

# Why You Need to Be Savvy About Learning Styles

**A**nyone who has ever lost a document in a computer knows how frustrating that can be. This loss usually results either from failure to save the information properly or to save it in a way that makes it easy to find and retrieve—storing it on the hard drive, saving it in a labeled folder, or copying it onto a floppy disk. Each person chooses to save the file in the manner that best suits his or her needs. Those who consistently lose documents may need to develop a better system for organizing their files.

The above example offers a useful analogy to teaching. As student populations around the world become more diverse, not only in terms of culture but also abilities and learning preferences, teachers must find new ways to accommodate this variety and individualize their approaches in order to meet the needs of every student. One way to do this is to understand that each student needs to process, file, and retrieve information according to his or her conceptual frameworks, i.e., just as people choose how to save information on a computer. However, students may not know their preferred learning style or combination of styles. Teachers must, therefore, use a variety of teaching methods to help them “save” new knowledge in the proper “files” so they can retrieve and use it later. No one method of “storing information” is better than another. It depends on what works best for each individual student.



**By Dorothy J. Patterson**

## **Understanding and Accommodating Diversity**

The exploding student diversity in schools has special importance for us as Seventh-day Adventists because we operate the world's largest centrally organized Protestant educational system.<sup>1</sup> By recognizing the responsibility of our schools as educational pioneers, we embrace the doctrine that we are “one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. . . . In Christ . . . distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality . . . must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ. . . .”

We are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, we must find ways to better understand and accommodate diversity—especially as it relates to educational practices.

### Staying Up to Date

What, then, can we do to ensure that all of our students, of every grade level and culture, have the opportunity to maximize their learning potential? First, we must remain current in our content areas—by staying up to date on new developments, contemporary trends, and innovations, then appropri-



ately integrate this knowledge into our lesson plans. This will make us more aware of the various ways students learn and the need to use diverse teaching methodologies to reach a variety of learners. Educators, at every level, need to “study to shew [themselves] approved” (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV), in order to increase their teaching effectiveness and ensure that *all* their students are successful. This article will offer some information about students’ cognitive styles—the ways they “file” information—as well as suggested teaching methodologies that can *easily* be integrated into *any* lesson plan.

### Cognitive Styles

Learning styles can be concisely defined as “[individuals’] characteristic approaches to learning and studying”<sup>3</sup>—that is,

the different ways they perceive, process, and communicate information.<sup>4</sup> Educational researchers have identified three basic types of learners:

*Visual learners* process information best through the use of sight (i.e., pictures, models, diagrams, demonstrations, and other visual aids). In order for these learners to get maximum benefit from a lesson, they must see the teacher’s facial expressions and body language. They usually sit at the front of the class so nothing will obstruct their view of what’s going on. They like to highlight and underline areas in their books and take copious notes to aid them in absorbing information.

*Auditory learners* use hearing as their main source of information. A preference for lectures, discussions, and listening to the comments of others—all these characterize auditory learners. They are interested in voice intonation and pitch and benefit from reading assignments aloud or taping lectures to play back at a later time.

*Kinesthetic, or tactile,* learners prefer hands-on approaches to acquiring information. They like to explore the physical world in which they live. Easily distracted, these learners need variety and activity.

Though many people have one predominant learning style, most individuals learn well through a combination of approaches. Keeping this in mind, we will explore some of the general learning-style traits. Additionally, students’ beliefs about their own capabilities play a part in their academic achievement.

### Locus of Control

Clinical psychologist Julian B. Rotter proposed a social learning theory that includes the concept called “locus of control.”<sup>5</sup> Simply put, “locus of control” refers to people’s beliefs about the reasons for their successes and failures. If people believe that they succeed or fail because of factors they can control, such as effort, then they are said to have an *internal* locus of control. On the other hand, if they believe their successes and failures are due to factors beyond their control, such as luck or innate intelligence, then they are described as having an *external* locus of control.<sup>6</sup>

**W**hile “locus of control” is not an either/or proposition, it does tend to predict behavior. “People can be classified along a continuum from very *internal* to very *external*.”<sup>7</sup> Students with an external locus of control orientation are more likely to get discouraged when they get poor grades and blame the teacher, the rigor of the course, school policy, or other factors. Students with an internal locus of control feel more in control of their lives, though they may engage in withering self-criticism when they fail.

If a student appears to have an external locus of control, the teacher will need to make special effort to motivate him or her. Anita Woolfolk suggests several ways to nurture students’ self-worth: (1) Take special notice of their progress; (2) Revise the grades on selected assignments after students

show improvement; (3) Discuss finished assignments with each student, praising what was done right and explaining what was done wrong and how it can be improved; (4) share examples of how you—or some admired person—overcame personal challenges.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of students' orientation—internal or external—teachers must make every effort to encourage and to foster confidence within every student, at every opportunity.

### Major Methodologies

The best way to help students achieve maximum success is to use various methodologies—*daily*—in order to accommodate the learning styles and preferences of *all* students. Here are some general teaching methods that will help all students learn, regardless of their cognitive styles.

