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## Teaching Excellence: TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY, Vol. 7, No.5, 1995-1996

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# Teaching Excellence

TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

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## Teaching With Style: The Integration of Teaching and Learning Styles in the Classroom

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Traditionally the concept of teaching style has been viewed in a pejorative manner. "It has been confused with affectation, denigrated as a kind of posturing to mask a lack of substance, or tolerated as a natural manifestation of personal eccentricities" [Eble, 1980, p. 1]. Thus, to define our styles, as teachers, to understand it, to develop it, and to use it effectively entails moving beyond the limited and negative sense in which it is sometimes perceived.

Style in teaching is more than a superficial collection of interesting mannerisms used to create an impression. It is best viewed as a pervasive quality that plays an important role in several aspects of our teaching. *Our personal qualities guide and direct the selection of instructional processes.* Thus, style becomes the mechanism responsible for how we convey the substance of our disciplines. Style also reflects what Reinsmith (1992; 1994) describes as the teacher's *presence* and the nature and quality of the *encounter* with students. As a result, the efficacy with which we display our styles as teachers has two effects on students. *It may facilitate or hinder their ability to acquire content and skills and it influences the learning styles our students adopt.*

In effect, there is a symbiotic relationship among our personal qualities, the instructional processes we employ to convey the content of our disciplines, and the styles our students display as learners (Grasha, 1994; 1996). An integrated model of teaching and learning style I developed over the past two decades illustrates the

interdependencies among these elements as well as ways teachers can use them to enhance classroom instruction.

### ELEMENTS OF THE MODEL: TEACHING STYLE

Teaching style is viewed as a particular pattern of needs, beliefs, and behaviors that faculty display in the classroom. My research shows that several patterns describe the stylistic qualities of college teachers. They include the teacher as: *Expert* (transmitter of information); *Formal Authority* (sets standards and defines acceptable ways of doing things); *Personal Model* (teaches by illustration and direct example); *Facilitator* (guides and directs by asking questions, exploring options, suggesting alternatives); and *Delegator* (develops students ability to function autonomously).

While it might appear tempting to place teachers into one of five boxes, such attempts at parsimony are premature. Almost everyone who teaches possesses each of the five teaching styles to varying degrees. In effect, each individual style is like a different color on an artists palette. Like those colors, they can be blended together. Interviews with faculty, observations of their teaching, and information generated by the *Teaching Styles Inventory* I developed in my research program showed that four blends or clusters of teaching style were dominant. Each cluster and the percentage of the 761 classrooms across disciplines where each blend was dominant are shown below.

- Cluster 1: Expert/Formal Authority (38%)
- Cluster 2: Personal Model/Expert/Formal Authority (22%)
- Cluster 3: Facilitator/Personal Model/Expert (17%)
- Cluster 4: Delegator/Facilitator/Expert (15%)

Nine-two percent of the classrooms we examined reflected one of the four primary blends or clusters of teaching style. *Each cluster of teaching style helps to create the mood of a class.* When used in a very traditional manner, the styles of Cluster 1 sends a message to students that "I'm in charge here" and tend to create a "cool" emotional climate. In contrast, an emphasis on the Delegator/Facilitator/Expert blend of Cluster 4 creates a different picture. It sends message to students that "I'm here to consult with you and to act as a resource person." A warmer emotional climate is created and students and teachers work together, share information, and the boundaries between teacher and student are not as formal.

### ELEMENTS OF THE MODEL: LEARNING STYLE

Early in my work, it became clear that any attempts to enhance teaching-learning processes would have to focus on the needs students have as learners. In collaboration with Sheryl Hruska-Riechmann, the *Grasha-Riechmann Student Learning Style Scales* was developed to identify and categorize such preferences (Hruska-Riechmann & Grasha, 1982; Grasha, 1990). This inventory identifies the following styles of learners: *Competitive* (compete with other students); *Collaborative* (believe they can learn by sharing ideas and talents); *Avoidant* (uninterested and/or overwhelmed by what happens in

(Continued on back)

class); *Participant* (eager to take part in class activities); *Dependent* (need structure and support); and *Independent* (like to think for themselves and work alone). Like the styles of teaching, learning styles are best thought of as a blend or profile that resides within every student. Some students possess more of one style than another and it is typically the dominant qualities that are most easily seen in class.

#### ELEMENTS OF THE MODEL: INTEGRATING TEACHING STYLE, LEARNING STYLE, AND CLASSROOM PROCESSES

As my research program developed, it became clear that teaching style, learning style, and classroom processes were interdependent. For example, the use of the Expert/Formal Authority styles in the context of the traditional lecture-discussion method of teaching encouraged and reinforced the Dependent/Participant/Competitive blend of learning styles. The same thing was true of employing other blends of teaching styles. Each had implications for the teaching processes faculty used and the learning styles students were asked to adopt. The relationship among these four elements are illustrated in Table 1.

My work suggests that faculty wanting to modify their approach to teaching have several options. They might ask what learning styles they want to encourage and choose instructional processes compatible with such styles. Or, after listing the specific goals they want to achieve, the issue of what alternative teaching styles and classroom processes address such goals can be explored. After such analyses, some instructors might shift their teaching to another cluster in the model in order to meet their objectives. Most, however, would probably find it helpful to add variety to the cluster in which they currently reside. Those teaching in Cluster 1, for example, might integrate several aspects of the instructional processes in Clusters 2, 3, or 4 into their courses.

*A word of caution is in order here.* Modifying one's teaching is not as easy as picking and choosing among elements in each of the four clusters. Each demands that instructors have or are willing to acquire the skills to use those methods. For example, knowing how to function as a role model, guide, or coach is necessary to engage in Cluster 2 activities. Similarly, skills as a consultant and resource person and an understanding of group

dynamics are needed to effectively use the methods in Clusters 3 and 4. Furthermore, to teach in these clusters means that some control over what happens in class must be turned over to the students. Also, one must be willing to build relationships with learners and to teach them how to work effectively together. Finally, students need the capability to learn in new ways or the teacher must be willing to teach them how to do so.

Teaching with style demands that instructors explore "Who I am as a teacher?" and "What do I want to become?" The integrated model provides one vehicle for doing so. The payoff is that we move away from blindly *teaching as we were taught* or simply repeating *how we taught the course the last time*. Instead, instructional strategies become grounded in a conceptual base of knowledge about teaching and learning styles. Like scholarly methods in our disciplines, instructional strategies then begin to serve broader philosophical, theoretical, and conceptual goals.

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