



New Chalk Talk

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Academic Center, Room 212A
Tel. 20.2.797.6659, clt@aucegypt.edu

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Learning Styles, Strategies and Practice: “You’re OK, I’m OK, we’re just different!”

*Dr Herb Thompson
Professor and Chair, Department of Economics*

I remind you of my main premise - that there may be as many different learning styles in a classroom as there are people, which should directly impact on the way I organise my teaching. I now share with you a little exercise (based on the work of others) that is helping to move me in the direction of not only respecting the differences between students, but also between me and my students. I use the exercise to assist me to overcome my weaknesses in promoting the value and validity of differences in teaching/learning.

Not too long ago I came across the research, experimentation and results of the work by Richard M. Felder (Professor of Chemical Engineering) and Barbara A. Solomon, (Coordinator of Advising), both at North Carolina State University. They have developed a questionnaire, and used it numerous times to delineate engineering students amongst four dichotomous pairs of learning styles. The four pairs are: 1) Active and Reflective Learners; 2) Sensory-based and Intuitive Learners; Visual and Verbal Learners; and 4) Sequential or Global Learners. I recommend an examination of their efforts at <http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/> There is a great deal of information on that site which includes a description of styles, an online questionnaire, a summary of results and their meaning, and suggestions to those learners, with different styles, as to how they might enhance their particular skills in the classroom and study habits.

Of course there are numerous “ifs” and “buts” in the results of their work, but so far I have found the questionnaire a most practical and useful tool to get a mental image of the groups I teach. It is a web-based exercise in which the students fill in a questionnaire, submit it for electronic grading and summation. The results are immediately provided back to the student with explanation of their learning style location on a bar chart. I then ask each student to either email me the results or print-out the results and give me a hard copy. Then I, or a research student, collate, summarize, group them, and construct a “mental map” of student learning preferences in that particular class. Should any one or small group of students stand out as exceptionally

biased toward one style more than another, I log it to make sure that I construct the class so that the needs of as many students as possible are provided for, without, I must say, undo additional effort. I can hardly say that my results are significant in that my sample of classes and total students participating remain small. But I am pleased with something that continually forces me to think about what I'm doing in the class.

Having used it at AUC for one year, the following results are mirrored by the questionnaires filled in by my students to date. As I assert, these results are more anecdotal, than analytical, but may provide room for consideration. Almost all of the students, in my first-year Economics course, tend toward an extreme end of the spectrum of "visual" rather than "verbal". One or two students in each class stand out at the extreme end of "intuitive" whereas most of the others fall within a "balanced" position between "sensory" and "intuitive". The other categories are fairly balanced as well. There does not appear to be a significant gender difference in learning styles.

Initially, there is both a positive and somewhat alarming conclusion to draw from the initial data sets for my students. The positive is that most Economics classes are very visual (graphs, charts, symbols, schematics, models and flow charts). Therefore, one would expect visual learners to be satisfied in an Economics class. However, of concern is the fact that so few students have an intuitive bias, given the abstract and theoretical nature of Economics, particularly at the introductory level. My response, in this instance, must be to continually give specific examples as to how the theoretical concepts actually apply in practice. But in a global sense, if Economics turns off practically-minded, sensory-based learning groups, then it could go towards explaining why the discipline has lost/ is losing so many students to more "practical", "sensory-based" courses in business and finance during the past decade. The other point to mention is that the "intuitive" thinkers were among the best in the Economics class. All of which begs another question. Do students come to Economics with particular learning styles already ingrained; or does an education in Economics develop/push a bias towards a particular learning style.

There are definitely problems with both the questionnaire and somewhat simplistic delineation into dichotomies. The students have identified what are probably two important causes of bias in the results. First, I hand out the questionnaire the first week, i.e., before students have had a chance to "suss" me out or generate any semblance of trust in the classroom situation. Therefore, it is quite likely that they may be answering the questions as they think they are supposed to answer them rather than what they really think. For instance: "For entertainment, I would rather (a) watch television; (b) read a book." And the other weakness (identified by many students) is implicit in the same question. Most of us would probably answer "It depends!"

Consequently, I accept that one must be very careful in proceeding along this path and not start an upheaval in the classroom as another passing fad. But to acknowledge the differences in learning amongst our students; to acknowledge that everyone does not pursue knowledge in a manner similar to our own particular style; to accept that knowledge production comes in many forms; is the first step to taking our job seriously.

Not to lose the woods for the trees, grading is primarily a credentialing practice, not an indication that "learning" is, or isn't taking place. So when you hand out your next final assessments, you should be reminded that you are grading yourself as well as the class – which could be yet another reason for "grade inflation" ☺