What’s your style?
Learning styles theory for better learning and teaching

Zubin Austin BScPhm, MBA, MISC, PhD FCAHS
Professor and Murray Koffler Chair in Management
Leslie Dan Faculty of Pharmacy
University of Toronto, Canada
Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this workshop, you will be able to:

• Describe major psychological theories of teaching and learning
• Discuss effective principles of pedagogy
• Apply learning styles theory to design of educational events
• Reflect upon your own teaching and learning style
The Psychology of Teaching and Learning

- **Behavioural** approaches emphasizing rewards and punishments
- **Cognitive** approaches highlighting the supremacy of reason over feeling
- **Developmental** approaches focusing on the stages of human growth
- **Psycho-analytic** approaches aiming at making the unconscious conscious
The Learning Styles Tradition

- **Piaget**: Infant and child development
- **Eysenck**: The biological basis for personality and learning
- **Maslow**: Hierarchy of needs, and the adaptive, survival value of learning
- **Kolb**: Learning preferences vs. learning styles
Kolb’s Learning Styles
The Four Learning Styles

**Divergers**: “Let’s just all get along, okay?”

**Assimilators**: “Lack of organization on your part is no reason for an emergency on my part”

**Convergers**: “Relax everybody – I’m here to help”

**Accommodators**: “Are we there yet?”
Comparing Learning Styles: *Approach to Material*

**Divergers:** emphasize inter-relationships and connections

**Assimilators:** emphasize theory and expertise

**Convergers:** emphasize application and value

**Accommodators:** emphasize utility
Comparing Learning Styles: 
*Process of Learning*

**Divergers:** Reflection-in-action

**Assimilators:** Reflection-on-action

**Convergers:** Action/activity

**Accommodators:** Action/activity with a reason
Comparing Learning Styles: 
*Teaching Approaches*

**Diverger:** A friend, values relationships

**Assimilator:** An expert, values credentials

**Converger:** A coach, values drive

**Accommodators:** A colleague, values outcome
Comparing Learning Styles: 
*Psycho-educational needs*

**Divergers:** Supportive peers, time to reflect and discuss before performing

**Assimilators:** Expert teachers, time to reflect and discuss before performing

**Convergers:** An audience to impress with an outcome to achieve

**Accommodators:** A legitimate reason to care and be involved
Comparing Learning Styles: 
Relating to Others

Divergers: Values harmony, group process over objective outcomes

Assimilators: May confuse others’ confidence with competence

Convergers: May mistake own confidence for competence

Accommodators: Values efficiency, sometimes at the expense of efficacy
Comparing Learning Styles: Approaches to Feedback

Divergers: “Fantastic! The best ever…”

Assimilators: “There were 10 criteria for evaluation, you got 9, therefore this is excellent…”

Convergers: “Great, but what about the other 10%”

Accommodators: “Good”
Group Activity #1

Your group is developing a continuing education session aimed at adults who are not familiar with fairy tales (e.g. Jack and the Beanstock, Little Red Riding Hood).

This is all the information you have been given.

Be prepared to present the following:
1) Present your “curriculum” (including assessment methods)
2) What teaching, learning, and assessment strategies are you using and emphasizing? Which ones are you not?
3) How did you prioritize/decide upon your curriculum and assessment approaches?
4) What did you learn about yourselves and the influence of your learning styles on the design of your session?
Teaching to Accommodate Learning Styles

• Importance of educational design that respects different learning needs
• Recognition that each individual has personal preferences/strengths, but that all professionals must be able to function competently in any learning style
• Multiple teaching and assessment methods provides opportunities to “play to strengths” but to also develop new skills
Teaching to Accommodate Learning Styles

“Divergent” teaching methods:
- Reflection
- Non-time pressured group work
- Mentoring
- Creative, unstructured activities
- Talking-based activities
- Self-assessment, low-stakes formative feedback
- Learning for the sake of learning, not simply for the purpose of application
Teaching to Accommodate Learning Styles

“Assimilative” teaching methods:
• Expert-driven lectures
• Clear linkages to learning objectives
• Very clear alignment between teaching and assessment
• Homework
• Individual activities
• Web-based, non-interactive
• Mentoring
• Learning for the sake of learning that also has practical application
“Convergent” teaching methods:
• Purpose-driven group work
• Competitions
• Role-playing
• In-practice activities
• Mentoring
• Learning for the purpose of practical application
Teaching to Accommodate Learning Styles

“Accommodative” teaching methods:
• “Just-in-time” curriculum
• Time/resource efficient learning
• Practical problem solving
• Real-world situated learning
• Involvement/engagement with actual workplace-based problems
• Lack of faith in traditional/formal summative or formative assessments
• Mentoring
• Learning for the purpose of solving problems
Learning Styles and Teaching

• Role of “diagnosing” learning styles…it is not ‘blood typing’ or citizenship!
• Used as a tool for understanding oneself, one’s interactions with others and the environment
• Most useful in providing a respectful vocabulary with which to begin discussion around teaching and learning
Group Activity #2

In mixed-learning styles small groups, generate a list of strategies/tactics that will allow curriculum planners and instructors to better integrate learning styles theory into their teaching.

Be prepared to discuss:
1) Teaching methods
2) Learning methods
3) Assessment methods
4) Self-reflection/quality improvement
Questions for Reflection

• How does my own learning style influence my perception of a “great” teacher or student? A “lousy” teacher or student?

• How do the educational programs I’m involved in meet needs of learners with different learning styles?

• How do the educational programs I’m involved in push learners to expand into different, non-dominant learning styles?
Conclusions

• Learning styles theory can be a powerful tool for teachers, students, mentors, preceptors...and that’s everyone!

• Learning styles instruments should not be used to ‘segregate’ or ‘stream’ individuals; rather it should be used to challenge fundamental assumptions about what is “good”, “effective” and “efficient” teaching and learning
For further reading
