

# Learning Styles

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Ever since my first experience with the Tutoring/Learning Center at the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point, I have wondered about the impact of learning styles on students. This whole thought process started about a year and half ago when I was a learner. I was having trouble in my Religious Studies course. More specifically, no matter how hard I tried I was unable to receive anything higher than a "C" on my papers. I finally decided to ask the Tutoring/Learning Center to help me find a tutor. I felt awful about having to get help. I was an "A-/B+" student. I never before received a "C" on a paper. Why was I having so much trouble in this class? Lack of interest, time of day, length of class, and classroom surroundings were no different for this class than they were for some of my other classes that I did well in. Then what was the difference? I concluded that it was the professor's teaching style and my learning style that made the class difficult for the both of us. I had never had a professor quite like my Religious Studies professor. He based the class on lecture only and his lectures tended to be auditorally based. There were no visual cues to help me learn the information. I was completely lost. Not only were the lectures difficult for me to learn from, but the style of papers he wanted were nothing close to the style that I usually write. There is one theme that seems to run through my writing experiences: I usually write with a lot of emotion. I let it be known to my reader how I feel and what I think about the themes of my writing. Needless to say, that was not the style my Religious Studies professor used or accepted from his students. I had a challenge before me--how was I going to accept and deal with the challenge?

My personal challenge has not been the only one that I have come across while working in the Tutoring/Learning Center. I have found obstacles as a tutor, many of which have to do with learning styles - at least in my opinion. There are three sessions in particular that stand out as having to do with a conflict of the professor's teaching style and the student's learning style. (The names have been changed to ensure the privacy of the learners.)

This history of obstacles as a result of learning styles showed itself very early in my tutoring experience. JR was a student who was having trouble retaining almost all of the information from his history lecture. He would read his book and retain a great amount of the information but the professor would focus the test on the lectures more than the book readings. JR was an "A" student and felt that he should be doing that well in history, too. During our first tutoring session, I attempted to help him by re-explaining everything that the professor had said. I left the session thinking that I was never going to make a decent tutor because JR left even more frustrated and lost than when he came in. I knew that I had to think of something and just hoped that he would come back and give the TLC one more shot.

Karen was another learner who came to the TLC for help in her German 101 class. She was working for her Bachelor of Arts degree and had to take two years of a foreign language to finish her degree. She had put the semesters of language off until the last minute because she had a lot of trouble learning her vocabulary. I learned in our first session that flashcards did not help and that even when she wrote them out constantly she was unable to retain the information. Again her learning style was posing a problem in the classroom. The professor did a limited amount of verbal explanation and would rely more on worksheets and overheads. Much of the class time was spent in quiet study of the terms and ideas.

Sue, a friend who lived down the hall, had a lot of trouble writing her papers for any class. She did well

on most of her other homework but was unable to make herself sit and write her papers. She told me that she was unable to think while sitting in front of a computer screen. She explained to me that she had tried the TLC to help her with her papers but that the booths were too small and it bothered her that she had to sit still and try to discuss what her paper would be about. This fact aroused my curiosity because Sue and I would always take walks and discuss a wide variety of issues. What would cause her to have trouble discussing ideas in the TLC?

How could I, as a tutor, help these students succeed in their most difficult classes? All of them came and asked for help on their own, which means that they wanted to improve. So motivation was not the problem. The difficulty was understanding. I decided that the best way to help the learners I worked with was to take the information they had to learn and teach it to them in a way they would understand. I was going to teach them using the strengths they already possessed. The strengths of the students could be found by using the information I had acquired about learning styles. Longman and Atkinson state that "when you study or think in ways that match your (learning) style preferences, you learn more effectively" (7).

I suppose an explanation would be good right about now. To me, a learning style can be defined as a process by which one learns a given set of information. Wahlstrom and Williams agree by defining learning styles as "the ways in which people acquire knowledge" (97). Each process reaches the end result, which is learning the particular set of information, but as the word "process" suggests each learning style has its own set of instructions or set steps towards reaching the end result. There are many different processes to take part in but most of them can be categorized into four main learning style types: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactual.

Visual learners, as the name suggests, learn by looking at materials. They rely on sight. They like to mind map, sketch, organize by writing, learn by reading, and love any information that can be given in hard copy. They tend to stare into space and visualize when contemplating ideas (Orr).

Auditory learners pick up most of their information by listening to sounds around them. They dislike reading and when they do read they tend to read information out loud so that they can hear it. They tend to be very talkative and enjoy participating in discussions. Lecture classes work well for them (Orr).

Kinesthetic learners pay the most attention gross motor skills or physical involvement. They like to move around and tend to think better when they do. They also do well in discussions because the surroundings allow for more movement. They have poor listening skills and tend to have difficulty in lecture classes, whether they are visually or auditorally based (Orr).

