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Native Learning Styles: Shorthand for Instructional Adaptations?

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A discussion about Native learning styles in the literature is reviewed, and it is argued that the term is ambiguous, and that several of the studies and propositions about Native learning styles go beyond cognitive and interactional categories to further confuse the issue. Nonetheless, the literature can provide some general indications for teachers, not in defining attributions or characteristics of Native learners, but in suggesting things that teachers might be sensitive to, in order to accommodate to a specific situation.

In approaching the issue of Native learning styles, we are confronted with a range of problems and dangers. One of the primary problems is defining exactly what we mean by learning styles. Swisher and Deyhe (1989) conclude that

In summary the body of research which examined learning styles of American Indian students, although small, does present some converging evidence that suggests common patterns or methods in the way these students come to know or understand the world. They approach tasks visually, seem to prefer to learn by careful observation which precedes performance, and seem to learn in their natural settings experientially. Research with other student groups has clearly illustrated differences in learning styles ... can result in "academic disorientation" ... what is clear from the research is...that American Indian students come to learn about the world in ways that are different from mainstream students. (p. 5)

Kleinfeld (1988), however, remains unconvinced.

Good teachers always adapt to the culture of the children and the culture of the school. Nothing is lost by using the term "learning style" to denote such teaching adaptations, but little is gained. "Learning style" becomes a vague and ambiguous concept without significant heuristic value. (p. 95)

Indeed, an examination of the literature on Native learning styles offers a bewildering array of perspectives on exactly what is meant by learning styles, many of which seem to have little to do with the generally accepted view that learning style relates to students' cognitive patterns—"distinctive ways in which individuals learn from their environment" (Walker, Dodd, & Bigelow, 1989).

The most commonly accepted and widely publicized Native learning style characteristic is the often reported preference for visual (as opposed to verbal and kinaesthetic) learning. Kaulback (1984) cites numerous studies that point to a visual learning preference, and he attributes this visual orientation to child rearing practices that emphasize observation and imitation. Guilmet (1976) looks at both anthropological accounts and contemporary examples to conclude that Indian students learn primarily through nonverbal mechanisms. He suggests, however, that Indian students' tendency to be less verbal in the classroom is also attributable to "interference theory"—Indian students speak less because

classrooms are not structured to allow Native students to display their verbal competence.

Dumont (1972) further supports the interference theory concept, observing that classrooms that emphasize teacher dominance, formal lecturing, spotlighting, and low tolerance for dialogue produce what she calls "the mask of silence." Here the lines blur between learning styles, the ways students process information, and teaching styles, the things instructors do (and don't do) to accommodate students' backgrounds, behaviours, and culturally based communication patterns.

Henry and Pepper (1988) further obscure the meaning of learning styles while emphasizing the teaching accommodations we need to make for culturally based student characteristics. They begin by concluding again that Native students prefer observation versus verbal learning, which, they say, places the Native student at a disadvantage in school "where teaching methods tend to cater to the auditory learner," and then go on to list 21 characteristics of the Indian learner. Many of these (for example, "They may have difficulty with the correct verb" and "many Indian children have a low self-image") are not even remotely related to learning styles, though they are listed as "learning style inclinations." The authors then suggest 22 teaching strategies to accommodate the "learning styles" factors noted.

In a study that does look at learning style as strict cognitive preferences, Diessner and Walker (1986), using data from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) tests administered to Yakima Indian students, combined with previous research elsewhere, suggest that Native students may have a "typical cognitive pattern": spatial ability is greater than sequential ability which is greater than verbal conceptual ability. They conclude that "it would be warranted to search for curriculum materials that use a spatial, visually presented format" for Native students.

More (1987) moves in different directions when addressing learning styles. He suggests four learning style bipolarities—global vs. analytic (or simultaneous rather that successive) processing, imaginal vs. verbal coding, concrete vs. abstract learning, and trial and error vs. "think- (or watch) then-do" patterns. He suggests that Native students tend toward the global, imaginal, concrete, and think-then-do poles.

