Consider Your Style ~ A Customized Self-assessment Tool for Teaching Effectiveness in Online Environments

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Abstract: This is the third phase of a study investigating teaching and learning online. Phases I & II, previously presented at E-Learn, were devoted to student online learning preferences. Phase III investigates the teaching styles of faculty in online environments. In a pilot test, a survey instrument was administered to faculty in the College of Education. The results generated an individualized report for each faculty member, highlighting their teaching style strengths. In a follow-up one-to-one consultation with faculty members, each shared their current teaching practices and perceived needs. Based upon their teaching strengths, the faculty member was provided with a customized spectrum of teaching tips suited to their particular online teaching preferences and needs. The teaching tips were gathered from the research literature on pedagogy and from the authors' work with faculty peers.

Teaching success online

With the growth of online education, more faculty are stepping into the online teaching frontier – with or without training (Camp, DeBlois, Agee, Allison, Ardalan, David, et al. 2007). In some ways, there are obvious similarities in the pedagogy of face-to-face and online instruction. The similarities are based in understanding of the art of teaching itself and understanding different levels of thinking related to Bloom's taxonomy (Using Pedagogy, 2005). However, just knowing the content area does not necessarily lead to an effective online course. Students come into the online learning environment with different preferences, needs and attitudes that all affect how they will receive the course (Camp, et al, 2007). Teachers also come into any instructional setting with their own beliefs about teaching and their preference for a certain teaching style.

The goal of any course is for the students to follow and accomplish goals and learning objectives. This is the same for online courses, except that the route to get to the goals may change. Similar to the way that students develop and express learning preferences, teachers develop and perform using certain teaching styles (Lucas, 2005, Grasha, 1994). These develop from beliefs on how students learn and how the teacher learned himself. Through

reflection of teaching styles, faculty can become more effective teachers both face to face *and* in the online environment (Grasha, 2000).

Anthony Grasha has defined teaching styles into five different types: expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator, and delegator (1994). Originally, Grasha was referring to traditional face-to-face teaching situations. Each of these styles carry with them their own ways of accomplishing academic goals. These categories are not meant to pigeonhole teachers; rather teaching styles often fall into a few of the categories, which have been grouped together as clusters, at the same time (Lucas, 2005). The expert teaching style focuses on the faculty member's extensive knowledge of the subject matter (Grasha, 1994). Experts will divulge as much information as possible so that their students will be fully prepared. The formal authority teaching style emphasizes the teacher's status as a teacher, as the leader of the class. After they have commanded the respect of their students, they are best able to function in the classroom. The personal model teaching style is where teachers use themselves as standards or examples "to live by" (Grasha, 1994). The person with the facilitator teaching style works with students and coaches them through issues and concerns. In the delegator teaching style, the penultimate goal is for the students to be able to function on their own. The delegator will give instruction and have the students work through the intricacies of the assignments. The benefit of the clusters is that, in grouping these styles, we can reveal common methodologies per cluster (**Table 1**).

Cluster #	Teaching Styles Incorporated
Cluster 1	Expert/Formal authority
Cluster 2	Expert/Personal model/Formal authority
Cluster 3	Expert/Facilitator/Personal model
Cluster 4	Expert/Facilitator/Delegator

Table 1: Teaching Styles Clustered Grasha, 1994; Lucas, 2005

Cluster 1, which includes more direct, authoritative teaching styles, often relies on teacher-centered activities. The course material is often encompassed by lectures or presentations (Grasha, 1994). Cluster 2 is slightly more demonstrative, using personal examples and verbalizing steps or thought processes to reach completion. Cluster 3 methodologies include those that are hands-on and interactive. This cluster will do more with cooperative and problem-based learning. Cluster 4 incorporates the most independent learning on the student's part. Students will likely do projects or papers derived from their own ideas.

Each teaching style carries with it a standard modus operandi. Due to the generally accepted idea of learning styles, each teaching style comes with a set of advantages and disadvantages for a classroom of diverse learners. Some of the teaching styles are more teacher-centered and others are more student-centered. For instance, Cluster 1 does not naturally lend itself to bending and flexing with differentiated student needs (Lucas, 2005). An advantage of a lecture-based style would be the vast amount of information that a teacher would be able to impart to a classroom of students. Teachers who notice their tendency to teach in Cluster 1, should be on the lookout for what that style is doing to independent thought and student interaction in the classroom (Grasha, 2000). Some faculty may not have the understanding of learning styles and how they affect their classroom, and therefore feel no need to adapt their potentially landlocked teaching style (Lucas, 2005). For this reason, more research is being done to bring awareness to the discrepancy between the research and practice of teaching and learning online (Dupin-Bryant, 2004).

The online learning environment is the type of medium that lends itself to independent student learning. Students need hands-on, interactive tasks that will engage and challenge them. When thinking about Grasha's teaching styles, Cluster 2 (guiding and modeling), Cluster 3 (coaching individual thought processes), and Cluster 4 (coaching independent challenges from the sidelines) are the most conducive to online learning (Lucas, 2005, Grasha, 2000). These clusters allow for student growth from social interaction, collaboration and independent work. Although each cluster does this to varying degrees, the importance of these factors in an online environment cannot be underestimated.