- **Learning Centers:** These are usually found in the elementary classroom, but they can easily be adapted and used effectively at the secondary and college levels. There are various types: *skill centers* (to allow practice of skills learned); *discovery/enrichment centers* (to provide activities that enable students to enhance their prior knowledge base); *listening centers* (to provide instruction through listening or language labs); and *creativity centers* (which focus on arts, crafts, music, creative writing, and poetry). Learning centers can provide an accessible in-class resource if teachers (or departments) devote a portion of their space to mini-libraries of books and periodicals from their content areas.

- **Independent Study:** This can mean that students work alone on assignments or that they choose their own learning objectives, methods, and materials. They may help to construct a course syllabus or assist in setting up guidelines for a class project. Teachers can also use independent study to make assignments based on *time lines*, i.e., breaking up larger assignments into smaller parts. When they are given a schedule and are required to turn in portions of their assignment at set intervals throughout the term, students learn to pace themselves. They become better organized and gain a clearer understanding of concepts and the steps necessary to achieve a goal. (A good example of this is a research paper assignment that requires students to submit, at designated intervals, note cards, an outline, a working bibliography, etc.) This allows the teacher to assess students' progress on a continuing basis and to provide help in a timely manner. Requiring students to submit parts before the whole also deters cheating.

Portfolios also lend themselves to use in independent study. In art or writing classes, for example, students may collect their work for a designated time (possibly a semester) and submit the best representations of their skills for grading. Teachers can use contracts and progress reports to encourage students to self-evaluate. Also, providing rubrics—specific guidelines—will help students keep up with due dates and deadlines.

- **Cooperative Learning/Collaborative Groups:** By working closely with other students—in communities—each member of a group learns better. This type of real-world learning enables students to connect their studies with their

prior knowledge and helps them to work with other students to accomplish designated tasks. Collaborating in small groups, students experience what it is like to interact in real-life work situations. Group interaction helps them to develop the social and cooperative skills essential to their future lives. Each member has the opportunity to contribute to the success of the group and the lesson goals.

Additionally, collaborative groups provide an opportunity for the teacher to assign students of varying ability and sundry cultures to work together cooperatively, as well as to better understand people dissimilar from themselves. Of course, the teacher must guide this type of learning—monitoring group progress, ensuring that students are staying on task, and helping students resolve interpersonal and learning-preference conflicts. One way to prevent groups from



allowing one member to do most of the work is to specify that each member will receive a separate grade (for completing assigned tasks within the group) as well as a collaborative grade. As with independent study, breaking assignments into parts and assessing progress at regular intervals will help ensure the success of this approach.

1. **Peer-Tutoring:** With this strategy, students work in pairs. More advanced students can enhance their understanding of a content area by helping others to master it. Some students find it easier to ask questions of their peers, feeling embarrassed to speak up publicly because they do not comprehend the material as readily as their classmates do. This approach encourages qualities like responsibility and empathy, and improves student self-esteem as well.

2. **Use of Advance Organizers:** These tools—usually prepared lists or visual aids—help provide structure for students, enabling them to organize and link their prior knowledge to the material that they are about to study. Advance organizers help illustrate how the parts relate to the whole, how the items are interrelated (i.e., when beginning a lesson on clouds, a teacher

can provide an overview of the four types of clouds before describing each in detail). Advance organizers may include outlines, study guides, goal and objective statements, structured overviews, previews, summaries, syllabi, and discussion guides.

3. *Modeling*: This technique can be used in virtually every content area (including those requiring manual and physical dexterity, such as crafts, sports, and shop courses) to teach mental skills and broaden students' horizons, as well as to teach new ways of thinking.<sup>9</sup> Because behaviors and attitudes can be taught, this technique is perhaps the most important one available to denominational teachers as they seek to model Christlike behavior.

Classroom discussions, in all content areas, are critical



avenues for the integration of faith and learning. Through discussion, educators can teach their students how to think. They can encourage them to see the validity of viewpoints other than their own, at the same time illustrating that *every* viewpoint is not sound and that *all* viewpoints should be evaluated using the eternal principles of right and wrong found in the Scriptures.

Additionally, teachers must show enthusiasm for the topics they teach. If they are not excited and “psyched up” about the subject matter, how can they expect their students to be?

### A Note on Multiple Intelligences

Besides employing a variety of methodologies, teachers can also apply Howard Gardner's philosophy of learning called multiple intelligences.<sup>10</sup> Gardner's view contradicts the conventional wisdom that mathematical and language abilities are barometers of overall intelligence. He contends that human beings are “smart” in various ways (e.g., verbal-linguistic, logical-

mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and extentionalist). Gardner asserts that (1) *all* individuals possess these intelligences, though some demonstrate greater gifts in some areas than in others; (2) with guidance and encouragement, most people can develop any one or *all* of these intelligences; (3) the intelligences work together; and (4) people may exhibit ability within each intelligence in a variety of ways.<sup>11</sup> The bottom line is that *everyone* is intelligent in many ways.

