THE ROLE OF LEARNING STYLES IN MARKETING EDUCATION

Nancy T. Froniczak, Metropolitan State College

Abstract

Literature from education suggests that the student learning process is a function of three factors -- the environment, teaching style, and learning style. This process is relevant to the marketing education process. This paper reviews the relevant literature in the areas of marketing education techniques and learning style, then provides a new framework for understanding how the effectiveness of various approaches to marketing education may vary by student learning style.

INTRODUCTION

The trend in marketing education has moved from the traditional, theoretical, lecture approach to a practical application approach. A variety of approaches are often used to assist learning of marketing concepts by students, such as case analysis, group projects, guest speakers, and computer simulations. The primary objective of most of these assignments is to provide marketing students with an opportunity to learn more about the "real world." Before a review of the research related to the effectiveness of these more practical approaches to teaching is presented, one question must be raised: Can the effectiveness of the various approaches to marketing education be accurately measured without consideration of the individual differences in student learning style? The purpose of this paper is to propose a framework for analyzing student learning style and effectiveness of marketing education techniques, which may help understand this important question. Specifically, this paper presents:

1. A summary of relevant literature on the effectiveness of various marketing classroom techniques
2. A simple model of the learning process
3. A brief history of the theoretical development of learning style
4. A framework of potential learning style implications in marketing education, and
5. Directions for future research efforts

EFFECTIVENESS OF MARKETING EDUCATION TECHNIQUES

In analyzing the project method approach for marketing research courses, Malhotra, Tashchian, and Jain (1989) discuss the shift in direction of marketing education to "learning by doing and discovering" and the use of action-oriented approaches. They suggest that the project method approach fosters managerial skills such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills. In another study of the use of team projects, Dommer (1986) found that students preferred team projects over the individual format. Also supporting the favorable findings of the group project method, Goracka (1984) found that the class project was rated by students higher than the term paper or case study method. Other research has considered the effectiveness of client-sponsored projects (Ramocki 1987; de los Santos and Jensen 1985). Studies which have looked at the group project approach generally find this technique is useful in integrating theory and practice and that it has profound benefits for student's learning process. Overall, findings are extremely favorable with regard to the use of group projects in marketing courses.

The marketing literature includes studies which have analyzed other educational techniques. For example, Gottke and Osterman (1987) explain an approach called "The Feedback Lecture," which can be used in marketing courses. The "Feedback Lecture" combines the traditional lecture approach with a formal structure of lecture outlines, specified objectives, pre-tests, student discussion periods, and feedback. The authors suggest that this method of lecture is useful for all types of learners. Another study considered the benefits of other teaching techniques, such as guest speakers or panels, field trips to corporations, videotapes and films, and cases (Henke, Locander, Mentzer, and Nastas 1988).

The effectiveness of these alternative approaches to marketing education is certainly justified and supported by empirical research. The studies seem to suggest that most students of marketing generally prefer these alternative practical approaches and learn better through them. However, most of these studies do not consider individual differences in learning.

THE LEARNING PROCESS

Scholars in education have concluded that a student's learning process is a function of three factors -- the learning environment, teaching style, and student learning style. The learning environment has been the focus of many investigations of various physical alternatives such as sound, light, temperature, and design in the classroom (Dunn and Dunn 1975). Teaching style refers to the wide range of options a teacher may adopt for particular situations (Bloom 1976; Joyce and Weil 1972). Finally, learning style is described as individual orientations toward learning.

Figure 1 illustrates the factors in the student learning process. The simple model presented in Figure 1 applies to the marketing education process as well. A learning style approach to analyzing marketing education may provide an additional understanding of the effectiveness of marketing educational techniques.

HISTORY OF LEARNING STYLES

The concept of learning styles has a long, well-researched background in the fields of psychology and, more importantly, in education. To present a historical perspective, four theoretical paradigms are discussed.

