The Culture/Learning Style Connection

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Cultures do have distinctive learning style patterns, but the great variation among individuals within groups means that educators must use diverse teaching strategies with all students.

Our ability to give every child a chance to succeed in school depends upon a full understanding of culture and learning styles. After all, effective educational decisions and practices must emanate from an understanding of the ways that individuals learn. Consequently, knowing each student, especially his or her culture, is essential preparation for facilitating structuring, and validating successful learning for all students.

This imperative leads to three critical questions. Do students of the same culture have common learning style patterns and characteristics? If they do, how would we know it? And most important, what are the implications for educators?

These questions are both important and controversial. They are important because we need all the information we can get to help every learner succeed in school and because our understanding of the learning process is the basis for decisions about curriculum and instruction. They are important because success for the diverse populations that schools serve calls for continual reexamination of educators’ assumptions, expectations, and biases. And they are important because, ultimately, every educational decision is evaluated according to its impact on individual students’ learning.

One reason that the linkage between culture and learning styles is controversial is that generalizations about a group of people have often led to naive inferences about individuals within that group. Although people connected by culture do exhibit a characteristic pattern of style preferences, it is a serious error to conclude that all members of the group have the same style traits as the group taken as a whole.

A second source of controversy is the understandable sensitivity surrounding attempts to explain the persistent achievement differences between minority and nonminority students—it is all too easy to confuse descriptions of differences with explanations for deficits. Finally, the relationship between culture and learning styles is controversial because it brings us face to face with philosophical issues that involve deeply held beliefs. Debaters in the uniformity versus diversity dispute, for instance, differ over whether instructional equality is synonymous with educational equity. Another debate concerns the ultimate purpose of schooling.

Is it “cultural pluralism” or the “melting pot”?

A highly public example of how sensitive these issues are occurred in 1987 when the state of New York published a booklet to help decrease the student dropout rate. A small section of the booklet described the learning styles typical of minority students and identified certain patterns associated with African-American students.

These descriptions became the subject of intense scrutiny and animated debate. Eventually, the descriptions were deleted from the booklet. Nonetheless, in the New York State Regent’s Report, a review panel reiterated that:

learning style and behavioral tendency do exist, and students from particular socialization and cultural experiences often possess approaches to knowledge that are highly functional in the indigenous home environment and can be capitalized upon to facilitate performance in academic settings (Claxton 1990).
How We Know That Culture and Ways of Learning Are Linked

There is very little disagreement that a relationship does exist between the culture in which children live (or from which they are descended) and their preferred ways of learning. This relationship, further, is directly related to academic, social, and emotional success in school.

These conclusions are not as simple or definite as they seem, however. Though many syntheses and surveys have discussed the interdynamics of different cultures and ways of learning, each comes from a very distinctive approach, focusing either on a specific learning style model or a particular cultural group. No work, to my knowledge, claims to be comprehensive on the topic of culture and learning styles.

In general, researchers have reported three kinds of information about culture and learning styles.

The first is the set of observation-based descriptions of cultural groups of learners. For the most part, people who are familiar with each group have written these descriptions to sensitize people outside the culture to the experiences of children inside the culture. They have often contrasted minority students’ learning patterns with European-American students’ ways of learning and the school practices designed for such students.


The reports conclude that Mexican Americans regard family and personal relationships as important and are comfortable with cognitive generalities and patterns (Cox and Ramirez 1981, Vasquez 1991). Such traits explain why Mexican-American students often seek a personal relationship with a teacher and are more comfortable with broad concepts than component facts and specifics.

Research about the African-American culture shows that students often value oral experiences, physical activity, and loyalty in interpersonal relationships (Shade 1989, Hilliard 1989). These traits call for classroom activities that include approaches like discussion, active projects, and collaborative work.

Descriptions indicate that Native-American people generally value and develop acute visual discrimination and skills in the use of imagery, perceive globally, have reflective thinking patterns, and generally value and develop acute visual discrimination and skills in the use of imagery (Shade 1989, More 1990, Bert and Bert 1992). Thus, schools should establish a context for new information, provide quiet times for thinking, and emphasize visual stimuli.

In contrast, the observers describe mainstream white Americans as valuing independence, analytic thinking, objectivity, and accuracy. These values translate into learning experiences that focus on competition,
information, tests and grades, and linear logic. These patterns are prevalent in most American schools.

A second way that we know about the links between culture and learning styles is data-based descriptions of specific groups. In this class of inquiry, researchers administer learning style/cognitive style instruments to produce a profile of a cultural group, compare this group with another previously studied one (usually white Americans), or validate a particular instrument for cross-cultural use.

