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Does teaching for a balanced use of thinking styles enhance students' achievement? ☆

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Abstract

Teaching for a balanced use of thinking styles involves instructing and assessing students using a variety of teaching styles, rather than just a single style. This article describes two experimental studies that test if teaching for a balanced use of thinking styles enhances students' achievement. Participants were students and teachers from a comprehensive university of Shanghai, the People's Republic of China. The first study involved 95 students majoring in computer sciences and two teachers, and the second, 85 students majoring in economics and business administration and two teachers. In each of the studies, students were taught a special topic in a 45-min session and took an achievement test. Each test paper was evaluated by two teachers. Students also responded to a self-report test of thinking styles and to two ability inventories. Support for the superiority of teaching for a balanced use of thinking styles was found in Study One, but not in Study Two.

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1. Introduction

Many teachers put in much effort in trying to enable all students to learn effectively. Yet, more often than not, they find that there are some students who just cannot benefit from the way they teach. There could be many reasons why certain students lag behind academically—learning or physical disabilities, family problems, motivational problems, peer problems, teacher expectation problems, and/or any other problems that may inhibit them from learning effectively. However, it can be the result of a mismatch between students' preferred ways of using their abilities and the particular range of styles of teaching that a teacher uses. What can teachers do to make teaching benefit as many students as possible?

In their earlier writings, Sternberg, Zhang, and their colleagues (e.g., Sternberg, 1997; Zhang & Sachs, 1997; Zhang & Sternberg, 1998) have argued that teachers should teach in ways that allow students with different thinking styles to obtain their best achievement. Then, what kind of teaching could allow for students' different thinking styles? In the styles literature, two major strategies have been proposed for enhancing students' achievement. One is through providing learning environments that match students' learning styles (e.g., Adderley, 1987; Grout, 1991; Kagan, 1965). The other is through teaching for a balanced use of styles (Saracho & Spodek, 1986; Sternberg, 1997). This article describes two experimental studies that aimed at obtaining empirical evidence for the positive effect of teaching for a balanced use of styles upon students' academic achievement.

Teaching for a balanced use of thinking styles involves such a teaching method that teachers teach in a variety of teaching styles and assess students for a variety of learning styles. It is based on a theory of thinking styles—the theory of mental self-government (Sternberg, 1988, 1997). Using the word “government” metaphorically, Sternberg contended that just as there are different ways of governing a society, there are different ways that people use their abilities. These preferred ways of using one's abilities are construed as “thinking styles.” According to Sternberg, there are 13 thinking styles that fall along five dimensions: (1) functions (including the legislative, executive, and judicial styles), (2) forms (hierarchical, monarchic, oligarchic, and anarchic styles), (3) levels (global and local styles), (4) scopes (internal and external styles), and (5) leanings (liberal and conservative styles).

Sternberg proposed that people choose styles of managing themselves with which they are comfortable. Furthermore, styles are at least in part socialized, suggesting that they can, to some extent, be modified by the environment in which people live.

In the present research, only the function of thinking styles was investigated. As in government, there are three functions in human beings' mental self-government: legislative, executive, and judicial. An individual with a legislative style enjoys being engaged in tasks that require creative strategies. An individual with an executive style is more concerned with the implementation of tasks with set guidelines. An individual with a judicial style focuses attention on evaluating the products of others' activities.

When they are applied to the context of teachers' teaching, thinking styles are manifested in the form of teaching styles. Thus, a teacher with a legislative teaching style tends to be engaged in instruction that highly involves creative activities and in assessment that encourages students to use innovative strategies to solve problems. Legislative teaching tends to lead to creative learning. A teacher with an executive teaching style prefers to be engaged in instruction that is characterized

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