Jung's Psychological Types

Literature reviews on individual differences in learning styles most often cite the original work of Carl G. Jung's (1921). His research on "psychological types" suggests that an individual's approach to decision-making is influenced by the "thinking function" and the "feeling function". The thinking function uses logic and reason to analyze data and information in an objective, careful and thorough manner, whereas all alternatives are considered and weighed. The feeling function uses perception and personal insight to approach a decision in a subjective, empathetic and emotional manner. All people use both functions; however, we tend to be more
comfortable with one of these. Jung’s also discussed two types of perception: the “sensation function” where people observe and experience the world through their five senses (they see what is actually happening), and the “intuition function” where people react to images created in their mind based on intuitive “reading between the lines.” A practical application of Jung’s theory is the well-known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

Gregore Style Delineator

Anthony F. Gregore (1982) is another well-known author in the field of learning styles. He developed The Gregore Style Delineator based on his concept of four patterns of styles within individuals. In his theory, he suggests that people have a preference for either “abstract” (symbolic, intuitive, and emotional) perception or “concrete” (realistic, direct, and physical) perception. He also suggests that we have a preference in the way we order information. We either prefer “sequential” (linear, step-by-step, methodical) ordering or “random” (nonlinear, tangential, leaping) ordering. In combining these two dimensions of perception and ordering, Gregore identifies four patterns of style. In addition, he argues that everyone exhibits all four patterns to some extent, yet one pattern tends to be predominant.

Dunn and Dunn’s Learning Style Elements

Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn have also published extensively in the field of education (Dunn and Dunn 1975, 1978). They define learning styles as “the manner in which at least 18 different elements of four basic stimuli affect a person’s ability to absorb and retain information, values, facts, or concepts” (Dunn and Dunn 1975). The four basic elements of learning style suggested by Dunn and Dunn are:

Environmental Elements: Sound, light, temperature, and design (e.g., “Sound or external noise may positively or negatively influence learning style”).

Emotional Elements: Motivation, persistence, responsibility, and structure (e.g., “Motivated, persistent, responsible students usually require little structure and supervision”).

Sociological Elements: People “can learn in a variety of sociological patterns that include working alone, with one or two friends, in a small group, or as a part of a team . . . or some variation of these”.

Physical Elements: People learn through different senses such as auditory, visual or tactile senses or a combination of senses.

Based on these concepts, Dunn and Dunn (1975) argue that knowing a student’s learning style preference can make a teacher more sensitive to that individual.

Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory

Finally, David A. Kolb developed a Learning Style Inventory (1984) which represents a significant development in learning style research. Kolb identified two dimensions of learning style.

Perception: People perceive through Concrete Experience (“feeling”) or through Abstract Conceptualization (“thinking”).

Processing: People process through Active Experimentation (“doing”) or through Reflective Observation (“watching”).

Therefore, learning results from the way people perceive and then process what has been perceived. In putting together these two dimensions, a four-quadrant model of learning styles is formed (see Figure 2).

The Learning Style Inventory measures a person on each of the four dimensions using a self-description format based on 12 questions with four alternative responses (Kolb 1976). Respondents are asked to rank the alternatives according to how well they think each fits with how they would go about learning something. Based on the results of this LSI, a “Learning-Style Grid” can be formed for each person. The four basic learning styles developed by Kolb are:

Diverger: This learning style emphasizes concrete experience (“feeling”) and reflective observation (“watching”). This orientation stresses adaptation by observation rather than action. These individuals tend to be feeling-oriented, interested in people, tend to desire harmony, avoid conflict and process information based on their past and present experiences.

Assimilator: This person’s dominant learning abilities are abstract conceptualization (“thinking”) and reflective observation (“watching”). This orientation is less focused on people and more concerned with ideas and abstract concepts. Logical, sound theory, concrete, sequential ordering, attention to detail, facts and figures are important to this person. They process information concretely.

Converger: The convergent learning style relies on abstract conceptualization (“thinking”) and active experimentation (“doing”). This person likes problem solving, decision making, and the practical application of ideas and theories. Convergers would prefer to deal with technical problems and “figure things out” rather than social, interpersonal skills. They process information by kinesthetic and tactile “doing”.