Some methodologies are not as easily assimilated into the online environment as others. What should teachers do if they find their teaching style and beliefs to be incompatible with a student-centered online environment? Grasha suggests evaluating the needs of the students in the class and planning ahead to implement different clusters into each lesson (2000). It is also advisable to then look at the distribution of different teaching styles for each course module for the rest of the term. Because online learning is more student-centered than teacher-centered, those who believe in more teacher-centered tasks may have a difficult time working in the online medium

(Lucas, 2005). It is possible then, that the content of the course will need to change to become more activity oriented (Shank, 2005). Online learning can be visual (reading/writing) or audio (lecture) but it also needs to be interactive (Shank, 2005). Educators are continually learning about how students learn. A quality education is one that takes into account learning preferences no matter what the venue. Finding ways to create multiple activities and giving students access to multiple resources fits well with the online learning set-up.

Lucas explains that because teaching styles arise from grounded academic beliefs, it can be difficult, if not nearly impossible for some faculty to change their styles (2005). Teachers who rest primarily in Cluster 1 are concerned about losing control of the classroom if the setting becomes more student-centered. Grasha suggests ways to exert control, but allow for collaboration and group work (1994). Faculty can assign certain tasks within a group for each student, and create and maintain standards for quality of work. In order to believe in the utility of student-centered work, the teacher needs to believe in the student's ability to grow (Grasha, 1994). This growth is not just in the content of the course, but as a learner as well.

Just as teachers should expect their students to reflect upon what they have learned and how to improve themselves academically, teachers should expect the same of themselves. Living in a culture of accountability and research-based teaching strategies in the field of education, there should be a growing awareness of the continuity between methodology and research. There are many intrinsic barriers to the use of online pedagogy (Lucas, 2005). Most of these fears arise from the idea of change and the unfamiliarity that accompanies it. The concept of exploring teaching styles with faculty members is intended to promote the strengths of their teaching and provide them with tools that will increase their effectiveness. Their understanding of how to balance teaching styles and strategies is what will ultimately create learning environments best suited for all learners.

The Study
Teaching Preference Profiles

In a pilot test, a survey instrument was administered to faculty in the College of Education at a small mid-western university. The results generated an individualized report for each faculty member, highlighting their teaching style strengths (**Figure 1**).
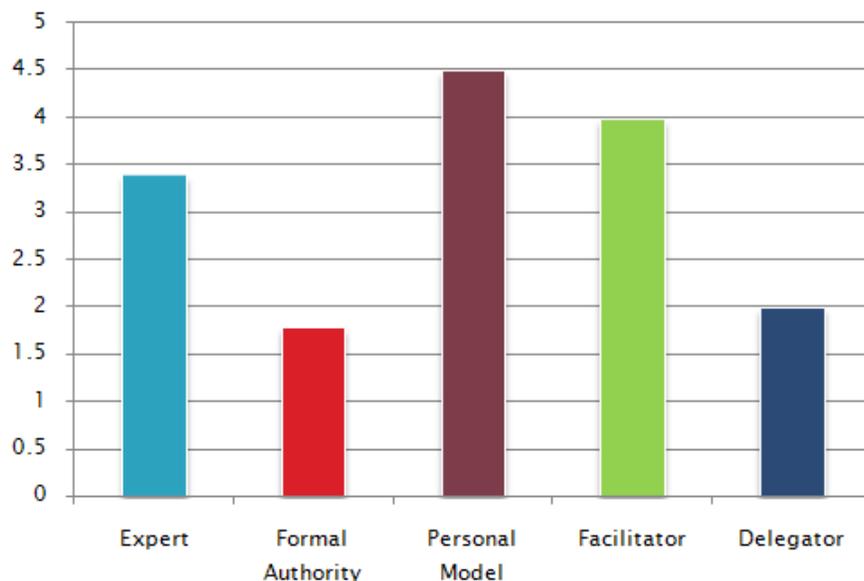

Figure 1: Teaching style preferences of an individual College of Education faculty member

Strategies for Increased Success

In a follow-up one-to-one consultation with faculty members, each shared their current teaching practices and perceived needs. Based upon their teaching strengths, the faculty member was provided with a customized spectrum of teaching tips suited to their particular online teaching preferences and needs. The teaching tips were gathered from the research literature and from the authors' work with faculty peers (**Table 2**).

