Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Volume 12 | Issue 1 Article 9

2015

Book Review: Learning Style Perspectives: Impact in the Classroom

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Book Review: Learning Style Perspectives: Impact in the Classroom

Learning Style Perspectives: Impact in the Classroom (3rd Edition)

Lynne M Celli and Nicholas D Young

Atwood Publishing: Madison, WI. 2014 128pp
ISBN 987-1-891859-51-9 (pb) $22.95US

Following the first two editions of her book, which she wrote solo, Celli has joined forces with colleague N D Young for the third edition. Celli and Young have prepared this book with the goal of giving instructors in postsecondary education "a primer on learning styles" (p.11). In a review of the second edition, Kovac (1999) highlighted the importance for educators of understanding the learning styles of their students to better present course content. Fifteen years later this statement remains true. With Kovac's own teaching background in chemistry, he noted that it was challenging to address the differing learning preferences of all students in his classes. He pointed to the practical nature of Celli's book in addressing these needs and offering pedagogic solutions. This third edition appears to have altered little, with an entry-level overview of learning-style theory, followed by an explanation of Celli and Young's own learning-style theory. Celli and Young set out to address the struggle of every educator who seeks to improve pedagogic practice in the classroom through careful thought, planning and innovative implementation.

The aim of Celli and Young in writing this book is to "provide instructors with a simple, practical way to conceptualise how students perceive and process information" (p.23). The first of the book's two sections outlines the critical nature of teachers' understanding of how their students learn. Celli and Young acknowledge that postsecondary instructors are generally experts in their chosen fields, and that as such; these knowledge brokers need to gain a clear understanding of how to transfer this knowledge base through understanding how their students best learn. The section then outlines nine theories of learning styles. These nine theories have been the main influences on Celli and Young's own theory, which divides learners into those who are characterised primarily by auditory, visual or tactile/kinesthetic learning.

The second section of Cellis and Young's book comprises the three core chapters that explain each of these three learning styles. Each chapter outlines the learner's characteristics and presents how their learning needs may practically be addressed in the classroom. This portion of each chapter is helpful for the reader in opening up the learning style to closer scrutiny. There is also a short overview of how teachers might assess the learning of each group of learners.

Celli and Young understand that postsecondary educators, while content-competent, often know less about pedagogical research and practice. Therefore the authors explain in detail each learning style and how its characteristics affect learner behaviour and the processes by which individuals take up and retain new information. A key feature of this "primer" on learning styles is the practical aid offered to educators in the form of teaching strategies for preparation, in-class activity and evaluation of learning. The book also has clearly presented charts listing characteristics of learner behaviours and strategies for addressing these in class.

However, the weaknesses in this book are not insignificant. First, the brevity of the book allows for only the swiftest of reviews of the nine contributory theories. Such brevity leaves the reader

with the feeling that the authors may have missed important points in their effort to include more major theorists. The book takes a very simplistic approach to pedagogy, which may be useful for a new educator but does not acknowledge the far more complex reality of learning; for example, it discusses learning from a trait approach, when in practice learning is much more dynamic, fluctuating with the context of each learning situation. This focus on learning styles rather than approaches limits the scope of the book. The theories presented also fail to make connections between the different elements of learning, in particular the link to assessment that has been widely acknowledged as a main driver of learning. It should also be noted that the theories covered are all quite dated, and it would have been refreshing to see some more current work in this third edition.

Second, the authors predominantly refer to providing content or knowledge to learners rather than engaging them in the skills and application of the discipline. They do refer to Ojure and Sherman's (2001) assertion that educators should be "facilitators of learning rather than merely distributors of facts and data", but do not follow this sentiment throughout the book. The next major issue with this text is that it highlights educators' individual preparation of subjects. This is a message that does not fit with current practice, where whole-of-degree design is being promoted as the best way to develop a well-structured, progressive degree that addresses degree-level learning outcomes through a scaffolded design. Last, while much of what the authors set out to achieve – that is, an overview of three learning styles that aid educators in understanding how learners learn – is contained in this edition, it fails to address the new technologies that have entered every classroom, from preschool to university, in the last two decades. References to writing on the board, handing out class notes, using overhead projectors or using visual aids are, at best, dated. The two sections devoted to computer-aided instruction and something called "webbing" amounted to an explanation of the difficulty of finding software useful for students; "webbing" turned out to have nothing to do with online instruction or activity. This oversight is a major criticism of this book, as the introduction of computer-related teaching devices has been so thoroughly taken up in postsecondary (and across all) educational settings in the last two decades.

Observing my own tertiary students, I have noticed how different students seem to engage more positively with different classroom teaching approaches. Some seem most comfortable when I am teaching from the front (lecture style); some really appear energised when they present their own investigations; and others are motivated by small-group work. There are many students in the postsecondary classroom who have more than one area that brings them to life, and I see my job as finding opportunities to engage all my students as I present the subject content. It is not sufficient for me, as an educator, to know the content and speak it; I must also work towards improving the methods I employ in the classroom to share that knowledge in ways that my students can take up. While I join with Kovac (1999) in noting the importance of understanding the learning styles of our students and the practical nature of this book, in each of its editions, the failure to address the influence of new technologies in the postsecondary classroom is a significant oversight.

Kovac, J (1999) Book Review, *Chemical Education Today*, vol. 76, 12 December, p. 1629.