Accommodating Different Learning Styles in the Classroom

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It's your first year. First semester. Not much to read for tomorrow's class, only about forty pages. So why has it taken you six hours to do it? Everyone else seems to be getting it, so why can't you? You read, you re-read, you take notes, you highlight, you listen to tapes of the lectures, you study with other people in your class. You end up more confused than enlightened. You have never worked so hard. You have never felt so stupid. Maybe you are not cut out for this after all.

Many academic librarians find themselves in front of a class on a regular basis. For some it is part of their job description, for others it is because they have specialized knowledge in a certain field or because they enjoy doing it (maybe all of the above). For those of you who teach or are considering it, does the scenario above ring true? Have you had students like this in your bibliographic instruction sessions, your library science courses, or any other classes in which you are the instructor? Probably, although you may not have realized it. Many students try to struggle through, thinking that there must be something wrong with them, too embarrassed to ask for help. Often they simply fall by the wayside. Or maybe you have had students ask for assistance, but you were not sure what to tell them other than "Keep trying, I'm sure you will understand it in time." The next time you encounter a student who is having trouble, consider this possibility: maybe the student has a learning style that differs from your teaching style.

Howard Gardner (Frames of Mind, c1983) has theorized that individuals have multiple intelligences, including linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal (understanding and interacting with others), and intrapersonal (self-knowledge)." Each person has these intelligences in varying degrees. The problem is that typical university teaching only caters to the first two (disciplines such as music, dance fine arts, etc. would be obvious exceptions). Muddling the problem further, educators are observing that many current students, products of a multimedia society, process information in ways that are very different from previous generations.

Any classroom will include a mix of students who have a variety of learning modes and styles. Learning mode refers to how an individual "absorbs" information. Information can only be absorbed using one's senses. Although I am sure taste and smell have their place in an academic learning environment, and I have long suspected that many of my friends passed their classes using their sixth sense, extrasensory perception, I will only focus here on the other senses. Some students absorb information best through hearing it. Students who have an "oral" disposition learn best through talking. Students who have an "aural" learning mode absorb information best by listening. Other students prefer to use their sense of sight. Students with a "verbal" learning mode learn best by reading. The "visual" student, though, absorbs information best by seeing something; this type of student needs to see visual relationships through pictures, diagrams, graphs, charts, etc. Still, other students are "tactile" learners; these students learn best by touching something and working with it.

Learning style, on the other hand, refers to the way people "process" information. There are many competing theories in this arena, but a brief summary of a few should suffice. Some students view things structurally and analytically and can parse out information; others view things globally and have trouble breaking down component parts. "Impulsive" students process information quicker but make more errors; "reflective" students process information slower but make fewer errors. People also differ in how they solve problems. "Holistic" students are redundant in the way they arrive at a solution; they are very imaginative and are good at seeing the big picture. In contrast, "serialistic" students arrive at a solution logically, step-by-step. A final comparison involves "top-to-bottom" versus "bottom-to-top" learners. Students who prefer the former learn best by going from the general to the detailed, while those who prefer the latter work best by going from the detailed to the general.

Current thinking views these learning modes and styles not as bipolar, but as a continuum. Rarely is a person all of one type and none of another. Furthermore, learning styles appear to be developmental. Learner's strategies can change over time as they gain more experience in a particular area and the appropriate learning style chosen by the learners may also depend on the specific task they are working on.

So, what is present in a typical classroom is a group of students with a multitude of learning styles and a wide variety of experiences being taught by an instructor who has his or her own teaching style. Who must compromise? It may not be so much a matter of compromising as it is accommodating. There are a number of things a teacher can incorporate into the lesson plan to accommodate different types of learning. The standard academic method of instruction, lecture, and reading, covers the "aural" and "verbal" learners, but what about the rest? Group debates, small group discussions, brainstorming sessions, are all activities that appeal to the "oral" learner. Slides, PowerPoint presentations, overheads, even drawing on the blackboard will bring in the "visual" student. In-class exercises, independent research problems, and "programmed" outlines that students can fill in as you lecture are just a few ways that "tactile" students can be reached. If you bring in freshly baked cookies in the shape of an OPAC or an index, you might even appeal to your students who learn by taste and smell!

Once you have done all of this, what do you do if a student is still having trouble? One thing you can suggest is that the student discover what learning style they use. Few students will have even considered the possibility that different ones exist. There might be agencies on your campus that can provide testing, or the student may have to rely on self-analytical tools. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is one such instrument, as is the Learning Styles Questionnaire developed by Honey and Mumford (The Manual of Learning Styles, 1992). Armed with new insights into how they learn best, these students may then be able to face the intellectual challenges presented to them in the university setting and in their life beyond it.

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