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Is Style Everything? Teaching That Achieves Its Objectives

by DIANE CARSON

Quite understandably, whatever our academic discipline, as teachers we focus on the challenging content of our courses, content that ranges from theoretical aesthetic concepts to complicated technical operations. However, our concentration on the substantive elements of appreciation, history, and production courses means that how we teach often receives secondary, even minimal attention, in favor of what we teach. Shifting our attention to that “how,” without diminishing content, this article will explore the ways learning style (LS) preferences impact classroom presentations and assignments. After surveying conventional LS taxonomies, I will pursue the implications of LS theories for teaching cinema pedagogy. In considering LS applications, I will propose several useful tools to help both our students and us to achieve key academic goals, tools that any reflective teacher can implement.

Theoretical Background. Increasingly we’ve discovered that the capacity to learn is not monolithic. As early as 1983, in a critique of our conventional idea of intelligence as IQ, Harvard psychology professor Howard Gardner argued for the recognition of “multiple intelligences” and that only if we expand and reformulate “our ingrained views of what counts as human intellect will we be able to devise more appropriate ways of assessing it and more effective ways of educating it.”

Fundamentally, multiple intelligences encompass diverse “learning domains”: cognitive (verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial); psychomotor (bodily-kinesthetic, musical); and affective (interpersonal and intrapersonal.) As teachers, we realize, then, that we’re


confronting not only conventional notions of diversity but also of intellect, which manifest themselves in different learning styles. Further, knowledge of these domains leads to the awareness that preferred learning styles directly and dramatically impact all our educational choices.  

**Typology.** Learning styles are described through various taxonomies. The most popular and familiar LS paradigms divide learning preferences into three principal modes: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic; but most people, teachers included, approach new learning by means of a single or dominant path. Typically, each of us exploits a distinctive learning preference, while some individuals exhibit more balance in their approaches than others. As with right- or left-handedness, where we tend to reach for an object with one hand or the other although in many cases either will work, so one professor may herself rely on auditory pathways and learn best from hearing people talk about and discuss content. Another teacher may favor visual learning, finding solitary reading more effective, and yet another will prefer kinesthetic approaches and learn more effectively by physical manipulation, often seen in drawing charts and diagrams or “board work.” Teachers, then, employ instructional techniques compatible with their personal learning styles with the tacit assumption that their students share the same preferences. This, when inaccurate, disadvantages students with different inclinations.

Whatever the mix of learning preferences in a class, no one approach or single presentational style maximizes learning for all students. And so a reliance on a single avenue, often the unconscious preference of the instructor, forecloses ease of access by students with different profiles. Admittedly, once upper level undergraduates and graduate students specialize in their selected majors, their classes will be more homogeneous than in large undergraduate classes. We also know that some students choose, or counselors guide students into, film electives because they seem easier and potentially more entertaining. Consider that these students directed to film electives as opposed to literature courses are destined to struggle when confronted with the complexity of our subject, a struggle compounded if their LS preference differs from that of the professor. And yet even in the most apparently homogeneous classes (usually specialized, upper level courses) I find more variety than anticipated as students wrestle with assignments that I originally projected as relatively routine and undemanding. For example, in my upper level seminars, students must write guided journal responses to the film under study each week, must write several analytical essays on assigned topics during the semester, and must make an oral presentation on one film. Predictable differences appear between oral and written competency, but it is also not unusual for students to exhibit quite different aptitudes in the two writing assignments, some

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3 For further discussion of MI, see http://www.howardgardner.com/MI/mi.html.
4 Though my full-time teaching has been at St. Louis Community College at Meramec, for ten years I also taught upper level undergraduate seminars as an adjunct professor at Webster University.
5 Yet another typology for understanding learning styles and what might work best in a specific class is to identify students as better at independent or group learning, at writing exercises or oral presentations, at analytical problem solving or creative brainstorming.
with journals skewing more toward the subjective while for others the essays exhibit discerning critical analysis.

