

## Presenting a Human Face

### Things to do at the start of your course

By Neil D Fleming, Lincoln University, New Zealand

*Neil Fleming, academic consultant to the Teaching and Learning Services Group at Lincoln University, New Zealand, presented a series of workshops titled "From Teaching to Learning: Exploring the Paradigm Shift" at both Dalhousie University and Saint Mary's University in March, 2001. These highly interactive sessions, "Learning to Make a Difference: VARK", "From Teaching to Learning" and "How Does Learning Happen", gave us the opportunity to ponder, among other things, our learning styles, teaching practices, the role instruction plays in the university setting and how that role is changing. This article proposes practical applications of the VARK questionnaire in the classroom as well as some strategies to address learning and communication styles on the very first day of class.*

Goethe maintained that "All beginnings are difficult." I hope that he would also support the view that although they may be difficult, they are rewarding if you get them right. Wilbert McKeachie stated that students make decisions about teacher qualities within two hours of contact, so it is important to start well. Any interactivity in that early period can indicate that this class is going to be better than a series of passive lectures.

Achieving an excellent rapport with students can be done through a rather mundane but little-used strategy: asking them about their learning. This approach has some unusual and some predictable results. Firstly, for many it is the first time a teacher has ever asked them such a question as well as the first time they have had an extended and focused discussion on their own learning. Secondly, it raises the students' level of interest in both the course and

the teacher because it shows genuine concern.

One way to begin a discussion about students' learning is to use the VARK questionnaire.<sup>1</sup> This brief (13 question) questionnaire takes students some 8-10 minutes to complete and can provide an early opportunity for student-teacher dialogue at a time when students are forming their impressions of both the course and the teacher.

The individual's VARK results are a set of four numbers – one for each of the teaching and communicating modalities (Visual/Iconic, Aural/Oral, Read/Write and Kinesthetic). With this preference profile the teacher can begin the discussion by posting some of the more unusual student scores. If you are willing to identify your own score, which is a good idea, it will become obvious that some students share your profile while others do not. Inevitably, students will recognise that there are

significant individual differences within the class. The idea that some of their friends do not share the same preferences for giving and receiving information is often new to them, as is the fact that some students have strong single preferences while others may be multimodal with two, three or four modes represented almost equally in their scores. As Pat Cross says:

*The most serious barrier to taking learning seriously lies in our failure to take individual differences seriously. Studies of individual differences almost disappeared from the research scene. It is almost as though there is something a bit unsavoury – or at least undemocratic – about individual differences. But learning is about individuals and improving learning is about understanding what goes on in the minds of the learner.<sup>2</sup>*

To continue the discussion, group students according to their profiles. You could elicit statements from the groups about how they approach such learning

(55-70%) is multimodality, a profile characterized by multiple combinations of V, A, R and K. The most often preferred single mode for students is kinesthetic learning (K). For faculty, the dominant single preference is Read/Write (R). Or, put another way, faculty prefer printed text and written examples of learning such as essays and tests.

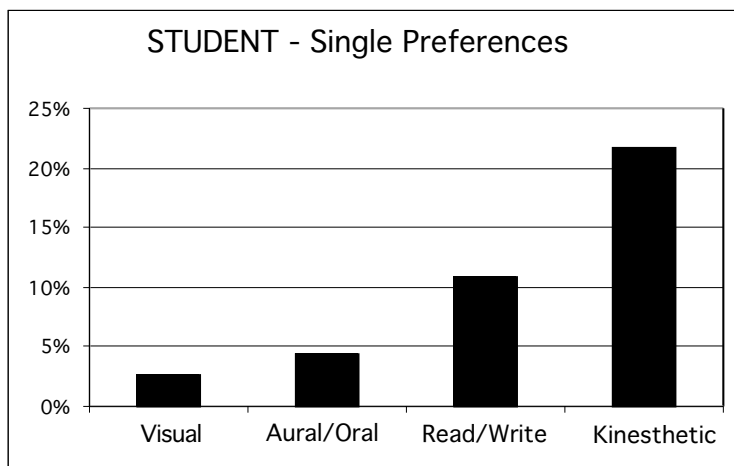
This strategy provides other opportunities. Discussion about one's learning should be related to each discipline before it becomes the focus of teaching. Some teachers discuss the learning strategies that underpin their discipline, and provide an opportunity to answer student questions about how we learn best in this particular discipline. This is not an in-depth topic that requires three hours of teaching time or seven pages on the website if the course is taught online. Nor is it meant to be one-sided. There should be a balance between the time taken by the teacher and that required by the students to explain their learning strategies.