The various formal assessment instruments that purport to measure learning styles detect differences in two general ways. In the category of instruments that looks for style preferences, respondents usually self-report their favored approaches to learning. The best known instrument of this kind is probably the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. It infers learning style patterns from basic perceptual and judging traits.

Another type of assessment instrument tests style strengths, that is, the ability to do tasks with a certain approach. The Swassing-Brage Modality Index, for example, asks test takers to repeat patterns given auditorily, visually, and tactiley. Another example is the well-known series of assessments that distinguishes between field-dependence and independence. In this series, the test taker tries to find a simple figure embedded in a more complex one. The results show differences in cognitive strengths, such as global, holistic learning in contrast to analytic, part-to-whole approaches.

Formal assessment data should be interpreted (though often, it is not) in the light of the kind of assessment used. An important fact about self-report instruments, for instance, is that they are language- and culture-specific. In other words, when test takers respond to specific words, they interpret the words through their cultural experiences.

Further, different assessments may yield conflicting results. For instance, someone might self-report a preference for learning something in a certain way and yet test out in a different way on a task involving strengths. It is equally possible for descriptions based on observations to conflict with self-reported preferences.

These inconsistencies do not invalidate the usefulness of each of the ways of assessing learning styles. They do point out, however, that understanding learning patterns is a complex task and that the scope of the diagnostic tool used imposes limits on generalizations that can be drawn on the basis of it. Further, the characteristics of the assessment instruments used often account for the seemingly contradictory information reported about groups of learners.

The third way we know about the relationship of learning and culture is through direct discussion. Shade (1989), for instance, comments that:

perceptual development differs within various ethnocultural groups. It is [therefore] an erroneous assumption in the teaching-learning process to assume children "see" the same event, idea, or object in the same way.

Cognitive styles research, Ramirez (1989) believes, could help accommodate children who see things differently. The research findings, he notes, provide "a framework to look at and be responsive to diversity within and between cultures."

Bennett (1986) warns that ignoring the effects of culture and learning styles would depress learning among nonmainstream students:

If classroom expectations are limited by our own cultural orientations, we impede successful learners guided by another cultural orientation. If we only teach according to the ways we ourselves learn best, we are also likely to thwart successful learners who may share our cultural background but whose learning styles deviate from our own.

**Accepted Conclusions About Culture and Learning Styles**

Those who study culture and those who study learning styles generally agree on at least five points.

1. Educators concur that students of any particular age will differ in their ways of learning. (Guild and Garger 1985). Both empirical research and
When people are asked to respond to specific words, they will interpret the words through their cultural experiences.

experiences validate these learning style differences, which in their cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, help us to understand and talk about individual learning processes.

2. Most researchers believe that learning styles are a function of both nature and nurture. Myers (1990) asserts that:

Type development starts at a very early age. The hypothesis is that type is inborn, an innate predisposition like right- or left-handedness, but the successful development of type can be greatly helped or hindered by environment.

Some researchers downplay the innate aspects of learning style, preferring to focus on the impact of environment. Many place great importance on the early socialization that occurs within the family, immediate culture, and wider culture.

3. Most researchers also believe that learning styles are neutral (Guild and Garger 1985). Every learning style approach can be used successfully, but can also become a stumbling block if applied inappropriately or overused.

This concept in the learning styles literature says a great deal about the effects of different learning approaches with different school tasks. Without question, for example, an active, kinesthetic learner has a more difficult time in school because of the limited opportunities to use that approach, especially for the development of basic skills. Nonetheless, the kinesthetic approach is a successful way to learn, and many adults, including teachers and administrators, use this approach quite effectively. Howard Gardner’s (1983, 1991) identification of various intelligences has helped people appreciate the strengths of various approaches to learning.

4. In both observational and database research on cultures, one consistent finding is that, within a group, the variations among individuals are as great as their commonalities. Therefore, no one should automatically attribute a particular learning style to all individuals within a group (Griggs and Dunn 1989).

This subtle point is often verbally acknowledged, but ignored in practice. Cox and Ramirez (1981) explain the result:

Recognition and identification of ... average differences have had both positive and negative effects in education. The positive effect has been the development of an awareness of the types of learning that our public schools tend to foster. ... The negative effect ... is that the great diversity within a culture is ignored and a construct that should be used as a tool for individualization becomes yet another label for categorizing and evaluating.

Debates About Applying Theory on Culture and Learning Styles

The published literature recommends caution in applying knowledge about culture and learning styles to the classroom. This prudence seems advisable because, despite the accepted ideas, at least five differences of opinion persist.

