

DIVERSE LEARNING STYLES FOR TEACHERS

By Michael D. Lee, MBA

As good teachers, we often survey the faces of our students for feedback and are delighted to see some of the people in our classes obviously enjoying our lectures. However, there are others who are constantly squirming in their seats and a few who have glazed looks on their faces. Whose fault is it that some of our students “just don’t get it”?

Many instructors assume that their preferred learning style is the same as that of their students. You will see why this is often not the case.

While we may believe that most people are comfortable with the preferred mode of communicating in America which is primarily verbal, we forget that there are students that have different learning styles. To ignore the impact of these differences in the classroom could be a fatal mistake, especially when teaching groups of students composed of a significant number of people from diverse cultures.

What are the different learning styles? There are four basic ways that people prefer obtaining information. In the United State, most classroom teaching is presented primarily aurally through lectures. However, research shows that only 30% of all audiences favor the auditory learning style. We must remember, however, that leaves 70% who prefer obtaining information in ways other than listening to lectures.

Studies show that 30% of people prefer learning kinesthetically where hands-on experience helps make the learning stick. Some 20% are visual/verbal learners who learn best when information is presented in a written language format such as that which is found on the Internet or in books. Another 20% are visual/nonverbal learners who learn best when information is presented in a graphical format such as charts, graphs and on television.

So what does culture have to do with learning style? Over one-third of the average student body in the United States is composed of people from diverse cultures. In many areas and classes this number can be much higher. Studies show that Hispanics tend to be highly kinesthetic. “They tend to prefer hands-on learning such as structured group exercises and the use of drawings as opposed to listening or reading”.¹ Asians tend to be much more visual than verbal because the Asian language is based on pictures. They tend not to perform well when the primary mode of instruction is verbal². Anyone who has spoken in Asia knows that speakers have to change to a much more visual mode of presentation when teaching in this part of the world.

The harsh reality for instructors is that if we do not teach using a “multi-modal” technique it becomes very difficult to connect with one or more of the learning style groups. Multi-modal teaching means using techniques that incorporate lectures with visual images of the concepts we are trying to convey, adding readings that students can

refer to and using exercises or physical activities that reinforce the same point. The challenge in a diverse society is to provide information in a way that reaches all types of learners.

One of ways to reach more than one of the senses is not only to lecture but also use a visual verbal technique such as PowerPoint, making an effort to incorporate charts and graphs for the visual/nonverbal learners and add activities and games for the kinesthetic. While a challenge to develop, you can imagine that this can make for a much more interesting and engaging program for the audience and keeps the speaker involved as well. Visual/nonverbal learners will be quite happy reading the information from a book or on a computer.

A question that many teachers often ask is whether they can present in a multimodal format without detracting from their presentations. The answer is an unquestioned “yes”. Studies show that multimodal programs are much more effective in conveying information than simply using a single learning style.

Other ways to make your classrooms more multimodal would include: group discussions, audio and video clips, pictures, role plays, small group work, etc. The challenge is to smoothly integrate these media and activities into your programs. I think you’ll find that they will add to the impact of your lessons and make your teaching more fun.

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