

Do We Know Enough About our Learners?

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Introduction

The main purpose of this brief article is to ask two questions, as follows:

1. Do Pacific students have distinctive learning styles which are largely attributable to their cultural backgrounds?
2. If so, to what extent should we take these 'styles' into account when implementing a curriculum or, further, how should we modify curricula in the light of the students' (known) learning styles?

What is a learning style? Keefe (1979a:4) cited in Reid (1987:87) defines learning styles as

'cognitive, affective and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment.'

Reid further defines learning style as '...a pervasive quality in the learning strategies or the learning behaviour of an individual' (1987:89).

She also took quite a strong view, as we are inclined to, that '...identifying the learning style preferences of ... non-native speakers (of English, learning English) may have wide-ranging implications... in ... curriculum design, materials development, student orientation, and teacher training' (1987:88).

Among many identified 'styles' are characteristics such as preferring visual to auditory input, preferring working alone/

individually to working in a group, preferring memorisation of content to having to learn by inferring/reasoning, or vice versa.

What Has Research Revealed?

Put very simply, research has shown that learners with different cultural backgrounds do have different learning style preferences.

Reid administered a questionnaire to 1,234 English as a second language (ESL) students and 154 native - (English) speaking American university students. The ESL group represented 98 countries and 52 different language backgrounds.

She found the following important features:

- ◆ 'The ESL students strongly preferred kinaesthetic, and tactile learning styles' (P.92). (Basically meaning total involvement, including physical, hands-on learning).
- ◆ 'Most groups showed a negative preference for group learning' (P.92). (This included the native speakers, leading Reid to query the promotion of group work techniques generally!).
- ◆ 'Males preferred visual and tactile learning more than females' (P.94).
- ◆ '... Korean students were the most visual in their learning style preferences' (P.96).
- ◆ '...Japanese students were the least auditory in their preferences.
- ◆ ESL students from different language (and by extension, different educational and cultural)

backgrounds sometimes differ significantly from each other in their learning style preferences.

Pacific Research?

There is a lack of literature on Pacific students' learning/thinking' styles, despite a wealth of such material having been produced elsewhere. The few studies which have been reported on, however, undoubtedly reveal crucial 'Pacific' characteristics.

Hansen (1984) found that Hawaiian students were 'significantly more field independent than Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, Indian-Fijian, and Tahitian students.' She also found that males in the latter five cultures were more field independent than females, but that this gender distinction did not occur in the Hawaiian (more westernised) students. Field dependence is a cognitive style in which the learner prefers to work holistically, intuitively and as a group person, whereas the field independent style involves a preference for analysis, individualism and reflection. The field dependent learner would be a better rote learner, for example.

Helu-Thaman (1982:) highlights the finding of her doctoral study, that certain 'valued contexts of thinking' affect schooling/ education in Tonga (or should be taken into account in the delivery of formal education in Tonga). These valued contexts or emphases which she found 'characterise the behaviour of Tongan people as a group' include:

- respect for rank and authority
- conformity to rules
- concern for specifics rather than generalities
- emphases on kinship and interpersonal relationships
- 'ofa (compassion)
- restraint behaviour

Referring to limitations in previous (pre-service) teacher training curricula, Helu-Thaman suggests 'It would appear that some of us might have failed our teachers and their students through our continued overemphasis on teaching subjects rather than on the preparation of **people** who can

meet the challenges of particular contexts' (1982)

While Helu-Thaman is referring to general characteristics, they lend strong support to the notion that learners' cultural backgrounds are significant variables in the teaching-learning context. The notion of learning style is closely linked to what Helu-Thaman refers to as 'emphases'.

Landbeck and Mugler (1994) interviewed a sampling of students at the University of the South Pacific. They conclude that Pacific students generally find group work extremely useful, efficient and enjoyable. They also note the predominance of rote memorisation as a learning style at tertiary level, but caution that students' preferred styles may be as much (if not more) influenced by the cultures of the institutions they attend, rather than all being attributable to their source cultures.

Conclusion

As can be seen above, the learning style concept is a key one. It asks us to take account of our learners' cultural backgrounds, and to be conscious of possible preferred styles of acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes which they inherit from these backgrounds. Although very little research has been done in our region, it is highly likely that Pacific students have preferred learning styles and that we should be at least aware of this as an important variable which has potential effect on the success or otherwise of curriculum implementation.

The editors of Pacific Curriculum Network would appreciate further articles on this topic. In particular, results of studies of learning styles or strategies of different Pacific cultural groups would be of interest.

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