Learning Styles of the Developmental or the Learning Disabled?

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I have long believed that many of the students in my developmental/remedial/pre-college courses who have been labeled as "developmental," actually are students who, unknowingly, have learning disabilities. These students have failed to learn simply because they have different learning styles than "the norm." It is extremely important for educators to be able to adjust their teaching styles in order to maximize the learning potential of students who are being left behind. In this article, I suggest some of the tools teachers can use to assist these students who have "fallen through the cracks."

Developmental education has been defined many different ways to encompass many types of individuals. However, no matter how developmental education is defined, most educators agree that developmental education is education that is geared toward improving the study habits and acquisition capacities of students who can advance to become independent and effective learners (Higbee, 1996).

Since I believe that a number of students in the pre-college courses at community colleges have undiagnosed learning disabilities, helping them discover how to accommodate their different needs during the learning process can give them the tools they need to succeed.

In the spring of 2004, I taught Pathways to College Success, a preparatory course for students who place into developmental classes. As I read my students' writing assignments, many curiosities surfaced. These curiosities included the omission of the "s" endings used with singular nouns; spelling errors of the simplest of words, while more difficult words were spelled correctly; hard to read handwriting; and long incoherent paragraphs that students could explain verbally when given the opportunity.

To develop strategies so that all the students in the class would be able to succeed, I asked students to take one of two learning style inventories that could be taken and scored on the computer. The learning style inventories can be found at http://www.usd.edu/trio/tut/ts/style.html and http://www.learning-styles-online.com/ inventory/.

Because I generally participate with students in class activities, I too took

the inventory. Discussing my results first made students more willing to share their own.

The results were amazing. Not one student in the class learned best through lecture, the main teaching or delivery system they have experienced. These students needed to touch, move, and look at brightly colored charts in order to learn all that they could.

While some students may have spent their school days "goofing off," it seems there were many more of them who might have been inattentive because the teachers' styles of conveying information was in conflict with the way they processed information.

It is important for teachers to incorporate a variety of instructional strategies in their courses to meet the needs of these diverse learning styles.

<p align="center">Table 1—Learning Styles*</p>

Learning Style	Characteristics
Visual (spatial)	Student learns best by using pictures, images, and spatial understanding.
Auditory (aural-musical)	Student learns best when using sound and music.
Verbal (linguistic)	Student learns best when using written or spoken words.
Kinesthetic (physical)	Student learns best when using his sense of touch.
Logical (mathematical)	Student learns best using logic, reasoning, and systems.
Social (interpersonal)	Student learns best while working or studying with at least one other individual.
Solitary (intrapersonal)	Student learns best working and studying alone.

<p align="right">*Adapted from Overview of Learning Styles, n.d.</p>

Instructional Strategies that Address Different Learning Styles

Strategies used to improve the effectiveness of learning in a classroom setting include:

Vary the activities during each class. It is important to avoid lecturing the entire class period and include a variety of instructional formats in order to reach all types of learners. One approach to variety in the class could be to combine visual and auditory modalities when presenting lecture material and then create experiential learning through group work and hands-on application of the material (Northwestern University Services for Students

with Disabilities, n.d.). Also, use visual displays to accompany your lecture. Attempt to include charts, photos, PowerPoint presentations, or other visuals displayed to help the visual learners in the class absorb as much material as possible.

Offer alternative assignments. For example, have students draw a diagram or build a model to demonstrate understanding of the lecture. Using more than one way to demonstrate or explain information is always helpful for the tactile and kinesthetic learner. Learning styles can also be enhanced by reconstructing assignments to incorporate computer technology using various multimedia such as course web site, electronic discussions, online quizzing, testing and survey tools, and simulations and animations.

Use easy-to-read fonts and colored paper for your handouts because standard fonts and black ink on white paper are the most ineffective combinations, especially for the dyslexic student.

Understanding the different learning styles of the students in our classes gives us a better opportunity to reach every student in the class. Is it more work? Probably. However, if our students are not learning, then we're not effectively teaching, because to be successful at teaching, learning must occur.

References

Higbee, J. L. (1996). Defining developmental education: A commentary. *Defining developmental education: Theory, research, & pedagogy* [1996 NADE Monograph]. Retrieved March 29, 2005, from National Association for Developmental Education: http://www.nade.net/documents/Mono96/mono 96.7.pdf

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Starletta Barber Poindexter received both her BA and MA from Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. Since that time, she has taught English at the post secondary level at a number of institutions. She served in college administration for more than ten years, most recently as Director of the College Success Center and Programs at Normandale Community College in Bloomington, Minnesota, where she has returned to teaching. Starletta is very interested in the science of education and in curriculum and faculty development.