By allowing students a variety of ways to fulfill class requirements (for instance, allowing them to make a diorama or PowerPoint presentation about World War I rather than requiring everyone to write an essay), teachers can ensure that all students succeed. Another strategy for a multiple-intelligences assignment would be to assign the production of a brochure marketing the school and allow students to choose what part they will play in this process. Some can plan the size and shape of the brochure and research the costs and schedule for production (logical-mathematical), others can design and actually print a sample brochure (visual-spatial), while other students present the finished brochure to the class and to the school board (verbal-linguistic). In other content areas, some students might write poems or music while others might perform these compositions.<sup>12</sup>

### Implications for Teachers

So, what are the implications of these techniques for Christian educators? It's really quite simple. We have been given the ultimate charge by Christ Himself to “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations” (Matthew 28:19, KJV). The multicultural classroom filled with diverse students is a reality, and we must prepare ourselves to effectively teach all of our students, regardless of their abilities or learning styles.

Teachers must also become knowledgeable about a variety of cultures: lifestyles, family patterns, religious and political beliefs, occupational preferences, etc. They can start by surfing the Internet and reading books and magazines, or by taking college or online courses.

Another important way that teachers can better comprehend diversity is to visit the homes of their students. Such visits can produce priceless benefits for both students and teachers. In addition, teachers might schedule in-depth classroom explorations of different countries—perhaps on a monthly basis—inviting speakers and artists and having students sample the foods of the various cultures.

In addition to familiarizing themselves with different cultures, teachers should learn about the dynamics of the various learning styles. And, even though the above-mentioned strategies, used routinely, will accommodate the learning styles of a variety of students, it would be even better for teachers to assess the learning styles of their pupils. Several simple assessment instruments are available online.<sup>13</sup> Applying the results from these inventories will help you adapt your lesson plans to



meet the needs of every student. (Note: It's helpful to discover your own learning style preference so that you do not teach using only that approach.)

Finally, be sure to make your classroom welcoming to students of all learning preferences. By using your learning style savvy, you will be able to respond to the Creator's edict to teach all your students "with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Colossians 1:28, NIV). ☞



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at workshops on effective techniques for teaching writing and learning styles/multiple intelligences.

### Suggestions for Additional Reading

Silver, Henry F., Richard W. Strong, and Matthew J. Perini. *So Each May Learn: Integrating Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligences* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000).

Skinner, Ellen A. *Perceived Control, Motivation, and Coping* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995), vol. 8.

Tobias, Cynthia Ulrich. *The Way They Learn: How to Discover and Teach to Your Child's Strengths* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1996).

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "For Your Information": <http://www.bibleinfo.com/fyi.html>.
2. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe... A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1988), No. 13, p. 170.
3. Anita E. Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), p. 135.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
5. Jack Mearns, "The Social Learning Theory of Julian B. Rotter": <http://psych.fullerton.edu/jmearns/rotter.htm>.
6. Mandy Grantz, "Do You Have the Power to Succeed?: Locus of Control and Its Impact on Education": <http://www.units.muohio.edu/psychersite/control.education.shtml>.
7. Mearns.
8. Woolfolk, p. 396.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
10. Johanna K. Lemlech, *Curriculum and Instructional Methods for the Elementary and Middle School* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill, 1998), p. 60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
12. A Multiple Intelligences test and more ideas for strategies can be found online at the following sites: [http://www.spannj.org/BasicRights/appendix\\_b.htm](http://www.spannj.org/BasicRights/appendix_b.htm); <http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-2204.html>.
13. Using an Internet search engine such as Yahoo or Google, type in the words, "Learning Styles Inventories."

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powers them, through the grace of God, to reach for eternal possibilities.

### 3. Authentic Living

The doctrine of creation is crucial to Christian education because of its perspective on ecology and history. Genesis shows that God created this Earth good, and that we are only His stewards; the Earth is not ours to treat any way we wish.

The essential goodness of creation thus denies the concepts of both dualism on the one hand, and the meaninglessness of history, on the other. As Niebuhr points out, God's creatorship "is a revelation of His majesty and self-sufficient power." "The doctrine of creation escapes the error of the naturalists who, by regarding causality as the principle of meaning, can find no place for human freedom and are forced to reduce man to the level of nature. It escapes the error of the rationalists who make *nous* into the ultimate principle of meaning, and are thereby tempted to divide man into an essentially good reason, which participates in or is identified with the divine, and an essentially evil physical life."<sup>3</sup>

The prophet Isaiah directed despairing humanity to God's creative activity in order to discover meaning in history. "Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to nought, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing" (Isaiah 40:21-23, NRSV).

Adventist education today can do no less. Genesis inevitably points to Revelation. Creation moves toward consummation. Despite its chaos and disorder, its confusion and hopelessness, its wars and rumors of peace, this world is not without hope: It is moving toward an inevitable climax. The words of the angel of Revelation 14:6 provide the educational agenda for our schools: "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" (NRSV). ☞

### REFERENCES

1. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (New York: Doubleday, 1929), p. 45.
2. Shakespeare, "Macbeth," V:v:17.
3. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964) vol. 1, pp. 132, 134.