students;
- teachers should help students to discover their own learning styles;
- teachers should match goals and tests to their instruction;
- teachers should use a more indirect method of teaching.

These results can be addressed by teachers with little or no significant loss of instructional time. The "How Do I Learn Best?" test developed by Neil Fleming and Colleen Mills is a simple instrument that assists both student and teacher in discovering which of the sensory modalities best describes the student's learning style. Cooperative learning groups can discuss the test results and help students clarify the implications of their individual results. Class discussion can assist the teacher in determining the variety of styles in the classroom. Teachers can match goals, instruction, and tests by using the following method: select the

chapter, unit or lecture to be taught; write a goal statement and test questions; and direct instruction toward goal and test questions.

A more indirect method can be developed by focusing lectures on what students already know (or what they think they know) about a given topic. Cooperative learning groups can discuss the topic prior to a whole class discussion. The role of the teacher becomes one of encourager, organizer and recorder. As an encourager, a teacher should be willing to accept and offer praise for student participation in the discussion; as an organizer, a teacher should help students classify their thoughts and form generalizations; as a recorder, a teacher should record appropriate comments on the board or overhead. In addition, teachers can use a flow diagram to illustrate the connections of the items listed to the topic being discussed. The following is a brief illustration of a flow diagram:

consumer products

	convenience products	shopping products	specialty products	unsought products
	\$	\$\$\$	\$\$\$\$\$?
	little plans no special brand aggressive	planned shping brands impt	planned shping no substitutes	emergency
	many retailers	fewer retailers		limited retail
ex.	gum, bread, etc.	appliances	luxury cars	life insur

This diagram is a visual representation that can be traced with a pen or pencil. As students trace the diagram, they can vocalize the contents. This type of study method uses the audio, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile channels of learning.

The research of Gardner, Smith, Demster, Stenberg, *et al.* is causing a shift in the instructional paradigm in our schools. The move is away from what students do not know and what they should know, to what they know and what they would like to know. In addition, teacher and students become co-learners. The methods discussed above are being used by many teachers with great success. These methods also offer teachers the opportunity for greater integration of the curriculum and more meaningful assessment of students.