Tactual learners are the last group that needs to be discussed. They are very closely related to the kinesthetic learners. They too like movement but it is more manipulation than the physical movement. They like to use the sense of touch to understand. Tactual learners also tend to be very emotional. They tie emotion and feeling into everything they learn. They remember by how they felt (Orr).

Because of how different the four learning styles are, teachers and students, tutors and learners all have to learn how to work with the other styles. We must all understand the similarities and the differences, the strengths and the weaknesses, and the actions that accompany each style. I feel that the misunderstanding of different styles is what causes very intelligent students to have trouble in a certain type of classroom and with a certain style of teaching. It is the tutor's job to find that ravine of misunderstandings and build a bridge connecting the different styles. The way that this can be done is by working with the information from the professor and the

strengths of the students. I realized this by solving the problems I was faced with by two of the students mentioned above. The third student did not necessarily need a bridge but she needed to have someone let her know where her strength was. She had never heard of learning styles. There was an answer to each, and I found the answers by paying attention to learning styles.

To continue the first story, JR did return to the TLC and give me another shot at trying to help him in his history class. The difference between the second session and the first was that I was prepared. I had had a week to figure out the best way to help JR remember and organize the history facts. I greeted JR with a smile and a large timeline. The timeline consisted of as many dates as I could remember from our first conversation. JR and I began at the beginning of the timeline and discussed every event that I included and even some that I had forgotten. By the end of the hour session JR had remembered and connected all of the different events that were represented on the timeline. You see, JR was a very visual learner and I had picked this up in our conversation because he had mentioned that he was very good at remembering facts from the books because of the pictures and graphs that accompanied the words. He had also mentioned that he tends to get side tracked when taking notes. When I looked at his notes I saw that that was true but I also noticed that he did not just check out of the lectures, he was drawing things in his surroundings. I concluded that he was a visual mind in a very auditory classroom.

Karen, on the other hand, was the complete opposite of JR. She was having difficulties memorizing her vocabulary words using flash cards and the worksheets provided by her professor. This was later in my tutoring experience so I was able to ask the right questions in the first session and realized that she was an auditory learner in a visual surrounding. I reached this conclusion by asking questions about her classroom. Where she sits? How the professor lectures or teaches? What distracts her from doing the assignments? I also asked about how she studies for her other classes in her major or minor. All of these questions helped me gather information on what might work. I asked her to come back to another session and told her that I would have something to try next week. I decided that since she was an auditory learner, discussing the new vocabulary might be the best way for her to learn them. But I was still at a loss to how to do it. Just discussing the words and saying them out loud was not going to work. I decided to come up with funny sayings for some of the new vocabulary so that she would have something in the conversation to remember. I also thought that the funny sayings would ease some of the anxiety that she was feeling toward the class and the TLC. Needless to say, the strategy worked. She came in the next week and I introduced her to her new study style. I had, like I said earlier, written some of the memory devices. The rest we did together. It was one of the best sessions I have ever had. We laughed the whole time and the next vocabulary quiz showed major improvement. Her only problem was that she kept laughing during the test.

My last example of how learning styles affect students does not have to do directly with the auditory or visual style. Sue was not having a conflict with any certain teaching or learning style. She just did not understand her own learning style for paper writing. If you recall, she is the student who had been unable to write any of her papers sitting in front of the computer. This I understand because I do the same thing. I needed to find a way for her to feel like she was composing without having her stationary in front of a computer. I decided that the best way for Sue to compose her papers was to tape them. We had always done a lot of composing on our long walks. Now I would make sure that the "walk talks" (as we liked to call them) would have a certain theme. We would discuss the topic for her next paper. I attempted to ask questions that would help her organize her ideas and compose the paper almost completely before she even sat down in front of a computer. It worked. The movement of the walk helped her think. She was able to use her kinesthetic strengths to write her college papers.

Each of the three students above was helped by the knowledge of learning styles. They were each able, with the help of an outside source, to build those bridges of understanding that they needed to succeed in a

challenging situation. That is why I believe that tutors should have knowledge of learning styles. I may even go as far as to say tutors should take the time to learn how to work in all of the styles. According to Wahlstrom and Williams, a person can have a "mixed modality learning style." This means that the tutor is then able to function almost equally in all styles (IOO). Along with working in each style, tutors should be able to make suggestions according to the characteristics they see in each one of their learners. Knowledge of their own styles helps because many of the misunderstandings would then be bypassed. They will be able to connect with the learner on learners' terms and the tutor will be able to harness the strengths that are present in every tutoring situation. Longman and Atkinson wrap it up the best when they explain that once students "understand style and modify learning tasks to incorporate style they will maximize learning" (3).

#### Works Cited

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