## Matching

*There is a whole body of work in the psychotherapy literature about something called 'patient matching' and it is possible we might learn how to do something like that with students and teachers. If the interactional styles of a variety of different types of good teachers were matched up with students especially receptive to those interactional styles, more academic success might well be the result.<sup>4</sup>*

Matching does not mean the teacher has to do all the work in accommodating individual differences among students. As James Rhem, editor of *National Teaching and Learning Forum* said:

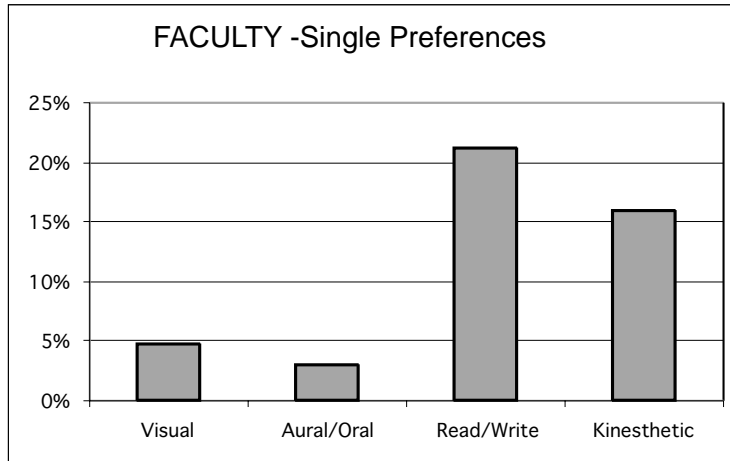
*It seems unrealistic to hope to provide programs that can meet the needs of all learning styles, to ask the teacher to forgo his/her strengths and become a presentational pretzel.*



*In cases where a single preference exists, students are most likely to prefer the Kinesthetic mode. However, VARK questionnaire data indicate that more than half of respondents are "multimodal".*

- tasks<sup>3</sup> as note-taking, making decisions about their studies, adjusting to different teachers' styles, studying for tests, etc.
- You could also discuss the fact that data from our VARK website indicates that the most common student profile

- But there is a reasonable compromise.
- Teachers could provide learning in as many different ways as possible to meet the needs of their students without compromising the standards of their discipline. Besides, research indicates that students learn more from each other than they do from their teachers.



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## • Expectations

- Another strategy to include in your first set of classes is an opportunity to find out about your students’ course expectations. You may ask about their reasons for taking your course and get some personal input about their perceptions of the workload, intended grades and the things that may stand in the way of reaching those grades. These questions indicate the human face of teaching and the data gathered are useful for planning the remainder of the course.

## • Prior Knowledge

- A third strategy is to collect data about students’ prior knowledge. They do not come with an empty slate. As David Ausubel said in 1968,<sup>5</sup>

*The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him [sic] accordingly.*

There is a growing trend indicating that if we expose what students already know, faculty may have more success in attaching new knowledge to the schematic frameworks they bring to class.

*We connect and maintain knowledge not by examining the world but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers. Knowledge is therefore not universal and absolute. It is local and historically changing. We construct it and reconstruct it, time after time and build it up in layers.<sup>6</sup>*

Your students may be taking in information that contrasts with what they already know, and, while they might be able to learn it well enough to pass your test, they will have difficulty integrating it into applications, behaviours or deeper layers of meaning.

## Building Reflection Time

Early in your schooling you may remember often having time for silent reading and reflection, two habits seemingly unused in higher education. In the field of learning, there is an increased interest in the role of reflection in acquiring knowledge and skills. Incorporating opportunities for students to stop and think (reflect) and to allow them time to assimilate new information into existing schemas should be something you practice from your first session. Indeed, the first session is a time when you can signal a number of patterns that will become part of your “normal” teaching. Students are quick to notice anything out of your regular range of strategies, especially if it first appears mid-semester, so “signalling” early is a wise approach.

## Making mistakes

Rodney Hide, one of Lincoln University’s first teaching award winners (and now a politician!) tells a delightful story against himself. Halfway through a

highly technical lecture in economics, he spied the graph on his next overhead transparency and had not the slightest idea what it purported to show. He had lost his script. He considered his options and decided to admit that he did not know what the graph was about and that the session would end prematurely. The students were stunned, having seldom witnessed a teacher who finished on time, let alone early. The following day, Rodney dreaded his return and the possible loss of credibility. Not so! There were a bevy of students waiting to assist him with the explanation of the graph. They had done more learning that evening so that they could “help” Rodney through his honest confusion. In our first sessions with students, in whatever way we can, we need to show that we are human and that we are capable of making mistakes.

## The One-Minute Paper

And for the end of your first session, what about the now famous One-Minute paper? If it is new to you, ask the OI DT for a copy of this great activity.

All of these strategies for session beginnings should fit easily into just one

hour of your teaching programme. That might mean the loss of some valuable content delivery time, but if asked for their opinion, students would vote for the strategies outlined above. I recommend that you use some of them in your first session. Take the time to find out from your students who they are and what they know. The other strategies are aimed primarily at showing your students a human face and encouraging an interactive environment designed to reinforce that learning is an active verb.

- <sup>1</sup> It is available on line at “<http://www.active-learning-site.com>” or as an email attachment from one of its designers (flemingn@lincoln.ac.nz) or from the office of Alan Wright, Executive Director, OI DT, Dalhousie University.
- <sup>2</sup> Cross, K.P. (1998). What do we know about students’ learning and how do we know it? AAHE National Conference on Higher Education.
- <sup>3</sup> These could also be done in an online course.
- <sup>4</sup> Rosenthal, R. and Jacobson, L.(1992). *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils’ Intellectual Development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- <sup>5</sup> Ausubel, D.P. (1968). *Educational psychology: a cognitive view*. New York, USA: Holt Rinehart and Winston.
- <sup>6</sup> Bruffee, K.A. (1995). *Collaborative Learning: Higher education, interdependence and the authority of knowledge*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.

OFFICE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT & TECHNOLOGY  
 DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY  
 6225 UNIVERSITY AVENUE  
 HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA  
 CANADA  
 B3H 3J5