1. People differ, for instance, on whether educators should acquire more explicit knowledge about particular cultural values and expectations. Proponents say that such knowledge would enable educators to be more sensitive and effective with students of particular cultures. Certain states even mandate such information as part of their goals for multiculturalism.

Other authors argue, however, that describing cultures has resulted in more stereotyping and may well lead to a differentiated, segregated approach to curriculum. For example, Cox and Ramirez (1981) note that “the concept of cognitive or learning styles of minority and other students is one easily oversimplified, misunderstood, or misinterpreted.” The authors go on to say that misuse of the concept has led to stereotyping and labeling rather than the identification of educationally meaningful differences among individuals.

2. Authors also debate the proper response to the fact that the culture-learning styles relationship affects
Evidence suggests that students with particular learning style traits (field-dependent, sensing, extraversion) are underachievers in school, irrespective of their cultural group. Students with such dominant learning style patterns have limited opportunities to use their style strengths in the classroom.

Even more disheartening is the practice of remediating problems so that the learner conforms to school expectations, rather than structuring school tasks in ways that respond to students' strengths. With the current emphasis on the inclusion of all learners in classrooms, it seems essential to change that practice.

Another achievement problem is the serious inequality that results when certain cultures value behaviors that are undervalued in school. Will increased attention to culture and learning styles eradicate this problem? Hilliard (1989) thinks not:

I remain unconvinced that the explanation for the low performance of culturally different "minority group" students will be found by pursuing questions of behavioral style.... Children, no matter what their style, are failing primarily because of systemic inequities in the delivery of whatever pedagogical approach the teachers claim to master—not because students cannot learn from teachers whose styles do not match their own.

Bennett (1986) agrees that accommodating learning styles won't solve all problems:

We must be careful ... not to view learning styles as the panacea that will eliminate failure in the schools. To address learning styles is often a necessary, but never sufficient, condition of teaching.

3. Another unresolved issue is how teachers working from their own cultures and teaching styles can successfully reach diverse populations. Bennett (1986) sums up the problem this way:

To the extent that teachers teach as they have been taught to learn, and to the extent that culture shapes learning style, students who share a teacher's ethnic background will be favored in class.

Some argue, though, that teachers properly play a special role in representing their own culture. Hale-Benson (1986), for example, says:

It is incumbent upon black professionals to identify the intelligences found especially in black children and to support the pursuit of their strengths.

Yes, that seems sensible. But we have all learned successfully from teachers who were neither like us in learning style or in culture. Often, these were masterful, caring teachers. Sometimes our own motivation helped us learn in spite of a teacher. Clearly, neither culture nor style is destiny. Just as clearly, though, teachers of all cultures and styles will have to work conscientiously to provide equitable opportunities for all students.

4. How cultural identity and self-esteem are related remains an open question, too. Many large city school systems are wrestling with the appropriateness of ethnically identified schools, such as an African-American academy. Bilingual programs continue to debate the value of instruction in the students' first language.

I would add to this discussion a remark of Carl Jung's: "If a plant is to unfold its specific nature to the full, it must first be able to grow in the soil in which it is planted" (Barger and Kirby 1993). This comment has led me to argue against the approach to learning so prevalent in our schools (especially in special education programs), which emphasizes the identification and remediation of deficiencies.

An acceptance of learning styles demands an approach that develops skills through strengths. Should the same not be said of cultural identity?

5. Perhaps the most weighty of the application issues has to do with ways to counteract our tendency toward instructional pendulum swings. This oscillation has become so predictable in schooling in our country. Today it's phonics. Tomorrow whole language. The day after that, phonics again. We are always seeking one right way to teach, and when we accumulate evidence that a strategy is effective with some students, we try to apply it
When a child is socialized in ways that are inconsistent with school expectations and patterns, the child needs to make a difficult daily adjustment.

Educators need not avoid addressing the question of style for fear they may be guilty of stereotyping students. Empirical observations are not the same as stereotyping, but the observations must be empirical and must be interpreted properly for each student.

As we try to accommodate students' cultural and learning differences, it is most important to deeply value each person's individuality. If we believe that people do learn—and have the right to learn—in a variety of ways, then we will see learning styles as a comprehensive approach guiding all educational decisions and practices. The ideas will not become ends in themselves, which would merely support the uniformity found in most schools.

Using information about culture and learning styles in sensitive and positive ways will help educators value and promote diversity in all aspects of the school. This task will not be easy, but then teaching is not a profession for the faint of heart. It requires courage and a willingness to grapple with real questions about people and their learning. Many students stand to benefit from that effort.

References

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