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Cross-Cultural Learning Styles

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Without Abstract

Culture and Teaching

The importance of, and the cultural influences on learning styles in the classroom, are not new topics. Over the past 30 years, several theories have been advanced about how students, from kindergarten to post-secondary education, learn and process information. Even before that, theorists had been investigating the influences of culture on cognitive processes. These fields of study have converged in research on how to create culturally inclusive classrooms and attention to cross-cultural learning styles.

The critical examination of standard teaching practices in North American schools was catalyzed by the civil rights movement and the recognition that educational institutions were not serving the society as a whole. It was proposed that these practices were in fact excluding many students from advancing within the school system. Primarily these students were from marginalized and economically depressed cultural communities. Teaching practices were perpetuating social divisions along lines of class and color of skin.

As a result of extensive research, there are several ways that learning styles have been categorized and conceptualized. In the midst of all these theoretical constructs, the attempts to connect cultural influences to the way students learn has been haphazard. The following will give an overview of learning styles, investigate the impact of culture on the way students learn, provide important parameters for using information about learning style, and suggest an umbrella approach to serving all students in a multicultural class.

Learning Styles

Many definitions of learning styles have been posited. However, in its most basic form, learning style refers to the preferences that a learner has for processing and retaining information. Processing of information includes how the learner thinks about information, how the learner relates to others in the classroom, and how the learner relates to the environment and classroom experiences. Designations for learning styles include such things as how students take in information (visually, verbally, hands-on), how they organize and process information (through activities, by reflecting, by induction or deduction), and the rate at which students progress toward the learning goal (one thing at a time, by looking at the big picture).

Teachers have an important role to play in how and when information is disseminated so that possibilities for student processing and retention are maximized. Students who have a learning style that matches the learning style of the teacher have a higher rate of success in the classroom. For example, if a teacher has been successful in his/her own learning by working alone using memorization and reading, it is likely to be his/her tendency to expect the same from students. Students who match this style are successful in that particular classroom. In general this creates a need for the teacher to expand the repertoire of teaching techniques beyond those that have been comfortable.

Cultural Impact on Learning Styles

Culture is a historically shared system of codes and symbols, deeply imbedded within each individual, that provides a way of interpreting and giving meaning to social interactions. Social interactions include those that take place in a classroom and throughout the process of learning. Therefore, it makes sense that cultural background will in some way have an impact on student learning. For example, when communicating in the classroom, if a student's cultural learning has put emphasis on being conscious of the well-being of others (collectivism) rather than achieving rewards for themselves (individualism), they are less likely to feel comfortable giving personal opinions in front of the rest of their classmates. If this sort of communication is expected in the classroom, those students will be seen as "not participating" or "not trying." Culture influences the way a student perceives, organizes, and processes information.

If a teacher knew which particular cultural preferences were present in the classroom it might make sense to have students design a curriculum that matches the resulting learning style. On the other hand, although culture may be a deeply imbedded system that is shared by a group, individual differences (especially within a North American context) must be taken into account across teaching contexts. To make an assumption that all Hmong students need to work in groups because they come from a culture that values collectivism would be counterproductive to them and their classmates. It is more useful to remember that all students use all learning styles at some point in their learning but may prefer to start with a particular preference.

All Students use all Styles

It is important to understand that a combination of teaching strategies, that incorporate the learning styles, optimizes opportunities for learning. In the author's own study, 100 university students were surveyed (50.5% White, 21.9% Hispanic, 28.7 other) to test the hypothesis that students learn more when classroom activities cross all learning styles. To test this hypothesis, students were asked to identify the array of teaching techniques used in a class where they felt they learned a lot as well as in a class where they did not learn a lot. There was statistical significance in two areas: (a) the number of teaching techniques that were used in the classroom; and (b) the use of styles that did or did not cross a variety of learning styles.

In the classes where the students felt they learned a lot, compared with those where they felt they did not learn a lot, the 95% critical value for a χ^2 test with 99 degrees of freedom was 124.34. The χ^2 value for these data was 527.34, greater than the critical value of χ^2 (99, $N = 100$, $p < 0.05$), so the null hypothesis was rejected. Learning is related to the number of teaching techniques used.

Similarly, the techniques themselves, when using a more active learning mode that incorporates several learning preferences, make a difference. In a paired-samples t -test, 12 of the 19 techniques were more than the t -value of 1.98 required for significance at the level of $p < 0.05$. Techniques such as working with a partner ($t = 9.998$), discussion as a whole class ($t = 12.006$), and giving a team presentation ($t = 5.042$) all use a combination of reading, seeing, hearing, practicing, and demonstrating knowledge.

The usefulness of learning styles is to recognize that all students use all styles in the full cycle of learning. Although students may have a preference for starting or concentrating their learning in a particular phase of the cycle, it is the wholeness of the process that needs to be considered when designing a curriculum. Whether it is designing each day to include a full cycle of learning style activities or designing each unit that way, all learning styles can be built into a curriculum that attends to cross-cultural learning.

See also: [*Assessment of culturally diverse children*](#); [*Culturally competent practice*](#); [*Learning styles*](#)

Suggested Reading

Garcia, E. (1999). *Student cultural diversity: Understanding and meeting the challenge* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). *Educating culturally responsive teachers: A coherent approach*. New York: State University of New York.

Suggested Resources

New Horizon for Learning—http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/front_strategies.html: This website offers information on some of the most widely implemented methods for helping all students to learn more successfully. The information includes a description of how the teaching and learning strategies

work, where they have been applied, results, books, websites, and other resources, and where to find further information from experts in the field.