Accomodator: The fourth learning style emphasizes concrete experience (“feeling”) and active experimentation (“doing”). These individuals like doing things and getting involved in new experiences. They seek opportunities, take risks, and learn more by intuitive trial and error. These individuals are at ease with other people.

Kolb proposes that every person has a dominant learning style which influences all aspects of their life. However, all people also possess aspects of all four learning styles.

Based on Kolb’s work, Bernice McCarthy (1980) developed the 4MAT System. Type One learners (Diversers, according to Kolb) often ask the question, “Why?” in order to find a reason for learning. Type Two learners (Assimilators) ask the question, “What?” in an attempt to get accurate information. Type Three learners (Convergers) ask the question, “How does it work?” when applying knowledge. Type Four learners (Accommodators) ask the question, “What if?” They enjoy creating new experiences for themselves and others.

The 4MAT System suggests first that all learning experiences should move through all four quadrants and second, educators might begin planning with Quadrant Two and move through the remaining quadrants. The purpose of using the 4MAT System is to bring depth to any learning experience and to have learners process information based on their predominant style.

Studies based on Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory have found implications regarding the selection of academic
fields in higher education and career choice (Weisser 1971; Kolb 1984). For example, social work, counseling, and teaching professionals are often Diversers; scientists and mathematicians are frequently Assimilators; engineers and accountants who integrate theory and practice are primarily Convergers; and, finally, individuals in fields such as marketing and architecture are often Accommodators. Criticisms of Kolb's LSI have been found in the management literature (Freedman and Stumpf 1978), although Kolb argues that the critique is seriously flawed (Kolb 1981). Kolb refers to the almost 100 studies which have used the LSI, indicating its widespread use in the literature.

A FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING STYLE IMPLICATIONS IN MARKETING EDUCATION

The previous discussion suggests that researchers in education have made significant theoretical advances in learning style concepts and that tests of learning style instruments have demonstrated many useful applications. Kolb's (1976, 1984) efforts, which integrate much of the previous learning style research and represent the most recent and most rigorously tested research, provide a logical framework to expand current marketing education literature.

In their attempt to improve the marketing education experience for their students, marketing educators need new guidelines which will enable improved teaching methods. Kolb's Learning Style Inventory provides the structure for a new paradigm of teaching in marketing education.

Table I provides marketing education implications for each of the four learning styles. Although the suggestions offered in this table have not been empirically tested, they do suggest logically different educational considerations. A discussion of implications for each of the four types of marketing students will help explain Table I.

Since Diversers learn by listening, they would respond to carefully prepared traditional lectures and to the feedback lecture. Each lecture should include learning objectives and justification for study of each major topic, since Diversers like to ask the question, "Why?" The syllabus should clearly show the "main" of the class. Type 4 Learners are feeling-oriented and interested in people and would, therefore, like those opportunities to work with other classmates. Group projects and group case analysis could provide both the opportunity to work with others, plus an opportunity for tackling problems by "brainstorming", which they enjoy.

The Assimilators, concrete sequential thinkers, enjoy the traditional structured classroom. Lectures are a preferred method of learning for these students who like to ask the question, "What?" in order to get accurate information. Type 3 Learners are less focused on people and more interested in ideas, so these students should be given the opportunity to work independently on assignments such as individual case analysis, term papers, or computer simulation. They also have a need to know what "experts" think and value, so guest speakers, field trips, and videotapes would be appropriate learning techniques for these students. In addition, professors themselves, as perceived "experts" should express opinions and values related to marketing issues. Professors can also provide outside reading lists for students to learn from other experts in the field. Finally, Assimilators do need details, but they also like to assimilate facts into coherent, logical theories. Professors should not simply provide lists of facts, but should provide a framework for discussion of all topics. Professors generally enjoy the thorough, industrious nature of these learners.

