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## Reading your professors: A survival skill

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■ Effective study skills such as time management and increasing recall capacity may now be joined by a newly sharpened tool based on Anthony Gregorc's mind styles research. This tool was once nebulously referred to as "psyching-out the prof," and we learned it by osmosis, gossip, and experience.

Today's college students are also aware that whenever possible they should choose professors whose teaching styles complement their own learning styles. Like us, however, they often base their decisions on first impressions or on the advice of fellow students. Most aren't even sure of their own learning needs, let alone the styles of others.

Gregorc's theory of mind styles can provide some direction for students whose learning preferences do not fit the traditional lecture-textbook-and-three-exams approach. Some professors are uncomfortable with a traditional approach, too, and these persons may offer students alternatives for learning and for demonstrating what they have learned. This article

will provide a brief description of Gregorc's mind styles and suggest applications of his ideas to study skills courses.

### **Gregorc's mind styles research**

Gregorc believes that within each human being is a blend of universal qualities, which are held in common with all other human beings, as well as physical, emotional, and mental qualities unique to the individual. The universal and unique qualities are either promoted or frustrated during the individual's interaction with the outside world. Gregorc's mind styles were developed to enable individuals to interact more successfully with the outside world by understanding their own and others' styles.

Gregorc's four styles are based on a Mediation Ability Theory which states "The human mind has channels through which it receives and expresses information most efficiently and effectively." The two types of mediation abilities revealed by the Gregorc Style Delineator are perception and ordering.

Perceptual abilities are the ways in which we interpret incoming data. They are described on a continuum with abstractness at one end and concreteness at the other. The quality of abstractness enables us to understand information through reason and to deal intuitively with subjective concepts and feelings. It allows us to perceive information that is invisible to our physical senses. The quality of concreteness enables us to understand information gathered by our senses and to apply this information directly to the physical world.

Ordering abilities are the ways in which we arrange, prioritize, and use information. These abilities emerge as

qualities of sequence and randomness.

Sequencing abilities enable us to organize data in a linear, step-by-step fashion. They enable us to express ourselves in a precise, progressive, and logical manner with each bit of new information linked carefully to those preceding it.

Randomness inclines a mind to organize information in a more net-like fashion, with each bit related to others in a myriad of ways. This quality enables us to deal with diverse elements and activities simultaneously and holistically.

Gregorc contends that each human being exhibits both abstract/concrete abilities and sequential/random qualities, thus demonstrating processing abilities held in common with all other human beings. Beyond these common attributes, however, each of us tends to prefer some channels over others, and we orient ourselves accordingly.

The four mind styles which emerged from coupling perceptual and ordering abilities were designated concrete sequential, abstract sequential, abstract random, and concrete random. While we are able to use all four qualities, most of us prefer one or two channels over the others, and we rely most heavily on those abilities in our interactions with the outside world.

To study each style in depth, the reader should refer to Gregorc's work (Gregorc, 1982; Gregorc, 1985). For our purposes we will discuss each style only in relation to the following categories: thinking processes, focus of attention, creativity, use of language, and major intolerances. These categories were chosen because of their direct relationship to college teaching and learning.

By thinking processes, Gregorc

means the activity of examining whatever happens to attract attention regardless of results or specific content. Focus of attention is the center of a person's concentration, concern, respect and, at times, identity. Creativity refers to the ability and process used to bring an idea into existence. Use of language refers to a preference for specific words or ways of stating ideas in order to communicate with others. Major intolerances are those attitudes, behaviors and environmental conditions which one cannot allow to continue. In the following sections, each mind style will be described in relation to these categories.

### **Applying Gregorc's mind styles**

- *The Concrete Sequential (CS) style*

Instructors whose style is predominantly CS process information in a methodological and deliberate way. They look for physical reasons and external causes of events and ideas. They appreciate and need logic, are well organized, and continuously strive for perfection. They are sensitive to details and may exhibit "photographic" memories. Dominant CS instructors focus their attention on material reality. They excel in making, collecting, labeling, categorizing, and owning objects of value and beauty. They are rarely creative in terms of invention or originality, but they are good producers of a prototype using someone else's idea, and they can duplicate to perfection. They use language literally, labeling and describing exactly. They prefer concise, clear prose with few complex sentences or figures of speech. In general, dominant CS professors abhor messiness, procrastination, excuses, and disorganization.

To cope successfully with professors who use a CS style in the classroom,

students should arrive promptly and pay attention to all deadlines. Lectures tend to be highly structured with detail built upon detail until the big picture emerges, so students need to outline textbook and lecture information and review their notes before each class. There is little time during class periods for questions, debate, or discussion, so any questions students pose should ask for specific information, be well thought out and succinctly stated.

These professors are likely to appreciate students sharing practical applications of ideas presented in class. Tests will be taken verbatim from class lecture and reading, so attendance is very important. Attentive students in the front rows are looked upon more favorably than those relaxing near the door.

