

More "Teaching Tidbits" from the NYLS Initiative for Excellence in Law Teaching (IELT)!



New Research on Learning Types: Beyond Learning Styles

The critics here at IELT Omnimedia™ have been somewhat skeptical of reductive suggestions urging law professors to accommodate our teaching to all possible differences in our students' learning styles.

Considerable research substantiates the notion that reaching more than one neural pathway at a time (by, for example, using visual cues to support a lecture) fosters more engaged learning and greater retention of material. Yet there appears to be an emerging consensus among learning theorists that simply "matching" our teaching to students' individual learning styles does not always result in the improvements we might hope for.¹

Perhaps this is good news for law teachers who have yet to find ways to incorporate tactile or kinesthetic learning into their lectures. Nonetheless, there **are** meaningful variations in how our students learn. But this begs the question: **how much should these variations affect the way we teach?**

Students Have Flexible Learning Preferences

Many scholars view adult learning as malleable and adaptive. At least one recent study found that the learning styles of first-year law students shifted considerably over the course of their first year of study—toward greater intellectual experimentation and problem-solving orientation (though not, interestingly, toward greater comfort with abstract conceptualization).²

In short, recent work suggests that what earlier researchers deemed **learning styles** may be better described as **learning preferences**: simply inclinations about learning that students possess, rather than absolute barriers or requirements.

Extraverted vs. Introverted Learners

Though somewhat distinct from learning-style theory, one common way that specialists have categorized students' preferences to assimilating new information and skills is by associating it with typologies from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).³ Of greatest interest to legal educators are the MBTI preference scales relating to direction of energy (extraverted vs. introverted) and perception (sensing vs. intuiting).

Those who learn best by reaching outward are likely to be, for better or worse, the most talkative students in our classes. Students whose mental processes are more internal tend to want time to think carefully before sharing their ideas.

While it may be true that students at either extreme can adapt well to law school, there may be ways we can facilitate their adjustment. For example, encouraging students to speak briefly with a classmate or small group before returning to the full class discussion may help extraverted learners develop their thoughts. And, by creating an outlet for their energies, it may keep the most vocal students from dominating conversation. Conversely, asking the whole class to write down their thoughts for a few moments before attempting to answer a difficult question or hypothetical may assist students whose processes are more reflective and internal, while at the same time giving all students a valuable opportunity to consolidate their learning.

Sequential vs. “Big Picture” Learners

For law teachers, perhaps the most important distinction in learning may have to do with the ways that students comprehend new information. In their book *JURIS TYPES*, educational psychologist Dr. Martha M. Peters and law professor Don Peters suggest that some students approach their legal learning sequentially: working step-by-step to assemble details into recognizable patterns that they can then use to build a broader understanding of the materials covered. Other students learn in the opposite direction: they first seek a “big-picture” overview in which to deposit more detailed information.

Peters & Peters are agnostic about which approach law students must use, pointing out that the legal profession requires both detailed and more abstract thinking, and that good legal reasoning (and learning) may be inductive or deductive. This suggests at the very least that regardless of whether our classes start more broadly and theoretically or focus first on individual legal rules, our teaching should ultimately help all students see how the specific rules fit into the larger concepts we are covering. And when working with students individually, we might want to learn more about whether they tend to understand material better from a top-down approach or a bottom up one, and tailor our advice accordingly. For many students, Peters & Peters point out, simply understanding that both abstract comprehension and precise technical application of legal rules to facts are necessary components to legal thinking may itself be enormously helpful.

Most importantly, Peters and Peters show us that there is no one correct approach to learning law, and that there may be some real differences in how some students and their professors approach new material. (Indeed, Joanne Ingham has shown that law professors’ learning preferences may be quite different from those of our students.⁴) We may not be obliged, or even able, to adapt everything we do to each student’s learning preferences. But the more we know about the wide variety of ways our students learn, the more we can help each of them become more versatile thinkers and learners.

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¹See Aida M. Alaka, *Learning Styles: What Difference Do the Differences Make?*, 5 CHARLESTON L. REV. 133 (2011)(objective analyses of empirical studies have found little to no positive correlation showing that “matched” teaching and learning styles leads to greater ~~mastery or retention~~ learning).

²Eric A. DeGroff, *Training Tomorrow’s Lawyers: What Empirical Research Can Tell Us About the Effect of Law School Pedagogy on Law Student Learning Styles*, 36 S. ILL. U. L.J. 251 (2012).

³For further resources on MBTI and learning see <http://www.myersbriggs.org/type-use-for-everyday-life/type-and-learning/>.

⁴Joanne Ingham & Robin A. Boyle, *Generation X in Law School: How These Law Students are Different from Those Who Teach Them*, 56 J. LEGAL EDUC. 281 (2006).