Whatever students’ preferred modes, reflective teachers aware of their own dominant learning style can intervene to maximize student learning by conscious diversification of assignments (more visual, more auditory, more kinesthetic—depending on the class) and integration of different LS modes in their own presentations. For students, it’s not a matter of studying more but of studying smarter, using time more productively. Equally important, we need to know how learning styles influence our classroom presentations and interaction.

**Resources.** We can quickly identify our own and our students’ LS through easily accessible websites that provide surveys identifying LS. Though some elaborate sites involve fees, many free sites offer exceptionally valuable information and beneficial assessment requiring ten to fifteen minutes to take. The free sites yield basic but nonetheless usable results.

For individuals who want to explore both multiple intelligence (MI) and LS taxonomies, a good place to start is http://www.ldpride.net/learningstyles.MI.htm. Divided into six categories for ease of navigation, this site offers definitions and explanations of learning styles, explains types of multiple intelligence, includes an interactive MI test, an interactive learning styles test, ways to make your learning style work for you, and informative links, all free. It further suggests skill sets associated with intelligence categories and offers possible career interests for each intelligence category. The Interactive MI Test accessed through this site is free; the Interactive Learning Styles Test costs a nominal fee, and so I will suggest other free sites for LS inventories.

First, anyone interested in pursuing MI can take the interactive MI test. On a scale of 1 to 5 (“very little like me” to “a lot like me”) the MI test asks the user to respond to eighty statements; for example, “I like to take walks in the woods.” It took me fewer than ten minutes. The results reflect relative strength as a learner in eight categories (linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily/kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal) accompanied by explanatory descriptions for each category. The MI test yields an extremely enlightening inventory for teachers and students alike. Most students embrace it as a welcome and enjoyable “task” they can complete on their own schedules. They often express surprise at what they learn about their own dominant intelligence.

A free LS inventory, accessed through http://www.ldr.ca/projects/tscale/, is the Sternberg-Wagner Thinking Styles Inventory. This assessment includes 104 items with a scale of seven options from which to choose depending on how accurately each statement describes the person. The choices range from “not at all well” to “extremely

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6 A wonderful complement to LS diversity is Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson’s “Seven Principles of Good Practice,” among the best foundations for teaching. Briefly, the principles are that a teacher: encourages contact between students and faculty, develops reciprocity and cooperation among students, encourages active learning, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning. More can be found on this at http://www.johnsonfdn.org/Publications/ConferenceReports/SevenPrinciples/SevenPrinciples.pdf.pdf or in Chickering and Gamson, *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (New York: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1991).
well.” For example, “When making decisions I tend to rely on my own ideas and ways of doing things” or “I like to deal with major issues or themes, rather than details or facts.” Neither the Sternberg-Wagner LS nor the MI inventory is timed; results are delivered immediately. The Sternberg-Wagner inventory notes that “this inventory has been standardized with non-student adults and may not produce accurate results for other groups.” Nevertheless, I have found the inventory descriptive and helpful for students as well.

A better known, also free, and shorter (twenty-four item) LS inventory is the Barsch Learning Style Form, available through http://itdc.lbcc.edu/cps/learn11/learn11ka/barsch/index.htm. Requiring about ten minutes for most students to take, the Barsch asks for respondents to rate statements (by clicking radio buttons) as “Often,” “Sometimes,” or “Seldom.” Responses are scored as soon as the respondent hits the “Submit” button according to three categories—Visual, Auditory, and Tactile. A description of each category clarifies what an individual’s learning preference means and, another crucial dimension, how she/he can best learn. The greater the difference among the three scores, the more dominant one learning preference is; alternately, a relatively similar score for each of the three categories, the more able the student is to learn through multiple avenues. Barsch also notes the “Auditory” as the sense that dominates most instructors’ presentations, observing that weakness in this area may, therefore, cause a student difficulty and may warrant strategic attention.

Websites of the inventories listed above and sites of scholars in the MI and LS disciplines lead to more inventory options as well as extensive discussion of MI and LS research. For our purposes, the importance of this knowledge is its integration into pedagogical design. Since practice follows understanding, once we know that we and students learn in different ways, the paramount question is how we put that knowledge into practice. Factoring students’ LS profiles into teaching practices and assignments increases the likelihood of effective teaching and learning.

