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## Learning Styles - Warning - Partial Rant

Lots of folks talk about learning styles - and lots of learning software claims to support multiple learning styles - and lots of grants are written and funded to produce material that supports multiple learning styles - etc etc etc.

So I have a really stupid question - as a teacher - I am having real trouble turning all of the learning style talk into clear and coherent guidance for me as to how to alter/improve my teaching to adapt to and support multiple learning styles.

Go and Google "learning styles" - you will find mounds of research on what to name learning styles and lots of pop-psychology web forms that tell you what your learning style is - in one or the other person's learning style name space.

Try Googling this:

"how to author content for different learning styles"

You will still have to pick through the religious battles about which is the best way to categorize learning styles - or my personal paper about the learning style inventory I came up with - and my survey to check this out - and how I gave this survey to 200 people and wrote a stupid paper about it.

After you get past the myriad of people trying to make their name - the Severance Learning Style Inventory Test! You might find a paper talking about what to \*DO\* about different learning styles. Google found me this one:

[http://www.mrs.org/s\\_mrs/bin.asp?CID=2725&DID=171663&DOC=FILE.PDF](http://www.mrs.org/s_mrs/bin.asp?CID=2725&DID=171663&DOC=FILE.PDF)

I can summarize it - give folks some text and give them some animations - and they do better than without the animations - pretty simple and direct - at least we are moving to what to \*do\* about it.

I got all interested in this because my students are starting to teach me about different learning styles in how they approach my class. And I am finding it really exciting. This may seem crazy - but in a way learning styles kind of remind me of unit tests for software - unit tests remind us to test many paths through our code.

People with different learning styles will take different paths through the material in a course - both the material I provide and the material they can find on their own. I find this out (just like a unit test) - when a student takes an unanticipated path through my course materials and something goes wrong because I assumed one path through the materials

and did not compensate for multiple paths. SO when I notice a new path through the materials - I make sure to think about that approach from that point forward.

I always like to give my students a lot of materials - hand out s, screen casts, lecture notes, podcasts of audio - and I let them find their own way through the material. Here is a couple of learning styles I notice:

- Start from the beginning and do everything - this is the way that works well - I made up all the material and sometimes I slide a detail into a screen cast that I forgot to put into the handout and then never go back and improve the hand out - those that skip the screen cast will run into trouble later.

- Start from the assignment and work backwards - look at the assignment - and look at all my materials as possible references to dig through. I am not well set up for this - because there is no good way to search through all of the handouts and video and audio that I produce so the student gets right to what they need - this is kind of the inverted learning style - and frankly a very common learning style in the web/google world - go until you get stuck and then use Google to get you out of a jam.

- Skim through the presented materials as they go by - go to lecture - listen - don't do any readings - when there is a task to do - the student has a rough idea about what knowledge is where - but needs to go back and dig deeper in the areas that the assignment pulled out. This works pretty well for my courses - students build a lightweight index as they skim forward and then have their own neural search engine to be able to zero in and find the material they need to know more deeply to make the assignment a success.

Of course this means that assignments must test/touch on the real learning objectives - because that is when all the learning styles kind of come back together - everyone needs to get the assignments done - they will learn at least that much - so the assignment is where you get their attention.

I am going to experiment with these concepts in the course materials I produce from now on - and try to get my students aware of their paths - so they can tell me what works and what does not work and how I can improve.

I am really excited to have the prospect of teaching [www.si502.com](http://www.si502.com) for a few years with large classes - so I can refine the same material over time and get to the point where I can teach it better and better and be more sensitive to learning styles.

And after a while of course - I will make my own inventory - the Severance-Chuck Learning Style Inventory - write a book and convince Psychology departments to teach it as if it were Maxwell's equations.

Posted by csev at September 4, 2008 08:38 PM