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What Kind of a Teacher Are You?

Instructional Styles, Instructional Theories

Kristin Yiotis

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Abstract

This essay briefly explores instructional theories and instructional styles in terms of this writer's experiences as a student and as a teacher. The author uses the 1997 work of Rowley, Miller, and Carlson, which discusses learning styles according to the Canfield Instructional Styles Inventory (ISI), to analyze personal teaching and learning experiences. The ISI isolates four instructional styles and places them along two basic dyads: social or independent, and conceptual or applied. The author finds useful Washburn's view of traditionalist and learner-centered models of instruction. Washburn views instructional styles as existing on a continuum with an instructor-centered style on one end and a learner-centered approach on the other. The author concludes that good instructors need to adapt their teaching styles to meet the needs of their students.

What Kind of a Teacher Are You?

Instructional Styles, Instructional Theories

By the time contemporary American students enter college, they have been through 13 years of formal education and countless informal learning experiences. No matter how varied the settings, at each occasion students experience interactions with teachers, instructors, or professors. Such interactions have characteristics that are determined by the theoretical educational principles accepted by the providing institution, by individual teachers' instructional styles, by individual students' learning styles, and by the instructional strategies and techniques teachers use to achieve learning outcomes. In this essay this student will discuss learning theories, instructional styles, and teaching strategies and techniques that she has experienced as a student and as a teacher.

Instructional Styles

According to Rowley, Miller, and Carlson (1997), instructional styles are outgrowths of many factors, such as "one's personality type, one's preferred learning style,...social interaction theory, and instructional theory" (4.0 Design section, ¶ 1). Rowley, et al. (1997) make use of the Canfield Instructional Styles Inventory (ISI) to analyze possible relationships between teaching styles and learning styles. The ISI describes two sets of opposing teaching styles: the social versus the independent style and the conceptual versus the applied style. Their research analyzes whether or not positive correlations exist between preferred styles and student achievement.

Rowley et al. (1997) explain that teachers use the social style when they plan for and encourage social interaction between students and between students and teachers (5.0 Methods section). Instructional strategies would include collaborative learning characterized by group work, learning communities, equality between students and between students and instructor. This

style develops students' social skills and their ability to work in teams.

In this writer's experience, the social style is the prevalent model for English as a second language (ESL) and English composition classes. This writer made use of this model when teaching these classes at local community colleges and overseas at private language academies. The goal in these classes was to have students discuss the text in small groups based on discussion questions that were handed out in advance. Then each group would report to the class at large. The strategy worked well with adult ESL students who were attending night classes. They liked the opportunity to get to know each other in a structured setting and discuss themes that were basically personal, like family, traditions, and culture.

The ISI places the independent style as the opposite of the social style (Rowley, et al., 1997). Teachers use this style when they set up instructional situations in which students develop and pursue individual goals (Rowley, et al., 5.0 Methods section). At its best this style develops self-disciplined student who are independent workers and who take the initiative. A good example would be a home economics or shop class where students choose the projects they want to complete. This writer taught computer literacy classes in a vocational education program at a local high school she used an adapted independent style. Students were assigned projects but they had a choice in when and how they completed them.

This writer also participated as a student in an adult education computer applications program that followed an independent instructional style. The program was self-paced. Students could take from 8 to 24 weeks to move from beginner to intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency. Like the high school vocational education program, the goals of this course were set by the program, and then students achieved the goals at their own pace.

The conceptual style is the traditional, teacher-centered method of instruction in higher

education worldwide. Teachers who prefer the conceptual style make use of “highly organized, language-oriented activities, such as reading and lectures” (Rowley, et al., 1997, 5.0 Methods section, ¶1). This writer has experienced this style as a student. At her undergraduate institution, a large public university, large lecture halls of hundreds of students necessitate this instructional style. Sometimes these lecture classes were supported by small classes for group discussions lead by graduate student teacher assistants (TAs).

This writer depended on the traditional instructional style during her years as guest lecturer in linguistics in a graduate program based at a large national university in South China. The prevailing educational tradition in that country requires that professors lecture and the students take notes. Students were accustomed to this tradition, and they were reluctant to interact directly with the lecturer since such interaction would be interpreted as interrupting. As a newly minted MA, I knew enough about my subject matter to lecture straight from the text, the journal articles, and my notes, and so took refuge in teaching by the traditional style. However, I did incorporate oral presentations of final research projects, but then found that students did not attend class on days they were not presenting. They interpreted that presentations were to be delivered to me personally. I didn't anticipate that this would happen until it was too late to require that students attend every class session.

In the experience of this writer, the conceptual style does not work at the community college level when process rather than content is being taught, for example the writing process, analytical reading strategies, or research skills. In these courses content is limited to grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation. Teaching a process requires the active participation of students because students are developing procedural knowledge, or “knowing how” in terms of habits and skills, not declarative knowledge, or “knowing that” in terms of domain content.

In contrast to the conceptual style is the applied style. This teaching style focuses on creating learning experiences that involve students in “realistic, authentic situations that include hands-on activities to engender problem solving” (Rowley, et al., 1997, 5.0 Methods section, ¶1).

This writer has experienced the applied teaching style in a graduate seminar that required preparing instructional units for a specific composition class for which I was the TA. Because I had the opportunity to teach the lessons I had prepared, I was actually preparing lessons for authentic situations. My composition program also offered a paid, mentored, semester-long teaching practicum that worked with formal graduate-level courses in instructional theory for teaching composition, like the instructional methodology and extended practicum opportunity at the University of Hawai’i discussed by Meulemans and Brown (2001, p. 254). The program at my school required passing a qualifying exam and a departmental interview. While I passed the former, I was roused by the competition in the latter.

