

Learning Styles and Distance Education

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Abstract

Why are learning styles important? Learning styles influence the way that learners attach their own meanings to topics being taught (Roy, 2006). Investigating the impact of learning styles on distance education is not complete without beginning the research by understanding the definition of learning styles. While there is no single definition for learning styles, according to Dictionary.com (n.d.), learning styles is defined as, “an individual’s unique approach to learning based on strengths, weaknesses and preferences.” Boyle & Dunn (1984) further defines learning styles as the way each person perceives, sorts, absorbs, processes, and retains information. These definitions perfectly explain what learning styles is but, more importantly, that learning styles is applicable to any type of education, whether it be face-to-face, blended, or online.

Keywords: learning styles, Gregorc Style Delineator, online courses

Learning Styles and Distance Education

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According to Zapalska & Brozik (2006), every student has a learning style that is prominent but may also learn in additional methods. This indicates that some students learn from watching/listening, reading or in a hands-on environment. While the definition for each of the above learning styles is obvious, when developing an online course, the instructor must develop a learning community that includes presentations and assignments that are appropriate for all learning styles.

When developing an online course, the instructor needs to be aware of various learning styles. The instructor also needs to know methods to address or meet the variety of learning styles that students in the course will possess. Knowing the various learning styles will support the instructor’s ability to modify techniques and strategies in an online course (Zapalska & Brozik, 2006).

Identifying Learning Styles

Learning styles is a valid psychological construct (Smith, et. al, 1989). Identifying a student's learning styles will enhance both learning and teaching (Graf & Liu, 2009). Graff & Liu (2009) further state that making both the instructor and the student aware of the student's learning style will both strengthen and deepen student learning. However, one must keep in mind that the learning management system's capabilities will directly impact how and to what extent an assignment or presentation can be modified to meet the various learning styles.

Teaching in the online environment poses many issues that a face-to-face course does not. In a face-to-face course, the instructor can carry on a dialog with a student as well as watch body movement. If the instructor is a seasoned teacher, they should be confident in his/her ability to determine each student's learning style. However, even the seasoned teacher may not be confident in his/her ability to determine a student's learning style. If this is the case, there are several methods and inventories that can easily be utilized to identify the learning style. Inventories can be utilized to help identify a student's learning style. One of the most popular inventories is the Gregorc Style Delineator. This inventory classifies individuals into four types that can be used by a student and a teach to actually tailor teaching styles to learning styles (Hueser, 1999).

In 1982 while continuing his research, Gregorc described learning styles as being distinctive, observable behaviors with the behaviors providing insight into how one's mind functions and, more importantly, relate to the world. Anthony Gregorc began work on learning styles in 1969 but the Gregorc Style Delineator was not developed until 1984 (Mind Styles, n.d.). The Gregorc Style Delineator was pivotal in the area of learning styles.

Underlying the Gregorc style delineator is the belief that to fully understand one's learning styles by learning the two types of mediation abilities that Gregorc thinks exists in each person. These two mediation abilities are perception and ordering (Perchaluk, 1996). Perception is how one grasps information. This can include abstractly or concretely (Markovic & Jovanovic, 2012). Ordering involves the method in which one likes to arrange and refer to information (Markovic & Jovanovic, 2012).

The Gregorc Style Delineator actually divides the brain into four areas pertaining to learning. By doing so, the learning style can be identified. These quadrants are: concrete sequential, abstract sequential, concrete random, and abstract random. Each quadrant, when taken together, identify one's learning style.

The concrete sequential learner likes order and logical sequence. This learner likes to follow directions and get the facts. This type of learner learns best with a structured environment and are faced with predictable situations. The concrete sequential learner finds it difficult to work in groups and seem to almost shut down if the environment is unorganized or chaotic. These particular learners cannot work in an unorganized environment (Mind Styles, n.d.).

The abstract sequential learner prefers to analyze a situation before making a decision and likes his/her point to be heard. This type of learner learns best when they are placed in a stimulating environment and are able to work alone. Abstract sequential learners find it difficult when they are forced to work with those who have differing views, work repetitively, and being diplomatic when they cannot monopolize a conversation (Mind Styles, n.d.).

The concrete random learner likes to take risks, use intuition, and solve problems independently. This learner learns best when they are able to use trial-and-error approaches, compete with others, and like to work by themselves. The concrete random learner finds it hard

to keep detailed records, show how they got an answer to a problem, as well as following routines (Mind Styles, n.d.).

The abstract random learner likes to listen to others, focus on issues at hands, and listen to others. They learn best when given broad or general guidelines, able to participate in group activities, and are able to maintain friendly relationships. This learner finds it difficult when they have to explain or justify feelings, required to concentrate on one item at a time, and working with authoritarian personalities (Mind Styles, n.d.).

Gregorc points out that while people have both concrete and abstract abilities, each individual is usually prefers using one over the other. He also believes that for the person who is more concrete may communicate in a “direct, literal, no-nonsense way” (Mind Styles, n.d.). For the person who prefers abstract, they find subtle ways to make his/her point. No one individual is a ‘pure’ style but are a combination.

Conclusion

Why are learning styles important? By understanding an individual’s learning style, course development can better meet the various student’s learning styles. Learning styles influence the way that learners attach their own meanings to topics being taught (Roy, 2006). In addition, by the instructor understanding and knowing his/her learning style can aid the instructor in creating presentations and assignments that better meet the needs of the online learner. Student success and retention can be increased if course development produces a better course and learning community.

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