Wauters, Bruce, Black, & Hocker (1989) used the adult version of the Dunn Learning Style Inventory to conclude that the Alaskan Native students they tested desired more teacher-student interaction, were more peer-oriented (thus were more oriented to collaborative and small group tasks) and preferred kinaesthetic and visual learning. Walker et al. (1989), employing yet another set of learning style descriptors, the Walker Learning Preference scale, demonstrated some preference for "patterned symbols" learning among Native students. These learners prefer small group participation, allowance for personal interpretations, a cooperative learning environment, and integrating new information with what they already know. As in many similar studies, it is significant to note that the

sample was very small (28 participants), and the "patterned symbol" learning pattern (one of four) was actually preferred by just over half of the sample.

Kleinfeld (1988) takes much of this research to task. While acknowledging that Native learners may indeed have a visual learning preference, for instance, she examines several studies that failed to demonstrate increased learning on the part of Native students when the information was bolstered by visual materials. While the studies she cites are few, sketchy and suspect (only still visuals were used to reinforce narrow, very possibly irrelevant content), she argues persuasively that the real value of research into Native learning patterns "does not lie ... in telling teachers to 'match' instruction to high/low verbal ability patterns. It lies rather in helping teachers understand the cultural context in which they are working so that they can respond with better judgement."

She suggests that we may be better off looking at teaching approaches that teachers have found work with Native students, approaches, she points out, that rarely include visually based instructional techniques.

Such an examination reveals a great deal about accommodating Native students. Several researchers (Dumont, 1972; Phillips, 1983) concluded that the tendency to isolate control in the hands of the instructors—especially the school's cultural incongruity between the home and school—caused Native student resistance and lack of participation. Dumont (1972) found classroom teachers who shared social control and employed warmer and more personal teaching styles were more effective.

Pacing—the ability of the instructor to adapt to the speed and movements of the students—was identified as an important factor in working successfully with Native students by Collier (1979), Erickson and Mohatt (1981), Barnhardt (1981), and others. Erickson and Mohatt (1981) also identified the importance of being sensitive to non-verbal cues; avoiding spotlighting (singling students out for praise, criticism, or recitation); accepting silence; and using more small group instruction.

Arbess (1981) speaks of the need to have instructors "negotiate a culture of the classroom" where cultural differences and learning and communication patterns are discussed and understood and a real negotiation of the operation of the class is carried out through genuine dialogue. He also warns against stereotyping or making assumptions about Indian learning or behaviour patterns. These must be verified.

In a seminal study, Kleinfeld (1975) concluded that effective instructors of Native students displayed two primary characteristics: personal warmth (vs. professional distance) and active demandingness (vs. passive understanding). Because, she suggests, learning for Native students tends to be more of an interpersonal activity (as opposed to goal-oriented, impersonal activity), establishing close personal relations with Native students is essential if an instructor is to be effective. On the other hand, if the instructor is not actively demanding—expecting and pushing for excellence—students whose school experiences have been negative and whose self-esteem has been battered may avoid academic situations and work below their capacity.

Phillips (1983) concluded that certain classroom participation structures produced different degrees of Native student involvement and that those most frequently used in schools (teacher lecturing and teacher directed small groups) produce the least Native student participation, while the least used (individual work and self-run small groups) produce the greatest participation.

Barnhardt (1981) advocates what he calls "culturally eclectic" curriculum that can adjust to the realities and world view of the Native student and uses traditional culture as a basis for examining and adapting to changing conditions. He points out that conventional curricula are culture-bound as they segment, classify and view the world in a manner that is culturally based. His curriculum incorporates four characteristics: it is process centred, community based, utilizes group learning situations, and emphasizes experiential learning.

Swisher and Deyhle (1989) bring the issue full circle by arguing that while there is ample evidence that Native students come to school with an approach to learning that is "culturally influenced" and often different from mainstream students, our teaching approaches tend to remain the same. They suggest that teachers first know their own cultural biases and personal learning and teaching styles. Then they make specific suggestions that "have special significance for teachers of Indian students": (1) discuss learning style and why students do what they do in learning situations; (2) be aware of student background knowledge and experiences; (3) be aware of appropriate pacing; (4) be aware of the discourse patterns and discussion style of your students; (5) avoid singling students out; (6) use multi-sensory instruction; (7) provide time for practice before expecting performance; (8) be aware of proximity and other non-verbal preferences; (9) Become part of the community: "observe and ask questions so that genuine caring and concern is communicated."