Application. Benefits of the foregoing self-assessments for students include confirmation of their own hitherto casual characterization of themselves as learners, a recognition of the need for a more deliberate approach to certain learning tasks, and even a prompt to encourage “stretching” across LS boundaries. After all, students must also learn how to acquire strategies for learning in ways that aren’t always “natural” or comfortable. But rather than floundering in a sea of frustration and failure, with informed choices and insightful deliberation they (and teachers) can work to fashion new learning approaches, to open options. A student who relies heavily upon visual learning can discover how to shift to other paths when appropriate. Or, an instructor can re-design an assignment that relies primarily upon auditory learning so it can be more fully accessed by students who learn best visually or kinesthetically. In this para-

7 “Style stretching is a term that [Anthony F.] Gregorc used to refer to the ability of a person to learn to operate within an unnatural learning style mode to complete a designated task. Stretching is accomplished when individuals become aware of their dominant learning style and find ways to work temporarily within another learning style,” p. 287 in M.T.B. Drysdale, J. L. Ross, & R. A. Schulz, “Cognitive Learning Styles and Academic Performance in 19 First-Year University Courses: Successful Students Versus Students at Risk,” Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk 6, no. 3 (2001): 271–289.
digm, the learning transaction can be the product of a thoughtful synthesis of teacher and student strengths.\(^8\)

A specific example should suggest pedagogical strategies and illuminate the importance of LS knowledge to our teaching. About ten years ago, I noticed students in beginning filmmaking classes making similar mistakes on their first rolls of exposed film. In this introductory super-8 class, students learn Kinoflex camera operation in the first week of the semester. Increasingly, I agonized over their becoming discouraged (some even withdrew from the class) when their exposure rolls returned from the lab with serious problems: over- and underexposure, shots out of focus, pans with too much or too little lead room, tilts with inappropriate head room, zoom-ins that went out of focus, etc. I felt I had to endeavor to remedy the situation.

Students already had written directions for the Kinoflex camera and a written explanation of the shots to include in their exposure roll. We always discussed the concepts in class; we watched several instructional videos;\(^9\) we reviewed the assignment; and yet problems persisted. Further discussion and LS tests with the students helped me realize that many filmmakers are, not surprisingly, very visual and tactile learners. Written directions, no matter how detailed, abundant, and oft-repeated, were not the answer for a significant percentage of this self-selected group nor was my emphatic, even theatrical, repetition of the information. In desperation, I decided to try another strategy—an interactive, nonlinear digital video module presented by one of my students explaining every aspect of the camera and the basic exposure roll shots (bracketing, pan, tilt, dolly in and out, zoom in and out, rack focus) followed by his demonstrating them.\(^10\) Students can access this tutorial module by checking out a CD from the library or via my internet web page. Any filmmaking student can come to the film lab, check out a camera, and work through its functions and the exposure roll shots. This provides visual, hands-on instruction at the student’s own pace accompanied by one of their classmates describing the camera and shooting assignment. Moreover, the student need not proceed in a linear fashion through the explanation but can pick and choose the sequence.

The results have been encouraging. While I have not eliminated all mistakes, this approach, a conscious effort on my part to tailor instructional methods based on a more reliable assessment of the students’ LS preferences, has minimized them, thereby

\(^8\) An example may best illustrate this. In an editing class, a conventional assignment might ask students to write an analysis of a classic scene, something from a Hollywood film, illustrating conventional cutting or, perhaps, an example of montage. Another option is to ask each student to bring in an example of their own choosing, no more than three to five minutes running time. The student would explain the aspect of editing illustrated by the clip: graphic match, jump cuts, match cuts, sound bridges, eyeline match, etc. And another option would be for students to take the same footage and edit it themselves in a conventional and an unconventional way. The total running time of the example can be sixty seconds. Each of these assignments allows students to show their mastery of editing but in ways that play to different learning styles.