Learning Theories

To discuss learning theories, Carol Washburn (2000) uses an instructor-centered versus learner-centered continuum. The traditional model of learning is instructor-centered. Teachers following this model view themselves as transmitter of knowledge and view students as recipients of knowledge (Washburn, 2000). Learning occurs when students have absorbed and can recall knowledge imparted to them by their teachers. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere (1993) called this style “the banking concept of education,” in which instruction is seen as making deposits in students’ memory banks that are drawn upon during testing. Students are seen as passive recipients of deposits of knowledge, empty vessels to be filled (chap. 2, ¶ 5). Jean Paul Sartre called this “alimentary education,” where students are taught that the information they need is in the texts they read and are then expected to regurgitate this

knowledge to prove learning has occurred (Friere, 1993, chap. 2, footnote 2).

This writer received a degree in English composition in 1996. In my composition theory class we discussed instructional theories. Composition Studies has been undergoing a shift to a post-modernist, constructivist approach to instruction, which allows for the social construction of knowledge as purported by postmodernist philosopher Richard Rorty and the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Roughly, the social construction of knowledge is the concept that knowledge or truth is a social construction and not an absolute. Since the late 60s postmodernist theory has moved education away from the traditionalist camp, from being a teacher-centered enterprise characterized by the teacher and the text embodying the knowledge or truth, toward a social, learner centered model, which incorporates the theory that knowledge and truth are social constructs, and so, therefore, exists already in the students but must be derived or brought out (Yiotis, 1994). Research in information literacy supports this transition in education to a constructivist approach (Danley, Forde, Lahmon, & Maddox, 1999, p. 122).

Macklin (2003) refers to constructivism as a constructivist approach to learning that engages students in problem-solving activities (p. 495). She describes Jonassen's constructivist perspective on learning that generates student-driven, rather than teacher-driven, goals that are outcomes of real life design problems that students are given. Like in real life, students must create workable solutions and figure out how to achieve them (Macklin, p. 496). Jonassen's constructivist learning environments (CLEs) "engage the learner in knowledge construction through problem-solving activities" (Macklin, p. 497). Knowledge construction would include learning the domain content, understanding the problem context, stating the problem in terms that enable research, and then finding information sources needed to solve the problem. Macklin's real life problem scenarios would be comparable to "the realistic authentic situations

that include hands-on activities” that characterizes the applied instructional style on the ISI as discussed earlier (Rowley, et al., 1997, 5.0 Methods section, ¶1).

Summary

What is the difference between teaching styles and strategies? Teaching styles are the attitudes or beliefs teachers’ hold about teaching. One’s attitude or particular style will direct how one performs as a teacher and will determine one’s teaching acts, the strategies and techniques one employs. Learning and teaching styles, the internal beliefs, rationales, perspectives on learning, direct the behavior of the teacher or learner. These attitudes may be grounded in a particular model or philosophical theory about learning that you agree with or that your institution has adopted. Certain theories or philosophies about learning at times have become the cultural norm or commonly held belief that continue for centuries, for example the traditionalist model of learning in contrast to the social model.

Strategies are the ways that teachers present and carry out classroom activities, the tools teachers employ to produce learning objectives. These strategies are the outward evidence of one’s instructional beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning. One’s rationale about teaching should be grounded in an instructional theory. For example the social style of instruction is grounded in the humanistic theory of learning. Evidence of the social style is exhibited in instructional behaviors that are based on one’s understanding of learning theory, such as a curriculum, lesson plans, learning objectives that allow for cooperative learning formats, whole class small groups and partner activities, and equality between the teacher and learner.

Conclusion

How can the effectiveness of instructional styles be measured? Some researchers have

studied instructional style to determine whether similarities in preferred teacher and learner styles correlated with student achievement (Keri, 2003; Rowley, et al., 1997). Keri (2003) investigated whether “congruities between students' learning styles and instructors' teaching styles related to student satisfaction” (Abstract section). Results indicated, “no statistical differences in the satisfaction of students whose learning styles were congruent to their instructors' teaching styles as compared to those students whose styles were not” (Abstract section).

What determines teacher effectiveness? In my experience practice and good mentoring increased my effectiveness as a teacher. Repeatedly teaching the same course lead to a thorough familiarity with the course content, an understanding of my teaching style and a realization of what strategies work best for certain students and certain material. Then as the instructor I could focus on the needs of the students instead of my need to prepare and deliver the material.

There is no right or wrong instructional model, nor a most effective or least effective teaching style. The model should be appropriate to the purpose for the education and appropriate to the people involved in the education. Good instructors are able to use different teaching styles in different teaching situations with different course contents. When teaching a process, such as the writing process, the good instructor will use a social teaching style supported by cooperative learning strategies like group work. When teaching domain content, such as grammar, punctuation, or sociolinguistics, the instructor will use a conceptual style supported by traditional learning strategies like taking notes and completing worksheets.

Good instructor are able to apply multiple teaching styles that include all learning modalities, because not all learners learn in the same way and the more learning modalities are included the better the material will be retained. Visual learners learn well from texts, charts,

tables, sensory or tactile learners need absorb concepts in ways that go beyond listening and looking. Brown (2003) citing David Kolb notes, “it is more effective to design curricula so that...learners of every learning style [can] engage with the topic, so that every type of learner has a way to connect with the material...” (Teaching style vs. learning style, ¶ 5).

For example this writer recently took an Emergency Medical Service (EMS) First Responder class from the American Red Cross. To learn the skills we read the text, watched videos, listened to our teacher lecture, asked and answered questions, and physically practiced the skills we needed to learn, such as practicing CPR on mannequins. Many learning modalities were involved, but still all of us failed the practical text. Why? We weren't able to perform competent responses to emergency situations in the time allotted for the course.

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