

The Learning Styles Inventory and Experiential Learning in the College Classroom

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Concrete Experience

As I have been a student for many years, I am aware of the way that I learn and that it can be different from the way other people learn. I know what is the best way for me to learn material and I know which methods do not work for me. As a TA it is hard to know what type of learner any individual student is unless you interact with them personally. When I have had the opportunity to interact with students in this way (in office hours) then most often I can find a way to explain something to someone that makes sense to them (particularly if they are patient). In my classes I try to explain difficult concepts from a number of points of view. The motivation for this in the past has been a realization that some explanations make more sense for a student than others, rather than an acknowledgment of differences in learning styles.

Concepts

The key concept presented was that everybody has a different learning style (a method of learning that helps them learn the best) and that these can be broadly categorized into four groups as given by the Kolb Learning Style Inventory. As a teacher, it is good to be aware of these differences in style and try to tailor your explanations to the learning style of the student.

Reflection/Observation

Doing the Kolb Learning Style Inventory was very interesting. It did not tell me anything about myself that I didn't know already however the booklet clearly laid out the characteristics of the different learning styles and it was helpful to know the characteristics of other learning styles. The different styles, at their extremes, have vastly different methods that are best suited to them. So much so that I was left with the impression that it is impossible to cater

to all learning styles in a one hour section. The speakers at the workshop did not have a suitable answer to how to cater to so many different learning styles in one classroom. This was primarily because they talked about the ideal situation when you are in charge of the syllabus and can plan activities without as many time constraints as I have as a TA at Caltech. At Caltech, the lecturing is often so bad that it is left to the TAs to teach the material and do examples as well. This creates a lot of time pressure that does not allow you to cover the same material in a variety of ways. The reason why this does not pose as great a problem at Caltech as it may elsewhere is because many people at Caltech seem to have an Assimilating or a Converging learning style. This became apparent when the participants were asked to indicate on the board which category they fell into. Assuming that Caltech undergrads are similar to grad students, this is not much of a problem because I have a strongly Assimilating learning style myself.

A problem which was not satisfactorily addressed was how to teach a subject such as pure mathematics that does not easily lend itself to being taught in a variety of ways. Subjects such as this one in which you can not perform experiments or give demonstrations seem to be more suited to assimilators rather than other learning styles.

Another concern is that it is often very difficult to guess what type of learning style a student has and thus how to tailor your explanations. It was mentioned that if you validate an Accommodator student then that is frequently all they need but if you do the same for an Assimilator student then you will frustrate them even further. This is problematic as most likely you won't know what learning style the student has. Unfortunately there does not seem to be a method of teaching that can reach students of all learning styles.

On the whole, learning more about different learning styles and thinking about the different ways one could approach material was very useful. I found this to be one of the most helpful workshops. The handouts were quite useful.

Future Application

In order to cater to the different learning styles that my students may have, it would be best to try and find different ways of presenting the material. This will be difficult given the subject matter that I have to teach but it is something that I would like to put more thought into. The first thing to try would be to have some group work time in which students can try to work out a problem by interacting with other students. I am unsure how successful this will be when there is little time but it is something to try.