Even this cursory review of the literature suggests some of the problems of the learning style debate: wildly differing definitions, the inclusion of cultural and personal factors beyond the usual view of learning style as cognitive patterns, dangerously generalized conclusions, and a confusion between student learning styles and teacher behaviours.

Perhaps the most useful way of looking at the issue is to abandon a narrow definition of learning styles for a more inclusive view. As Kleinfeld (1988) puts it, ["Learning style"] has become a short-hand reference for a wide variety of instructional adaptations necessary in a cross-cultural context." In this view, we look beyond the narrow debate over the meaning of the term to the broader instructional practices that result in greater Native student success.

When viewed this way, the learning style/teaching style literature provides a rich array of suggestions for creating more effective, successful class rooms for Native students. Specifically, research suggests that successful instructors of Native students tend to

1. share classroom control and responsibility;
2. reduce formal lecturing;
3. avoid "spotlighting"—singling students out for praise, criticism, or response;
4. allow students to retain control over their learning;
5. allow students to privately rehearse a skill before demonstrating competency publicly;
6. accommodate visual learning preferences, especially for new and difficult material;

7. use more student-directed small groups;
8. de-emphasize academic competition;
9. assist students to integrate and synthesize new material with prior knowledge and experience;
10. favour essay tests over objective exams;
11. emphasize cooperative and collaborative learning;
12. allow students to discuss information in a non-competitive atmosphere;
13. use more global, holistic instructional approaches;
14. use warmer and more personal teaching styles;
15. establish close personal relationships with students;
16. actively demand while remaining personally warm;
17. be sensitive to nonverbal cues;
18. accept silence;
19. allow longer pauses after asking questions;
20. establish a pace and flow consistent with that of the students;
21. use smooth, less abrupt transitions between lessons;
22. utilize slower, more personal helping modes;
23. avoid excess verbalization;
24. listen as well as talk;
25. utilize minimal teacher direction;
26. negotiate a "culture of the classroom";
27. become part of the community;
28. use experiential learning techniques;
29. discuss learning style with students;
30. be sensitive to student backgrounds and experiences;
31. be aware of discourse patterns and discussion styles of their students;
32. use multimodal instruction;
33. be aware of proximity and other nonverbal preferences;
34. emphasize development of self-esteem, confidence, empowerment, and capacity to affect change;
35. help students understand the need to "decontextualize" thought in writing and provide the skills to do it;
36. emphasize dialogue based on mutual respect;
37. use a whole language, integrated approach that emphasizes the words and experiences of the students;
38. recognize potential conflicts between student language/cultural backgrounds and school-based expectations (e.g., linear theses-support essays) and discuss these formal expectations with students;
39. emphasize a writing process approach rather than a grammar-based subskills method to writing instruction;
40. provide appropriate, effective, and adequate counselling and support services;
41. build life skills into programs;
42. avoid stereotyping: they consider all of the above as mere tendencies, and validate everything for themselves.

In conclusion, the Native learning style debate—do Native students have specific, generalizable learning preferences, and exactly what do we mean by learning styles anyway?—has tended to obscure the real value of the research. In the view advocated here, Native students are better served when we as instructors abandon the attempt to identify a definitive answer to the question "How do Native students learn?" for answers to the question "What teaching accommodations have proven most effective in helping Native students succeed in educational settings?" In this context, the learning style literature offers an important array of techniques and approaches that may help instructors better understand the "cultural context" they are working in and how to accommodate it. Understanding that the research offers only tendencies observed by others in

other situations, sensitive instructors will use the perspectives provided in the literature as mere starting points—suggestions of possible differences in communication patterns, world view, ways of processing information, and relating to one another—that must be verified for themselves.

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