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The Interaction of Teacher and Student Social Styles and Learning Styles on Learning Outcomes of the Basic Communication Course

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Much research has been done to determine ideal learning environments, and much of this research has focused on the role of teachers. There is good reason to expect teachers to have some considerable impact on learning outcomes. The results of a conference sponsored by the Office of Education's Bureau of Educational Personnel Development (Superintendent of Document 1971) concluded that "of all the factors that constitute a school, the single most influential in terms of pupil performance was the impact of the teacher."

There is little question that the interaction between teachers and students is important to learning outcomes (Stanford & Roark 1974). Instructional communication research has sought to identify the communication characteristics of teachers that affect the classroom (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey 1978; Friedrich 1978; Bassett & Smythe 1979; Scott & Nussbaum 1981; Barker 1982; McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney 1984). Some of the characteristics that have been examined include teachers' communication competence (Rubin 1982; Rubin & Feezel 1986), teachers' immediacy style (Andersen 1979; Kearney, Plax, Smith & Sorensen 1987; Kelly & Gorham 1988; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey 1987), use of self-
disclosure (Cooper 1988; Downs, Jividi, & Nussbaum 1988; Nussbaum, Comadena, & Holladay 1985), and humor (Civikly 1986; Gorham & Cristopher 1988).

Taken as a whole, this literature suggests that an instructor's communicative choices influence learning. What is not as clear is how these communicative choices impact different types of students. Is there an interaction between the social style of teacher and the social style of the learner? Is there a relationship between the social style of the teacher and the learning style of the student? The purpose of the paper is to provide a preliminary examination of these questions. First, the variable of social style will be reviewed. Next, a review of the literature concerning learning style will be discussed and finally the two areas of social style and learning style will be related to the classroom environment.

Social Style

The two underlying dimensions of social style are assertiveness and responsiveness. Assertiveness refers to the perceived effort a person makes to influence the thoughts and actions of others. Responsiveness is the perceived effort a person makes to control or show their emotions when interacting with others. Based on these two dimensions, a 2x2 matrix is formed and individuals are classified into one of four social styles: analytical (lowly assertive and lowly responsive), amiable (lowly assertive and highly responsive), driver (highly assertive and lowly responsive) and expressive (highly assertive and highly responsive).

Sullivan (1977) found that people in business settings that were highly assertive were also perceived to be more powerful and more competent than lowly assertive persons. Snively (1977) stated that highly assertive individuals were perceived to be more extroverted, more powerful, more trustworthy, more versatile, and more similar in terms of values than lowly assertive persons. Knutson and Lashbrook (1976) found that highly assertive individuals were less apprehensive than lowly assertive individuals. It
appears that assertive people are more attractive to others than nonassertive people.

Responsiveness is associated with a person's friendliness or emotional expressiveness. It is thought to be the relationship dimension since highly responsive individuals are labeled as warm, approachable, people-oriented, emotional, easy going, open, sociable, and dramatic. Lowly responsive individuals are viewed as cool, independent, aloof, objective, impersonal, and businesslike. Sullivan (1977) found responsiveness associated with sociability, versatility, trust, social attraction, character, composure, interpersonal satisfaction, task attraction and interpersonal solidarity. Snively (1977) further supported these conclusions when he found that highly responsive persons are perceived to be more versatile, sociable, extroverted, and trustworthy than lowly responsive persons. Finally, Knutson and Lashbrook (1976) postulated that highly responsive individuals were less apprehensive than lowly responsive individuals.

As indicated earlier, levels of perceived assertiveness and responsiveness are used to determine an individual's social style of analytical, amiables, expressive, or driver. A further description of the characteristics of each of the four styles provides a better understanding of the type of communication typically used by each of the four types. These styles include:

1) **Analyticals** are conceptualized to be technical specialists. They are characterized as industrious, persistent, serious, vigilant, orderly, uncommunicative, indecisive, stuffy, exacting, and impersonal. Since they are low in both assertiveness and responsiveness, they tend to make limited use of personal power and emotional expression.

2) **Amiables**, who are low in assertiveness but high in responsiveness, are thought to be supportive specialists. They are conceptualized as dependable, respectful, personable, conforming, retiring, non-committal, undisciplined, and emotional. While they
tend to hold their personal power in check, they freely express themselves emotionally.

3) Expressives are considered to be social specialists due to their high assertiveness and responsiveness. They also tend to freely express emotions and make use of their personal power. They are conceptualized to be personable, stimulating, enthusiastic, dramatic, inspiring, opinionated, promotional, undisciplined, and excitable.

