

Learning Styles and the Self

Abstract:

Problem:

Many of the students in Julia Shepherd's 11th and 12th grade literature classes struggled with certain assignments and excelled with others. This was due in large part to the wide variety of learning styles found in the classroom, and the difficulty in identifying these styles early on in the term.

Concern:

Did the students who struggled with homework and daily in-class work only do so because their learning styles did not match up well with either Ms. Shepherd's or the majority of their classmates?

Opportunity:

Discover how students view their own learning process in comparison to how teachers view it, and then explain how these styles affect their educational performance and achievement.

Intervention/Innovation:

The students were given a brief learning styles quiz on Friday, December 2nd. On Monday, December 5th, without having their quizzes looked at, the students participated in three activities which helped Ms. Shepherd and myself identify which learning style

each student thrives in. All three activities revolved around the subject of “firsts” written on the board (first bad grade, first good grade, first kiss, first snow, and first day of school). The first activity was a writing assignment, followed by a non-verbal communication project, and finally an oral expression piece. On Monday after school, Ms. Shepherd and I went over our observations and the videotape from that day's classes then compared the findings to the quiz results from Friday. On Tuesday I gave a lesson discussing the different learning styles found in all classrooms, and used techniques that support every learner. Next, I gave them back their quiz results, and discussed the importance of not placing themselves in a box, and that the results were not set in stone.

Research Questions:

(see learning styles quiz for all the questions directed at students)

- 1) Do some students not even understand assignments because of their learning style?
- 2) Do some students not pay attention because of their learning style?
- 3) Does a certain learning style dominate the classroom?
- 4) Does learning style affect quality of work, or is the work a reflection of diverging styles?
- 5) How accurately can students answer questions about themselves?
- 6) How well do students understand the idea that learning styles affect their compatibility to the classroom?
- 7) What are the problems that certain students have with specific assignments?

Literature Review:

A: Self-Advocacy: Encouraging Students to Become Partners in Differentiation; Douglas, Deborah; Roeper Review, 0278-3193, June 1, 2004, Vol. 26, Issue 4; *Academic Search Premier*; Advocating for the Gifted

This project, initially brought to my attention by Tommy Carlson, discussed how student understanding of their own learning style affects their educational outcome greatly. This helped me understand that the key to approaching learning styles is through self-recognition.

B: Self: Interactive or Inactive? A Consideration of the Nature of Interaction in Whole Class Teaching; Burns, Chris & Myhill, Debra; Cambridge Journal of Education; v34 n1 p35-49 Mar 2004; *ERIC*.

This study helped me understand a different technique available to me for teaching a wide variety of learners coming from vastly different backgrounds. The study helped focus my attention, further demonstrating the importance of teaching to ALL learning styles.

C: <http://www.ldpride.net/learningstyles.MI.htm#What%20are>

D: http://www.ldpride.net/learning_style_work.html

E: <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/vak.html>

The first site was given to the students as a handout on Tuesday, helping them understand what learning styles are in conjunction with my lesson. The second site was also a handout, this one given to help the students understand how they can learn best within their preferred learning style, as well as in others. The third site was the actual

quiz I gave them on Friday. All three of these sites helped me clarify exactly what I was trying to get across to the students. As the sites state, my lesson research will help the students find their "preferred" style, not their only style.

literature summary statement:

These studies and web sites have helped me develop an action research plan that will help students gain more knowledge of self by helping them understand where they are as learners. The studies have also shown me techniques for teaching diverse learners (styles and backgrounds), and helped me understand how to research these various styles.

Data Collection Methods:

Since the beginning of the new term, I have been observing learning characteristics of students in Ms. Shepherd's new literature classes. On Friday, I will administer a learning styles quiz to be completed by the end of class. Next, I will use participant observation and videotaping to analyze and interpret the learning styles of the students during the in-class activities. I will then triangulate my research by comparing the observations against the test results (which I will not see until after the activities) in hopes of finding common threads between the two. Then on Tuesday, I will present a lesson on learning styles, give them back their quiz results, and observe the responses towards the lesson's handout and their quiz results.

Analysis & Interpretation:

Since the completion of my on-site action research, I have spent countless hours analyzing the students' writing samples, as well as the videotape from the classroom to triangulate my research. The students' scores on the learning styles quiz, along with my own (and Ms. Shepherd's) first-hand observations, have served as bases for comparing the video and writing samples against. Through it all, no learning style dominates a particular class, and most students understood methods they can use to better apply their style to the bigger picture.

The video has given me extra insight on the intricacies of learning styles in the classroom. A few of the students who scored highest on the auditory section of the quiz floundered in their attempts at speech making. This has as much to do with the subject matter as it does with a quiz's inability to perfectly predict action. It is true that many of the students probably wrote down answers on the quiz that they only wished, or thought represented them. However, because some students wrote about their first kiss, personal subjects seemed to override auditory skills. The majority of those who spoke about their first kiss did have high verbal scores, which has helped validate my hypothesis that those truly skilled in auditory learning could overcome any obstacle to present out loud. One student became the perfect example of an auditory learner when she read her entry quietly out loud to herself, did a great job making a speech, and discussed her scores on the test with everyone around her.

The writing examples have also helped me better understand the connection between actual performance and the quiz. The students who scored highest on the verbal sections also wrote some of the best entries. However, a couple of the lowest verbal scoring students wrote beautifully crafted entries. The videotape also shows

some of the tendencies of the students during this silent writing time. A few of the verbal learners in particular showed high distractibility rates, thus proving they needed to study in a quiet place, as the handout states.

As a whole, my work since the action research has helped me understand that knowledge of one's own learning style cannot create change by itself. As I told the students, to truly grow as a learner, one must be able to adapt to his/her environment, and apply an individual style to mesh with those around them, especially their instructors. The results of the triangulation process has helped Julia and I identify what learning style *each and every* student prefers, now the harder part falls on Julia, who must use this information to balance and strengthen her classes beyond my stay. We have gone over ideas for implementation, and she plans on using some of my ideas, but, unfortunately, I will not be there to see the fruits of my labor.

Action Plan:

Throughout this semester at Harding, I have developed a greater understanding of what it takes to teach not only a diverse group of learners, but also a diverse group of learning *styles*. This action research project has helped Ms. Shepherd and myself determine which teaching methods best take advantage of all learning styles. We can now administer assignments with all learners in mind so that material is not glazed over by students who cannot consume information in certain ways.

Final Thoughts:

My action research plan ended up being a difficult project to take on. By developing it in conjunction with lesson plans created more work for me, and a process that could have been smoother for the students. Although the students really enjoyed the activities, the quiz, and learning about the styles, accumulating this information outside of the lesson would have been an interesting way of performing research. This would have been difficult to administer, but would have created a different dynamic for students to share emotions and feelings in. As it is, my research and coinciding interpretations have been tremendous helps for the students in Ms. Shepherd's classes. They have since used their results and "how to use your styles" guide as firm bases to learn more about themselves now and in the future. For me, the action research has helped dramatically increase my level of appreciation for teachers adept at instructing to all styles of learners. I will take this project with me, literally and emotionally, in my quest to become an urban educator focused on teaching to all walks of life and learning style.