The Converger, often called the "hands-on" learner, likes to ask the question, "how does it work?" These students enjoy all types of field trips to various corporations to find out first hand how various marketing functions work. They also enjoy listening to guest speakers and videotapes. Professors should provide these students with opportunities to gather information by "hands-on" experience through group projects or games and simulation. These students would enjoy the actual process of questionnaire design and testing and interviewing in research or creating a media plan in advertising. Since these students do not prefer the traditional classroom, professors need to include practical marketing strategy implications in lecture for these learners. Diversers are "skills oriented" learners, so "how to" information is useful to them. They would enjoy discussions on "how to" design an advertisement, prepare a marketing plan, or hire an advertising agency. Since they also enjoy defining and solving problems, "getting right to the point", the challenge of cases would be beneficial. Finally, Convergers would rather deal with technical tasks and problems, rather than social/interpersonal issues, so individual assignments, such as individual case analysis, are appropriate. However, they are willing to work with others who are task oriented and move quickly, therefore, group projects can work if professors provide the groups with specific tasks and deadlines.

Finally, as a risk-taker who likes new experiences, the Accommodator would enjoy the uniqueness of the feedback lecture, but would not particularly like the "traditional" lecture format. Since Accommodators are at ease with people, they would enjoy group projects and group case analysis. They would also feel comfortable visiting with marketing executives on field trips and discussing issues with guest speakers. Since Type 2 Learners relish change and like to "imagine what might be", games and simulations would be fun for these individuals. Finally, Accommodators tend to be good leaders and "enlarge" other people, therefore, they would naturally be effective group leaders for any group assignments. Also since they are so comfortable with people, they most likely would enjoy the opportunity to speak in class, both informally during class discussions and more formally for class presentations.

The framework provided in Table I could be expanded to include other marketing educational techniques. It provides a starting point for understanding how individual student learning style may be related to marketing education approaches.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper presents a simple model of the student learning process and suggests implications for the marketing classroom. Research in the marketing literature supports the trend toward a more practical, application approach to marketing education. However, these studies do not consider individual differences in learning style. In all likelihood, different marketing educational techniques may be more or less effective for particular types of learners. Using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory, this paper proposes a framework for analyzing student learning style and marketing education approaches.

In conclusion, teachers often teach in the way they learned best, but not all students may learn in that particular way. Marketing professors must realize that a variety of learning types exists in every classroom. Although students tend to be drawn to others with similar learning styles, students will actually learn more if they are encouraged to work with other students whose learning style is different from theirs (Kolb 1976). Professors can help their students to understand the value of working with others who are different learners. For example, a Converger (hands-on learner) who likes to
work out problems alone could be encouraged to work with a more "people-oriented" individual like a Diverger. Of course, this strategy presumes that the professor knows his (her) students well enough to encourage interaction among different learners. Kolb's LSI could be administered in class, but to be practical, faculty could use two simpler strategies. First, professors should encourage students to develop and strengthen their own learning style. Second, professors can encourage students to be flexible in their learning, which will help each student to better cope with all kinds of people, problems, and experiences. Even though it is difficult and challenging, working with other individuals who have different learning styles will help the marketing student to be able to be adaptable in all kinds of changing situations.

Future research in the area of student learning style in marketing education must test the empirical relationships between student learning style and response to various marketing education approaches.

REFERENCES


McCarthy, Bernice (1980), The 4MAT System: Teaching to Learning Styles with Right/Left Mode Techniques, Barrington, IL: EXCEL Inc.


---

**FIGURE 1**
THE LEARNING PROCESS

---

**FIGURE 2**
KOLB'S LEARNING STYLE DIMENSIONS

---
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEARNING STYLES</th>
<th>Traditional Lecture</th>
<th>Feedback Lecture**</th>
<th>Group Project Method</th>
<th>Guest Speakers</th>
<th>Individual Case Analysis</th>
<th>Group Case Analysis</th>
<th>Games and Simulations</th>
<th>Field Trips</th>
<th>Videotapes and Films</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DIVERGER (Type 1)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSIMILATOR (Type 2)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONVERGER (Type 3)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCOMODATOR (Type 4)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Students would benefit from this approach

**All learner types are checked for this approach (Gottko and Osterman, 1987)