4) Drivers are conceptualized as control specialists since they are highly assertive and lowly responsive. They tend to use their personal power, while controlling expression of their emotions. They are characterized as determined, thorough, decisive, efficient, pushy, tough-minded, dominating, and harsh.

Prisbell (1985) examined the relationship between interpersonal perception variables such as feeling good, safety, uncertainty level, and communication satisfaction and classroom learning and evaluations. He found that the preceding variables were significantly associated with affective learning, behavioral commitment, course evaluations and instructor evaluations.

A number of literature summaries have concluded that interpersonal attraction tends to be a significant predictor of leadership, interpersonal influence, and the amount and form of interpersonal communication in a relationship (Berscheid & Walster 1969). From studies in other but relevant areas it is expected that attraction would be a key variable in teaching effectiveness. Snavely (1978) found a significant relationship between task attraction and responsiveness among co-workers, suggesting that individuals would rather work on tasks with people who communicate affective responses (show emotions) than those who control their emotions. Parsley and Lashbrook (1976) also found a relationship between social attraction and responsiveness. Finally, Sullivan (1977) found that co-workers perceived amiables to be most socially attractive, followed by expressives and drivers with analyticals being the lowest in social attraction.
How is attraction related to learning the classroom environment? Is a teacher who is perceived as more attractive (task and/or social) by their students more effective in the classroom? Which of the four social styles will be perceived as the most attractive by students? Or is attraction an interaction between the teacher's social style and the social style of the student? Or is one social style the most attractive for classroom use?

**Learning Style**

Kolb (1976) defined learning style as the types of behaviors a person employs when confronted with an educational task and the attributes of the individual which interact with instructional circumstances in such a way as to produce differential learning achievement. Four parts of a person's learning style have been identified: 1) the manner in which one gathers information, 2) the manner in which one interprets information, 3) the manner in which one reasons to come to a decision or conclusion, and 4) the manner in which one interacts with others in a learning environment and the nature and quality of such interactions. Although there are a number of learning styles inventories, Kolb (1976) delineated four learning style scales: active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization. Based on a person's score on each of the four subscales, learning style classifies an individual as one of four types of learner:

1) **Converger** — Combines learning steps of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. People with this learning style are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. If this is your preferred learning style, you have the ability to solve problems and make decisions based on finding solutions to questions or problems. You would rather deal with technical tasks and problems than with social and interpersonal issues. These learning skills are important to be effective in specialist and technology careers.
2) **Diverger** — Combines learning steps of concrete experience and reflective observation. People with this learning style are best at viewing concrete situations from many different points of view. Their approach to situations is to observe rather than take action. If this is your style, you may enjoy situations that call for generating a wide range of ideas, as in a brainstorming session. You probably have broad cultural interests and like to gather information. This imaginative ability and sensitivity to feelings is needed for effectiveness in the arts, entertainment and service careers.

3) **Assimilator** — Combines learning steps of abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. People with this learning style are best at understanding a wide range of information and putting it into concise, logical form. If this is your learning style, you probably are less focused on people and more interested in abstract ideas and concepts. Generally, people with this learning style find it more important that a theory have logical soundness than practical value. This learning style is important for effectiveness in information and science careers.

4) **Accommodator** — Combines learning steps of concrete experience and active experimentation. People with this learning style have the ability to learn primarily from “hand-on” experience. If this is your style, you probably enjoy carrying out plans and involving yourself in new and challenging experiences. Your tendency may be to act on “gut” feelings rather than on logical analysis. In solving problems, you may rely more heavily on people for information than on your own technical analysis. This learning style is important for effectiveness in action-oriented careers such as marketing or sales.

According to Reckinger (1979), not all students learn the same way or in the same manner. He stated that some students are oral learners, others kinesthetic learners, while others are independent learners. Students may or may not fit
the learning style the teacher selects to employ. Bates and Keirsey (1975) estimate that 62% of the student population do not fit the traditional school learning pattern because they do not have traditional learning styles and personalities that match such a style. Bates and Keirsey further claim that 38% of the students learn best through activity and that this group of students have the lowest correlation between academic ability and grade point average. They are also often the students that drop out of school.

Individuals who enter an educational system with one type of learning style probably begin to alter or adjust the learning style to meet the style used in the system. The type of system employed then becomes a major influence in determining their own teaching style should they eventually become a teacher. A liberal, less formal structured system will foster a different style than a traditional system.

**Research Questions:**

The literature provides some justification for anticipating both learning styles and social styles to influence student outcomes. In particular, it is expected that students of instructors with matching styles would both perform better as well as be more satisfied with the course procedures. However, there appear to be few empirical tests of the relationship.

