

## Learning strengths

'It makes no sense to decide how to teach before one understands how people learn.' Eric Sotro 1994

### How do your students learn?

How do the children in your class group prefer to learn?

Which of their learning preferences are similar to your teaching strengths?

Do you sometimes feel frustrated because no matter how hard you try with some learners they 'just don't get it' when you teach them, but 'get it' when someone else shows them?

How can you adapt your preferred teaching style to support more learners?

### What does the research say?

Learning is not linear, but is affected by complex interactions between life experiences, habits and previous teaching. How people learn is based on how adults and other people, including peers, in the immediate context 'teach'. Some cultural differences may occur, but they cannot be assumed.

One of the purposes of education is to build on and extend all ways of learning so that people can be proficient in different ways. We are not supporting learners to be the best they can be if we only teach to their preferred learning style, as this may minimise opportunities for learning, resulting in students not reaching their learning potential.

According to Hughes et al., ways of learning are closely linked to our senses or perceptual functions – seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, kinaesthetic sense and awareness of our own body, for it is through these means that we gain information about the world.

They advise teachers that if, in a formal teaching situation, we are not getting the learner responses we anticipated, we need to think about how we are teaching, and the match or mismatch with the ways that learners are receiving and processing our teaching.

The inventory below will support you to determine a student's stronger and weaker ways of learning. As you complete the Inventory, think of the student learning in a variety of situations, especially when learning difficult concepts or skills.

	Student Name.....					
	When this student is learning a difficult concept or skill, he or she:					
		Almost always	Usually	Sometimes	Seldom	Almost never
1	learns best when the teacher emphasises a good overview before working on the individual components of the concept or skill					

2	learns best if the teacher begins with the individual components of the concept before doing the overall concept					
3	learns best if asked to think carefully about the answer before replying to the teacher					
4	attempts the task, expecting to learn from feedback about how she or he did it					
5	does better when examples are given first, rather than rules					
6	understands better when abstract concepts or principles are given first					
7	does better when pictures, diagrams or charts are used					
8	does better when 'hands on' activities are used					
9	answers fairly quickly, but makes use of feedback on the correctness or incorrectness of the answer					
10	does better if the concept or task is understood before dealing with specific concrete examples					
11	does better by using mental images to help in understanding					
12	understands better by developing his or her own written explanation					
13	does better when the rules or the concepts are given first, in fact the examples may be confusing					
14	needs many examples to understand the concept					
15	uses fairly detailed, 'wordy' examples					
16	learns much more effectively when the correctness or incorrectness of answers is explained					
17	uses names or labels effectively as a way to understanding and remembering					
18	does better when the each part of the concept is learned first, before the overall concept is learned					

19	does better when she or he draws pictures or diagrams to aid in learning					
20	does better when the overall concept is learned first before each part of the concept is learned					
21	finds definitions like those in the dictionary are very helpful, provided that the definitions are at an appropriate level					
22	takes time to think about answers before responding					
23	does better when the concept is presented using concrete examples					
24	does better when symbols or diagrams, rather than actual pictures are used					
25	does better when the teacher uses metaphors and similes such as 'it is like ...'					
26	is good at learning relationships between one concept and another					
27	does better when the task is broken down into smaller parts and each part is learned in sequence					
28	puts up his or her hand, even when unsure of the answer					
29	reflects carefully on each question to make sure the answer given is correct the first time					
30	tries to understand, to figure it out for him or herself rather than depend on the teacher for correction					
31	begins by breaking the task down into smaller parts					
32	does better if the concept is presented in a meaningful context					

Arthur J More, University of British Columbia

### Scoring

- Score each response as: Almost always = 5 Usually = 4 Sometimes = 3 Seldom = 2 Almost never = 1
- Write the score for question 1 in the space next to 1. Continue the sequence.

- Calculate the Total Global score by adding the four Global scores; write in the space provided. Calculate the remaining scores in the same manner.
- Compare the Total Global and Analytic scores. A difference of more than 2 is meaningful. Similarly compare the Verbal and Abstract scores and Trial and Feedback.
- What are the stronger and weaker ways of learning of this student? How do they compare with other student profiles? Are there strengths and weaknesses that will help you work effectively with this student? How does this student profile compare with your teaching profile?

### Scoring Form

Way of learning	Item	Score	Total	Way of learning	Item	Score	Total
Global	1	.....		Analytic	2	.....	
	20	.....			18	.....	
	26	.....			27	.....	
	32	.....			31	.....	
Verbal	12	.....		Imaginal	7	.....	
	15	.....			11	.....	
	17	.....			19	.....	
	21	.....			25	.....	
Concrete	5	.....		Abstract	6	.....	
	8	.....			10	.....	
	4	.....			13	.....	
	23	.....			24	.....	
Trial & Feedback	4	.....		Reflective	3	.....	
	9	.....			22	.....	
	16	.....			29	.....	
	28	.....			30	.....	

## Steps for classroom use

The term 'learning style' has been given so many different meanings that it is more helpful to think of *ways of learning which the student uses most often and effectively*.

The ways of learning identified below are not opposites but represent a continuum of the ways that people learn, ranging from using one way predominantly to a balance of the choices.<sup>1</sup>

### Global – analytic

Students who have strengths at the global or holistic end of the spectrum understand the task best when the overall concept is presented first, perhaps through an overview, as for these students the 'big picture' idea is important.

Students with analytical strengths tend to learn better when learning is presented in small parts and gradually built up to the whole – for them the context is less important.

### Verbal – imaginal

Verbal learners benefit from 'word' explanations or from the dictionary-style definitions rather than images. They rely more on words and labels.

Students with imaginal strengths learn and best remember from concrete or abstract images, metaphors, symbols or diagrams. Imaginal strengths may not always be visual and could be smells or sounds which trigger learning.

### Concrete – abstract

Students who learn from concrete experiences need real examples first, followed later by the concept or principle which links them. They may need practice with materials or examples for a period of time before the concept or principle becomes clear.

Students with abstract learning strengths learn best if the concept, rule or principle is presented first as an overview or 'big idea' followed by examples. They may need fewer examples, possibly even being confused by examples.

### Trial & feedback – reflective

Students with strengths in 'trial and feedback' tend to respond and learn from the teacher's feedback. They respond with less reflection, often giving the first answer that comes to mind, making errors but then building on the feedback to correct these.

Students who are strong in reflective learning, learn better from thinking through and reflecting on their answer carefully and completely. They depend less on external feedback and take time to respond.

### Steps for classroom use

1. Identify student learning strengths and your teaching strengths.
2. Teach to learning strengths for difficult tasks.
3. Strengthen weaker ways of learning – this is just as important as teaching to student strengths.
4. Help the students select the appropriate ways of learning – first focus on teaching to learning strengths for difficult tasks and strengthen the weaker ways of learning as this helps students realise their strengths.<sup>ii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> Hughes, P, More, A, Williams, 2004, *Aboriginal Ways of Learning*, Emeritus Professor Paul Hughes AM, FACE, Adelaide

<sup>ii</sup> Hughes, P, More, A, Williams, 2004, *Aboriginal Ways of Learning*, p. 48. Emeritus Professor Paul Hughes AM, FACE, Adelaide