

Focus on the Student: Emphasizing Learning Styles

Summary by Phillip Jones, Baylor University

San Francisco's historic St. Francis Hotel proved an excellent setting for the 1997 program of the Library Instruction Round Table (LIRT), "Focus on the Student: Emphasizing Learning Styles." By 9:30 a.m. on Sunday 29 June 1997, more than two hundred ALA conferees had entered the Grand Ballroom to hear a diverse slate of three speakers address learning styles. Both the content of the program and its title, "Focus on the Student: Emphasizing Learning Styles," represent a paradigmatic shift in the educational fields from an emphasis on pedagogy and teaching to their *raison d'être*, learning.

Each of the program's three speakers added her own insights to learning styles and took questions from the audience to foster dialogue. The presenters included [Gail Junion-Metz](#), President, [Information Age Consultants](#), University Heights, Ohio; [Lynn Sutton](#), Director, [Undergraduate Library](#), [Wayne State University](#), Detroit, Michigan; and [Debra Jones](#), Internet Librarian, [Cabrillo College Library](#), [Cabrillo College](#), Aptos, California. This report will address the focal points of their presentations.

After a brief report from Kari Lucas, LIRT President, Marcia King-Blandford, Program Committee Chair, introduced Gail Junion-Metz. Junion-Metz began by stressing the importance of formal training in the discipline of education for librarians; she asked members of the audience with degrees in education to raise their hands. Junion-Metz argued that library schools must acquaint their students with educational theory to prepare them for instructional posts in libraries. She emphasized that library instructors must understand how individuals learn material differently by age, personality, and other characteristics.

Reminding her listeners that learning theory is an ancient concept, Junion-Metz sketched an outline of its history from Hippocrates to the present. She also discussed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and recommended that her listeners take it or a similar personality inventory.

The three modalities, or learning preferences (auditory, visual, and kinesthetic) played a key role in Junion-Metz's lecture. Auditory learners prefer linear, highly structured instruction. Such persons weigh concrete, discrete details before forming their own concepts. They favor accurate, clear lectures. Visual learners favor visual signals. They rapidly absorb transparencies, diagrams, and visual presentations; e.g., PowerPoint. Unlike their predecessors, visual learners are highly concept-oriented, preferring to see the "big-picture" before zeroing on details. Kinesthetic learners bask in an environment that other learners find disorderly. These energetic students prefer hands-on assignments that allow them to learn actively.

One pertinent question at the end of Junion-Metz's presentation encapsulated the thoughts of many attendees: How does one apply all these lessons, specifically the modalities, in a short period of fifty minutes in the library classroom? She responded that instructors should mix

teaching methods within each class to cater to all three. A short lecture targets auditory students, handouts and overheads serve visual learners, and a hands-on period facilitates kinesthetic learning.

In outlining the design of the new undergraduate library at Wayne State University, Lynn Sutton depicted to the audience how an appreciation of learning styles can inform sound facility planning. She defined learning styles as the conditions under which one learns best. Some factors that relate to learning styles in architectural decision making include grouping (collaborative or individual); posture, which is governed by furniture (carrels and tables); sound; temperature; and lighting.

The planners of the new library at Wayne State envisioned a building that relied heavily on electronic formats of information. However, they acknowledged in their design that the library remains a place, not merely non-geographic access to information. Planners expect that when the new building opens in September 1997 it will serve as a focus of undergraduate life. Its design, policies, and procedures will balance the learning preferences of a diverse, urban clientele. For example, the new building will provide collaborative learning space as well as solitary carrels and computer workstations. Multiple furnishing arrangements will allow students to choose a comfortable environment with an appropriate noise level that facilitates their learning. Moreover, policies on food and drink will negotiate different learning styles and the competing interests of library users and preservation.

Sutton acknowledged that the modalities played a role in charting library instruction and orientation tours. Traditional tours, visual materials, and multimedia presentations will complement one another to acquaint all three types of learners to the new building. Likewise, through critical attention to the modalities, innovate library instructors will ground the undergraduates of Wayne State University in research methodology and gird them for lifelong learning.

Returning to a focus on the classroom itself, Debra Jones, the third speaker, explored the critical elements of instructional design to fulfill her stated purpose, "to support the practicing librarian in developing instruction for the student/researcher." An outline of her presentation is available at <http://www.cabrillo.cc.ca.us/thinking/focus.html>.

Jones broke instruction down to four essential components: learner, methods, objectives, and evaluation. By analyzing their learners in terms of background, characteristics, and motivation, instructors can determine the appropriate learning method. A whole group provides the best forum for general overviews and gives the instructor maximum control. Smaller instructional groups encourage interactions; however, instructor control is lessened and weak links (i.e., unmotivated group members) can impair the group. The least structured model, self-paced instruction, offers independence to students, but only works well for highly motivated individuals.

In creating instructional objectives, teachers can follow Jones's ABCDs: audience, behavior, conditions, and degree. After surveying their audiences, instructors should establish the desired outcome (behavior) of the instruction. Conditions govern how to measure the learner's

performance. Teachers also should decide to what degree they wish their students to learn. Jones borrowed from Benjamin Bloom's six-tiered [Taxonomy](#) (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) to delineate these degrees, with evaluation being the highest level of learning. To complete her paradigm, Jones emphasized the importance of evaluation in determining the success of one's instruction.

Jones challenged instructors to inculcate critical thinking skills in students. She also recommended that instructors employ instructional design models to put their efforts in perspective and to foster solid teaching in which they sharply focus on the centerpiece of instruction: the student.

The 1997 LIRT Program concluded shortly after noon. Although formal written evaluations will be tabulated, oral comments after the program were mostly enthusiastic. Each speaker contributed her own insights into the topic of learning styles. Program attendees sampled three unique, but complementary views of learning theory that they might apply to their own library classrooms. LIRT now awaits the 1998 program in Washington, on which the Program Committee will begin planning shortly.

Bibliographies prepared for and distributed at the program, [Critical Thinking](#), prepared by Caroline McIntosh; [Evaluation of Library Instruction](#), prepared by Phillip Jones; and [Learning Styles](#), prepared by Cynthia Krolkowski are available. Contact Gail Junion-Metz at gail@iage.com for information on her handouts.