Moreover, there is an alternative explanation that merits investigation. It may be that the actual correspondence of styles is less important than students' abilities to correctly identify their instructor's style. That is, students who are aware of their instructor’s styles are able to adapt and respond to the particular course, and thereby perform better as well as feel more satisfied.

To determine whether it is the actual correspondence or accurate perception of the instructors' styles this study was designed to answer the following research questions:

Q1: How does the actual match of instructor and student learning style influence student performance and student evaluation of course procedures?
Teacher/Student Social and Learning Styles

Q2: How does the student’s identification of the instructor’s learning style influence student performance and student evaluation of course procedures?

Q3: How does the actual match of instructor and student social style influence student performance and the student evaluation of course procedures?

Q4: How does the student’s identification of the instructor’s social style influence student performance and student evaluation of course procedures?

Method

Subjects

The subjects for the study were undergraduate students in basic speech communication courses at three midwestern universities. Fifteen sections, for an n = 277, completed the questionnaire during the last week of the term.

Survey Questionnaire

The fifteen instructors completed an instrument based on the Social Style Profile (Wilson Learning Corporation 1975). The study departed from the procedures recommended for the instrument, in that subjects only recorded their perceptions of their own social style. Instructors also completed the Learning Style Profile (Kolb 1976).

The students were given two sets of the same two instruments completed by the instructors. The first set asked them to identify their own social and learning style. The second set asked that they identify how they thought their instructors would answer the questions. In addition, the students completed a course evaluation form of sixteen items.
Predictor and Criterion Variables

The research questions required that a score be given to each subject for both the actual correspondence of learning and social styles as well as for the student’s accuracy in identifying how their instructor’s regarded their own styles. As both of the style instruments assume a 2X2 model (See Figures 1 & 2), the score was assigned based on the geometrical location of the instructor’s were the same, the assigned value was 3. A value of 2 was given if the student’s and instructor’s style were in adjacent cells. A value of 1 was assigned if styles were in diagonally opposite cells. Four separate scores were thereby generated: (1) actual match of learning style; (2) actual match of social style; (3) accuracy of the student’s judgment about the instructor’s learning style; (4) accuracy of the student’s judgment about the instructor’s social style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION</th>
<th>CONCRETE EXPERIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION</td>
<td>REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
Learning Style Quadrants
The research questions posed two criterion variables. Student performance was measured by final course grade. Evaluation of course procedures was measured by the sixteen item course evaluation measure.

**Data Analysis**

Pearson correlation analysis was performed on all possible predictor variables and the two criterion measures of final course grade and student course evaluation. Subsequently, ONEWAY analyses were performed.

**Results**

**Distribution of styles and grades**

Table 1 presents summary descriptors of the sample. Most of the students reported their learning style to be active experimentation. As for social style, over half the students are classified as expressives. The average course grade received by the students was 2.878.
### Table 1
Characteristics of Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Styles</th>
<th>Percentage:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Experience</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Observation</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract Conceptual</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Experimentation</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Styles</th>
<th>Percentage:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amiables</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Grade</th>
<th>Percentage:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean = 2.878  
s.d. = .960

Course Evaluation (Maximum = 80):
Mean = 53.936  
s.d. = 14.978

**Pearson Correlations**

Only two of the possible predictors of final course grade were significantly correlated (see Table 2). The student’s own learning style and social style were not significantly related to course grade.
Table 2
Pearson Correlation Coefficients for the Possible Predictors of Student Course Grade and Student Course Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Course Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Learning Style</td>
<td>-.0597 (n=200)</td>
<td>.1916* (n=271)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Social Style</td>
<td>-.0161 (n=172)</td>
<td>.1555* (n=255)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match of Instructor and Student Actual Learning Style</td>
<td>-.1384* (n=172)</td>
<td>-.0919 (n=174)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match of Student Perception of Instructor Learning Style</td>
<td>-.0437 (n=99)</td>
<td>.1655* (n=99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match of Instructor and Student Actual Social Style</td>
<td>.0101 (n=247)</td>
<td>.1714* (n=239)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match of Student Perception of Instructor Social Style</td>
<td>.1688* (n=218)</td>
<td>.0017 (n=221)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

The actual match of instructor's and student's learning styles resulted in a statistically significant, although surprisingly, very slight negative correlation with course...
grade ($r = -.1384, p < .05$). Less than 2% of the variance is accounted for by the $r$ value. An ANOVA analysis of the means for exact match, adjacent, and diagonally opposite groups produced an insignificant $F$ value, suggesting that the correlation is unrelated to course grade.