\(^9\) These included BBC and Australian Film School video modules.

\(^10\) I have the advantage at St. Louis Community College at Meramec of an excellent instructional resources support team: instructional designer Linda Inman and production specialist Mark Baby. Without them these projects would have been impossible given the community college teaching load of five classes per semester. We worked as a team with a wonderful synergy of ideas and approaches. I also received released time for these projects in order to give me the necessary time to produce them. The modules may be accessed at http://users.stlcc.edu/decarson/.
alleviating frustration all around. In class, we can then spend our time on other issues, such as watching all their exposure rolls, from which they learn more substantive production skills.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Objections and Implementation.} Time: Seldom, if ever, do we have adequate time to cover everything for any course. And so the immediate consideration is how to incorporate LS and/or MI assignments and discussion. The case for integrating a unit on learning styles into every syllabus includes knowing that the benefits begin to accrue immediately and continue throughout the semester. As important, the amount of time needed can be as little as fifteen minutes in class when an out-of-class assignment is elected. Some time to discuss the concepts and the results is needed so as to derail misunderstandings. Most freshmen and sophomores have only rudimentary knowledge of diverse learning styles; that is, they haven’t yet discovered, or become aware of, how they learn best. For most of us, learning how we learn best has been through an imperceptible, trial and error process.\textsuperscript{12}

Minimal adjustments can impart enormous improvements in students’ learning and involvement, change the classroom dynamic, and thereby transform their educational mind-set. We need only brainstorm briefly for nominal but constructive interaction. For example, in a film history course, have students who want to argue the superiority of Chaplin’s cinematic style move to one side of the room and those for Keaton’s style to the other for a ten-minute debate. Have three or four students move to a designated part of the room to discuss which single scene illustrated that day’s focus—mise-en-scène, editing, sound, performance, script, whatever is under scrutiny that day. A spokesperson for the group shares the scene’s details in a three-minute report for the class. Or for the last two minutes of class, students take turns citing the most impressive, illuminating moment (and why) in that day’s film clips. Some days all the students might write this on an index card.\textsuperscript{13}

Frankly our “stretching”—assigning different avenues to arrive at the same goal—makes our classes more engaging for us as well as for students. We’re empowered when we recognize that a subset of students fail in a given classroom because they rely on a learning style not privileged in that environment. Once we’re aware of our own

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Encouraged by students’ reception and improvement, I have developed three additional instructional modules for the production and editing classes. The module devoted to editing concepts (match cut, eyeline match, jump cuts, etc.) offered other advantages. I pitched the idea to an acting class, selected two students, and used another film production student of my own. Similarly, the module explaining Avid software involved two students enrolled in that class; for the sound module we again chose a combination of acting and production students. Most importantly, students use and benefit from the modules because they speak to their preferred learning styles.
\item \textsuperscript{12} I, for one, would have been immensely grateful had my instructors helped me understand my visual orientation and its implications for learning in traditional academic environments; they would have saved me hours of exploratory frustration. Similarly, at St. Louis Community College, where I taught full-time for over twenty-five years, students categorized as career/technical track individuals, as opposed to transfer students continuing their education at four-year universities (about two-thirds of our population), become aware of their tactile preference, their expertise in performing kinesthetic tasks as opposed to the emphasis on reading and listening in college courses.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Another excellent source for quick but productive exercises is Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross’s \textit{Classroom Assessment Techniques, A Handbook for College Teachers}, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993). And for solid examples of the systematic integration of learning theories (MI, LS) into practice, see the Instructional Skills Workshop site: \url{http://www.iswnetwork.ca/}.
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strengths and weaknesses and how they intersect with our students’ learning styles, we can compensate for differences by thoughtful construction of learning activities that accommodate student strengths. We need only to decide that we want to engage our students, to be reflective teachers, and to make education a dynamic transaction more gratifying for all of us.

I want to thank Dr. Willis Loy for generously sharing his extensive knowledge of MI, LS, and educational theory. This article and my own teaching have benefited in important ways from his educational research and practice, his feedback, and his support.

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