- *The Abstract Sequential (AS) style*

Dominant abstract sequentials are characterized in the image of the "absent minded professor." Their world is dominated by the abstract nonphysical world of theories and mental constructs. Their thinking processes are based on intellect and the laws of logic which allow them to outline, analyze, correlate, and compare data. They may appear flighty as their minds jump quickly from one idea to another, sorting and categorizing as they go.

Their attention is focused primarily on knowledge and understanding. They often collect books and display diplomas or awards as symbols of knowledge. They value detailed information and respect extensive documentation. The creativity of dominant abstract sequentials reveals itself in their ability to synthesize diverse ideas and produce a new concept or conclusion based on careful investigation. They are often able to express themselves equally well through spoken or

written word.

Professors who use an AS style in the classroom enjoy polysyllabic words which accurately express their abstract world. They love language and have a remarkable ability to decode and use words for progressively specific purposes. They appreciate students who redefine abstract words in order to clarify and specify their meaning. Generally these people dislike sentimentality or hazy thinking which leads to inaccurate conclusions, so students must study their notes and texts in depth, searching for the relationships among superordinate ideas and supporting material.

These instructors will test not only the individual theories presented, but how they relate to one another and what impact they might have on related ideas. Tests will require students to draw specific information from the reading to support their theories. Main ideas, summaries, and logical conclusions will be emphasized. Research papers may also be required since these professors tend to be experts in their disciplines. Students should choose an issue that allows for debate, thoroughly research the issue, and then take a position which they can support by logical evidence.

- *The Abstract Random (AR) style*

Dominant abstract randoms live in a nonphysical world of feelings and emotions. Information, impressions, and perceptions are absorbed holistically by abstract randoms and evaluated through a screen of personal and emotional experiences. Their attention is focused on relationships among people, ideas, places, and things. They are concerned with the teacher-student relationship, especially if it has personal significance to them.

Dominant AR's express creativity by

revealing the essence or beauty of an object or event to others. They are facilitators for understanding and experiencing the unusual or hidden meaning. Professors who tend toward abstract random behaviors in the classroom appreciate metaphoric language and the images it can create. They communicate through symbol, color, gesture, and humor. They speak in extensive description but often interrupt sentences to jump to another idea.

These teachers encourage their students to experience for themselves. They do not appreciate students who question their insights or ask them to justify or explain the logic in their arguments. They feel that study and investigation are valuable only if they have personal meaning.

In the AR classroom, it is important for students to summarize each day's material, whether written or oral, looking for overall ideas or recurring themes in the reading and discussions. These themes may never be stated explicitly by the professor, so students must be able to infer them from class discussion and activities and infuse them with "personal meaning." Dominant AR professors will view this process as genuine learning.

Professors who use an AR style in the classroom value student participation, so this is a good time for students to speak up and risk that crazy idea. They are also very sensitive to body language, so students should pay attention, lean forward, and smile. Deadlines are usually negotiable with these professors, as long as they feel students are sincere in their needs.

- *The Concrete Random (CR) style*

People who use a concrete random style in their classrooms employ the physical world as a reference point in

their thinking processes, while they search out the nature and significance of things. They look for the unifying idea or coherent principle that makes something function in the real world. They are insightful, moving from fact to theory quickly, sometimes unable to explain the logical steps in between.

As teachers, dominant CR's are more concerned with processes, applications, and attitudes than they are with facts. They are creative people whose products are usually original, unique, and not easily explained. They are glib conversationalists who use language freely but find it limiting. They assign several meanings to individual words and may jump from one idea to the next with dramatic animation and sweeping gestures. The CR thinker is often impatient with people who are unwilling to change or consider options.

As professors, CR thinkers appreciate the students who are willing to risk trying a new idea or to investigate an untried method. It may be difficult for some students to follow CR lectures; tools such as mind mapping may be useful for helping them to see the structure behind the professors' examples.

CR professors appreciate attentive students who laugh at their jokes and

applaud their efforts to make sense out of chaos. Students will usually be asked to produce something which demonstrates or illustrates how the ideas they have been studying might be applied in the real world. A new product or a new insight will be rewarded more quickly than accurate replication.

### **Mind styles: A blend**

It is important to point out that no one falls into a single style category but rather represents a blend of styles. Instead of discovering one style which each professor typifies, students will often find a combination of two, or perhaps three, styles for some professors. Students may be well advised to choose a professor whose dominant style complements their learning needs, especially if the subject matter is new territory or has caused difficulty in the past. However, since this is not always manageable or appropriate, students can learn to use the coping strategies described in this article to help them succeed with professors who conform to other styles.

### **References**

- Gregorc, Anthony F. *An Adult's Guide to Style*. Maynard, ME: Gabriel Systems, 1982.  
Gregorc, Anthony F. *Inside Styles: Beyond the Basics*. Maynard, ME: Gabriel Systems, 1985.

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## **Good book on words**

*Mysteries & Histories*, by the editors of the American Heritage Dictionaries (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986) is "half a cut above most books on words written for popular audiences," according to *The Editorial Eye* (January 1987, p. 7). *Mysteries & Histories* takes language scholarship seriously "without flaunting its erudition, which is considerable."

The volume features a wide left margin with entry words in red, and it is illustrated with woodcuts.