The student's accuracy in identifying the instructor's learning style also produced a significant correlation, and this time, in the expected direction ($r = .1688, p < .05$). Although the $r$ value accounts for less than 3% of the variance, the ANOVA for the between group variances was significant ($F = 3.9496, p < .05, df = 2$). The means for the three groups increased in the predicted fashion (exact match, $X = 2.41$; adjacent match, $X = 2.02$; diagonal, $X = 2.00$).

Four of the possible predictors of the student's satisfaction with the course were statistically significant. The student's own learning style was significant ($r = .1916$), accounting for less than 4% of the variance. Active experimenters appear to be generally more satisfied with their courses, but the ANOVA analysis resulted in a non-significant $F$.

Student's social style was also significantly correlated with course evaluation ($r = .1555$), accounting for less than 2.5% of the variance. Amiables appear to be more generally satisfied, but the ANOVA analysis resulted in a non-significant $F$.

The actual match between instructor's learning and social styles each produced significant correlations with course evaluation ($r = .1655$ and $r = .1714$). The ANOVA for actual match of learning style was non-significant. The ANOVA for actual match of social style was, however, significant ($F = 4.5525, p < .05, df = 2$). Students with exact matches had the highest course evaluations, adjacent matches next highest, and diagonal opposites were least satisfied.

**Oneway Analyses**

Oneway analysis of variance was performed on the three predictors which had significant pearson correlations and
significant between group differences. Only two of the remaining predictors had significant $F$ values (see Table 3). The student’s ability in identifying the learning style of the instructor with course evaluation as the dependent measure, failed the oneway analysis. The student’s accuracy in identifying the instructors’ social style remained a significant predictor of course grade. The student’s actual
match with the instructor’s social style also remained a significant predictor of the student’s course evaluation. The results of the Scheffe’ multiple comparison procedure indicated that for both predictors there are significant differences in the means of the three groups: exact matches had the highest means, adjacent matches the next highest, and diagonal opposites the lowest means.

Discussion

The results of this study lend further support to claim that individuals with dispositions to certain styles can be expected to experience different outcomes than individuals with other types of styles. As for learning style, active experimenters appear to express more satisfaction with their courses. Not surprisingly, persons who regard their social style as amiable report greater satisfaction with courses. However, the data in this study indicate that the individual dispositions of students in basic speech communication courses influence only their course evaluation, and do not influence the grades earned by students.

In so far as the match between student and instructor style, the results of this study suggest that the actual match in learning style as well as the student’s identification of the instructor’s learning style are relatively unimportant to the grades earned by students or their satisfaction with the course. It may be that instructor’s self-perceptions of their own learning style do not correspond with their own teaching style. Although the two might be expected to correspond with each other, it is important to realize that student’s perceptions are probably based on the instructor’s performance in class rather than on the learning processes instructors use. As learning style is a cognitive process, and teaching a communicative process, comparisons of learning styles may not be useful indicators of student outcomes.

Social style, in contrast, is a communicative factor, and therefore more likely to influence student behaviors. The results lend tentative support for this claim. As students are more accurate in identifying the social styles of their
instructors, they may be better able to respond to instructors, as well as have a better idea of what is expected. The relationship of the actual match of styles and course evaluation is not surprising. People prefer others who are like themselves, and therefore more likely to give positive attributions to similar others.

These results, nevertheless, must be regarded with some skepticism. One important reservation is that these results were derived exclusively from basic communication courses. The results might therefore be biased by the subject matter of the courses. Moreover, there were quite a few subjects who failed to complete correctly the entire survey booklet of 153 items. Finally, the grade point distribution was both relatively high and narrow, and therefore might have made it difficult for the analysis to determine significant sources of variation.

Conclusions

It would be naive, and probably wrong, to suggest that instructors ought to change their social styles. Naive, because individuals do not easily alter their social styles. Wrong, since this study provides no evidence that the social styles of the instructors were factors in predicting student outcomes. Effective teaching probably occurs through a variety of social styles.

The study does suggest, however, that student outcomes are influenced by student's abilities to accurately identify the social styles of their instructors. The implication is that instructors who wish to encourage better performance probably will find it useful to communicate information that students can use to identify the social style of the instructor. This is not to say that instructors should complete a social style inventory, and report the results at the first class meeting. Instead, it suggests a need for instructors to interact in class in ways beyond the presentation of course material. Indeed, the point is no more than the obvious: the better students know their instructors, the better they are likely to perform.
Certainly, further research is warranted. This study's failure to find significant relationships between instructor's and student's learning styles may be an artifact of the sample and the difficulties imposed by the survey questionnaire. For both learning and social style, it is necessary to research a wide variety of courses before recommending particular behaviors for all instructors. It is clear, though, that the communicative practices of instructors influence their students, and should therefore be more thoroughly understood.

References