Cluster	Online teaching tips
1. Expert; Formal Authority	• Utilize online two-way communication tools (Elluminate) • Content-dense web pages • Provide mini lessons • Quizzes • Set specific course objectives & learner outcomes • Clear Policies: Grading, absence, late work • Guided note-taking
2. Expert/Personal model/Formal authority	• Utilize online audio dissemination tools • Provide grading rubrics • Encourage reflection & discussion of readings • Homework • Set specific course objectives & learner outcomes • Policies: Grading, absence, late work • Role playing during on campus meetings
3. Expert/Facilitator/Personal model	• Facilitate through discussion & problem-posing dialogue • Get to know you introductory activities • Thoughtful reflection of course materials • Refer to external resources as needed • Create a social space • Utilize debate as online activity • Encourage learners to provide timely, meaning feedback to you and peer learners
4. Expert/Facilitator/Delegator	• Self-directed learning: Provide students with tools to identify learning goals and assessment tools • Provide students support services and learning resources • Discovery learning: Each module contains things to see, read, hear & explore • Problem solving activities • Create a website/blog • Expect learners to be leaders • Require students to design self-assessment tools

Table 2: Teaching styles clustered and corresponding tips or strategies to support teaching success.

Perceptions and Experiences of a Faculty Member

Common concerns of faculty members included finding way to make sure students are processing all of the information in the textbook and the posted modules, determining ways to get more interaction among students in the class, and finding ways to involve the students in critical thinking related to the topic. One faculty member in the College of Education used content reading strategies and a framework developed by Forget (2004) called the MAX framework. In MAX, you have a Motivating activity, an Application activity, and an eXtension activity. Motivating activities include KWL charts (answering the questions, What do you **K**now?; What do you **W**ant to know?; and What did you **L**earn?) and anticipation guides. An anticipation guide is a strategy in which students are given a list of statements about a selection they are about to read. They determine whether they think the statements are true or false based upon what they already know. Then they read the selection and see if it changes their mind about any of the statements. They are encouraged to tell where they found their answers in the text or posted readings/websites.

Application activities typically are designed to cause students to process the information in the course materials. Reciprocal teaching is a strategy that works well in this area and also can be used to encourage interaction among students. In reciprocal teaching, students take on the role of the teacher and develop the questions about the reading that the teacher would typically ask. The teacher can divide the reading into sections and use the Groups feature of Blackboard to have smaller groups develop the reciprocal questions. These are then posted to the Discussion Board, where classmates can respond to them. One way to manage all the postings that result is to read them and then send a mass email with comments related to trends that emerge from the collective postings.

Another useful application strategy is to create a chart where students post GIST statements about a section of reading in the left column, an outline of related points in the middle column, and how the information relates to your teaching in the third column. GIST statements are single sentences of 20-30 words that summarize a selection. This activity causes students to read critically to find the main point and subordinate points. Asking them what this means to them as a teacher is an extension that helps them realize the importance of the information.

A similar application strategy is Two-Column Notes, where the left column is for notes related to the reading selection (main ideas and related subordinate points) and the right side is where students tell how they will relate it to their teaching, explain it in their own words, create an acronym to remember it, or even draw a picture that explains it. The right column is personalized and a variety of responses are acceptable, thus allowing students to respond in a way that is compatible with their own learning styles.

Extension activities are designed to cause students to think critically about the information in the module, by applying it to a problem. For example, after reading about balanced reading programs supported by scientifically-based reading research, students told what they would ask a salesperson if they were on the curriculum committee choosing a new reading series.

The biggest challenge that this faculty member reported is the grading involved in this framework. One thing that makes it easier is that there are patterns that emerge from the readings that you see when you are grading multiple papers. Beyond that, the personalized parts are difficult to fault because they are meaningful to the individual student. Thus, the faculty member typically just responded conversationally to those sections. The biggest benefit of this framework is that the faculty member felt that she came to know each student as an individual. Having a Getting to Know You Discussion Board where students tell about themselves and their goals, and perhaps even upload a picture, helps this faculty member get to know her students as well.

This faculty member also shared some tips for making things go smoothly both for the students and the teacher:

1. Set a naming protocol for files that everyone uses: last name_assignment name.doc. This saves renaming files so you can keep track of them. Online students are notorious for not putting their names on papers.
2. Make all assignments in one color of print (red) and only use that color for assignments. That way, students know when they see that color, there is something they have to turn in.
3. You can also color code other aspects of the module: e.g. purple for objectives, blue for Motivation activities, green for Acquisition activities, etc.
4. As an easy reference tool, create and post a chart that lays out the course content and due dates.
5. Use the Announcements to give students all the information they need to get started. That is the first thing they will see when they log in.
6. As you become more comfortable with online teaching, try other tools to promote student interaction, such as the Groups feature or Elluminate.
7. Be prompt in giving students feedback so they know how they are doing from the start.
8. Turning modules off at a due date forces student to keep up. Procrastination is deadly in any course. However, be understanding when things come up.
9. Allow students to recycle until they get it right. The point is for the students to meet the course objectives, not for grades to reflect a bell-shaped curve.
10. Set up a "Getting to Know You" Discussion Board where students can introduce themselves and upload a picture.

Plan for Continued Study

Future study includes plans to incorporate knowledge gained from faculty member's Preference Profiles and their use of online teaching tips to investigate both their satisfaction and their perception of pedagogical success in an online environment.

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