

TEACHING DOES NOT EQUAL TALKING

Learning Styles and Ministries of Education

by Cassandra D. Williams

It has long been recognized that people have different preferred ways of learning. Attention to learning styles is important for church educational endeavors because doing so honors the richness of what it means to be human. This attention is also crucial since growing as a disciple of Christ requires engaging in learning that impacts not just what we think, but who we are and how we live.

Taking learning style differences seriously is also a justice issue. Historically, both general education and Christian education have valued analytical learning over other styles. The traditional classroom has been geared toward those who learn well by listening to instruction in an authoritarian context. In this biased context, analytical learners (myself included) are often rewarded while learners with other styles are neglected and even punished for not fitting the system. The term “preferred learning styles” may be misleading. What we are talking about is how the brain processes information – and that is not a choice. Those of us who have been rewarded by the educational system’s partiality to analytical learners simply lucked out by being born with brains wired to thrive in the western educational system.

Understanding learning styles can help teachers meet the needs of diverse learners. Such knowledge can also help teachers see why certain learners struggle with particular activities and can even explain (mis)behavior. Common sense learners, for example, are often mislabeled as hyperactive and the children who end up in time-out are very often dynamic learners who need to actively experiment in order to learn. In some cases, especially with adults, understanding our own learning styles can highlight areas in which we need to develop new techniques. For example, since I am an analytical learner, I do great with theory but I struggle with concrete application. I love ideas, but I know I have to work at the “so what?” and put extra effort into bringing new information into practical reality.

It is not necessary to assess the learning styles of participants in order to be an effective – and just – teacher. It is important to be committed to using a variety of teaching methods. Most of us automatically teach in ways that reflect our own preferred learning styles or in the ways that we were taught, so it might be helpful to take the time to identify your own style and then make efforts to guard

against defaulting to that style. The likelihood is that you’ll readily see yourself in one of the descriptions below. If you’d like a more formal assessment, many sources of learning style assessments can be found on the Web.

Learning styles have been categorized in a variety of ways. The two charts below present insights from three different systems (traditional, McCarthy, and Kolb) of classifying learning styles. The ways we name learning styles is much less important than purposely accommodating the wondrously diverse ways in which people learn.



TRADITIONAL CATEGORIZATION

LEARNING STYLE	TECHNIQUES
<p>Auditory learners like to hear stories and easily follow spoken directions. They like to talk as well as listen. Auditory learners make up only about 20% of learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • singing and listening to music • speaking participants' names during prayer • small group discussion • choral or responsive reading • listening for key words in a hymn or reading • sound effects during dramatic reading • rapping or chanting • one on one interviews • clapping, finger snapping, or foot stomping
<p>Kinesthetic teaching recognizes that about 80% of what we learn comes from what we do. Kinesthetic teaching is especially important for younger children and others whose attention is enhanced by movement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dance • movement prayers • prayer postures • role play • sculpting with clay • service projects • using tactile, olfactory, and gustatory elements, such as anointing hands with scented oil and tasting traditional Seder foods
<p>Visual learners represent the most common learning style. Visual learners like to see things and need concepts developed in a visual manner.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creating and displaying banners • using or creating simple symbols • using liturgical colors • watching videos • putting together puzzles • making murals of stories • creating journals in words or images • matching games

MCCARTHY/KOLB SYSTEMS

MCCARTHY'S STYLES	KOLB'S ORIENTATIONS	THEY DON'T DO WELL WITH	THEY APPRECIATE
<p>Innovative Learners start with what they see and generalize. They are interested in personal meaning and need reasons for learning.</p>	<p>Innovative learners have an orientation toward reflective observation, which focuses on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations. They are good at inductive reasoning and tend to emphasize understanding over practical application. They appreciate different points of view but like to rely on their own thoughts to form opinions. They value patience, impartiality, carefully thought out opinions and harmony.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • debates • timed activities • quiet listening without the opportunity to interact • perceived superficiality or simplistic answers • common-sense style teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening and sharing ideas • small groups/cooperative learning • mime and role play • brainstorming • team games • observing and describing situations

MCCARTHY/KOLB SYSTEMS (continued)

MCCARTHY'S STYLES	KOLB'S ORIENTATIONS	THEY DON'T DO WELL WITH	THEY APPRECIATE
<p>Analytic Learners are watchers and listeners, who think systematically. They are interested in acquiring facts in order to deepen understanding.</p>	<p>Analytic learners have an orientation toward abstract conceptualization, which focuses on logic, ideas, and concepts. They enjoy listening to lectures and emphasize thinking over feeling. They rely on logic rather than intuition. Their thinking patterns are rational and sequential. They value precision, rigor, and disciplined thought, and tend to defer to authority.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • role play • vague parameters • open discussion • getting "off-task" • anything that seems illogical • dynamic-learner style teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • instruction/lecture • being given, and reciting, facts • sequencing stories • competition • demonstrations • independent research
<p>Common Sense Learners are interested in how things work. They are eager to try things out and need to see how what they have learned plays out in real life.</p>	<p>Common sense learners have an orientation toward concrete experience, which means being involved in immediate human situations in a personal way. They emphasize feeling over thinking and are intuitive rather than systematic. They value involvement with real situations, relating to others, and open-mindedness. They have difficulty engaging when information seems unrelated to their lives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • memorization • emphasis on reading • group work • responding in writing • innovative-learner style teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flexibility and relaxed structures • problem solving • debates • independent work • experiments and hands-on activities • practical experiences
<p>Dynamic Learners start with what they can see, hear, touch, and feel. They are interested in self-directed discovery and eager to teach themselves and others.</p>	<p>Dynamic learners have an orientation toward active experimentation and are more concerned with what works than with what is "right." They yearn for practical application, rely on intuition, and seek to actively influence situations. They value risk-taking and getting things accomplished, and have little patience for retreating to the safety of ideas or acceptable routines.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sitting still • authoritarian teaching methods • high pressure/haste • assignments without options • inflexible routines • analytic-learner style teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • independent study • case studies • guided imagery • drama • creative projects and exploring possibilities • assignments that encourage originality

Sources

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