Can Students Identify Their Own Learning Styles?

When it's important to them, they can.

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Many people wonder whether students are really capable of analyzing how they learn best (their learning "style"). Obviously, some cannot. Others can sometimes. But in testing more than 175,000 youngsters in grades 3–12, we find that most children not only *can* tell you how they learn, they *want* to and are *delighted* that you asked.

What causes problems is that no one is affected by *all* the elements of learning style. Obviously students can't tell you about any personal reactions to elements that aren't important to them. But where an element is either a very strong preference or a very negative preference, most children can describe their feelings about it and reactions to it very well.

At the College Level

As early as 1971, Farr confirmed that 72 college students could accurately predict the modality in which they would demonstrate superior learning performance. The data also revealed that it is advantageous to learn and be tested in the same modality and that this advantage is reduced when learning and testing are both conducted in an individual's nonpreferred modality.

Earlier, Domino (1970) had grouped 100 students according to their perceptions of how they learned. Some of the groups were then taught in a manner consonant with their perceived learning style, while others were taught in a manner opposite to their perceived style. The testing data revealed that the students who had been exposed to a teaching style consonant with the ways they *believed* they learned scored higher on tests, fact knowledge, attitude, and efficiency of work than those who had been taught in a manner dissonant with their orientations.

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At the Secondary Level

Cafferty (1980) had students answer a self-report instrument, identified *their styles and their teachers' styles*, and using 1,689 pairs examined how well the students did academically. The greater the match between the student's and his or her teacher's style, the higher the grade point average; the lower the match, the lower the grade point average. Copenhaver (1979), in addition to verifying that students' styles remain consistent regardless of the subject being studied, also revealed that significantly more positive attitudes result when students' styles are similar to their teachers', and that a wide range of learning styles exists in a single class. Douglass (1979), using high school biology students, also verified that students' styles can be reported and that when their styles are appropriately matched with complementary instructional resources, achievement increases; when students and resources are mismatched, achievement decreases.

Lynch (1981) used a self-report instrument to identify the learning styles of chronic and initial truants. His research demonstrated that: (1) when matched with their Time of Day prefer-

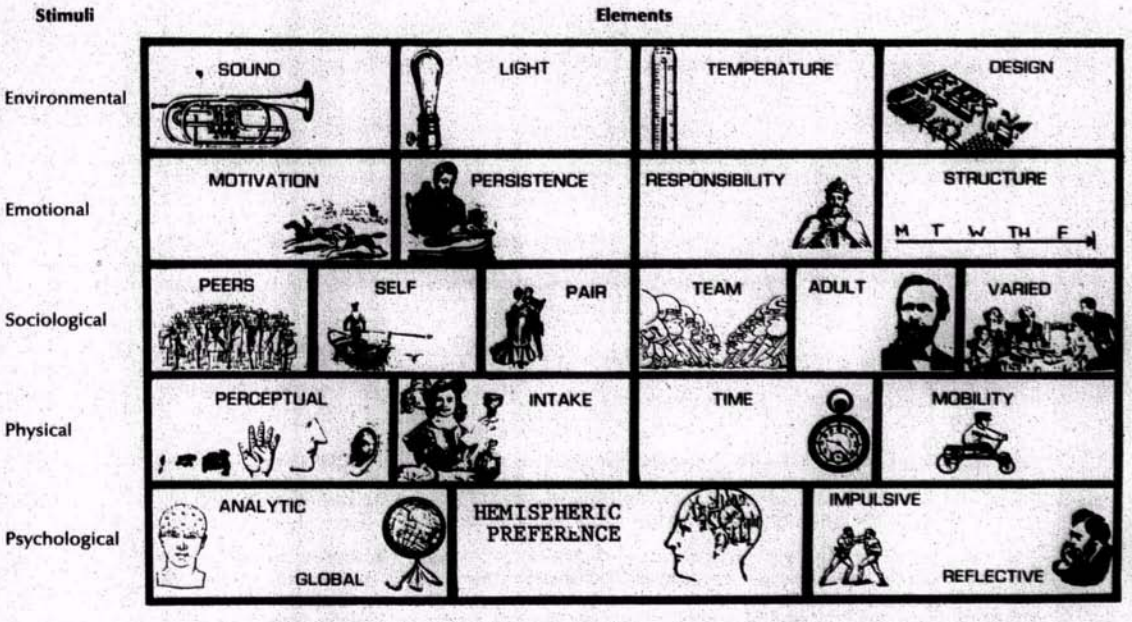
ence and mismatched for teacher assignment, chronic truants attended class more frequently (3.5 units per ten-week marking period); (2) there was significant interaction among degree of truancy, learning style Time preference, and English teacher assignment, suggesting that Time preference was a crucial factor in reversing truancy patterns among those secondary students. Had the students *not* been able to identify their own Time preferences, the study could *not* have obtained statistically significant interactions.

Using the same self-report inventory at the ninth grade level, Shea (1983) identified the students' preferences for learning/taking tests in a formal (wooden desks and seats) versus an informal (couch, carpeting, lounge chair) design. When students were matched with their identified styles, statistically significant higher reading scores resulted at the .01 level; those who were mismatched with their informal preferences achieved statistically less well than when they were matched. Examination of the graphic notations made during the experiment revealed that youngsters who said that they learned best in a formal design, adapted the informal design to respond to their preferences; because there were no "hard" chairs, they sat on the floor with their backs straight up against the wall.

At the Elementary School Level

Pizzo (1981), using a self-report inventory to identify the styles of sixth graders, conducted an experimental study based on the youngsters' perceptions. Students

FIGURE 1. Diagnosing Learning Styles.



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were placed in an environment responsive to or antagonistic to their styles. When the students were matched with their identified learning style preferences, higher reading and attitude scores resulted that were statistically significant at the .01 level. Krimsky (1982) followed the same procedures with fourth graders. His findings also revealed statistically significant gains at better than the .01 level when children were matched correctly; when they were mismatched, their achievement fell far below that of their matched counterparts.

The studies cited here used various self-report instruments. Either experimental or de facto investigations were then conducted to determine the accuracy of the students' perceptions and findings at statistically significant levels were revealed. Thus it can be concluded that, indeed, at college, secondary, and elementary levels students can identify their learning styles.

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