

"I have this one student who comes up to me after every class to hold forth. I mean, the guy must just love to hear himself talk! He acts like he's arguing, but he's not really arguing - sometimes he's just repeating the ideas the class has just discussed. I find it annoying - almost arrogant - as if he has to come up to me and display his mastery of the material..."

Does this sound familiar? That sort of student, whose classroom experience seems incomplete until he or she can spend those five or ten minutes telling the lesson back to the teacher, may try our patience. But don't be too quick to judge this behavior as arrogant or argumentative. It may be that the student's classroom experience really is incomplete, without that chance to talk it out.

That may even have something to do with the behavior of that know-it-all student who **just won't shut up!** There could be more motivating those students than a mere desire to make your life a living hell. They might be people who learn best by talking.

Teachers (and education researchers) have long known that different students have different **styles of learning**. The researchers tend to call them "learning strategies" and define them in long and psychologically significant words. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but to make use of these useful concepts one is forced to delve into cognitive research. Teachers, however, can do a bit of common-sense research of their own, and benefit from the insight that different students have different methods for processing ideas. A good beginning would be to identify these four broad categories of learning styles: **listening, talking, reading and doing**.

**Listening** is the most familiar; indeed it is the basis of the classic lecture-hall format of a classroom. Many people actually do process information quite effectively in this manner. (I, for example, find I retain less if I try to take notes in class - go figure...) Listeners are also the easiest to teach - all we need (beyond our understanding of the subject matter) is a clear voice and gift of gab! One problem that can arise, though, is that those who want to learn by listening resent the disruptions of those who do not!

For it is true, like it or not, that some students learn by **talking**. There is often something in the act of expression that makes difficult concepts come clear - perhaps because of a perception that talking is more fun than thinking! In any case, if one is to talk intelligently about ideas, one **must** think. Perhaps we teachers shouldn't be quite so hard on those motor-mouthed students of ours. Isn't it, after all, a truism that one never fully learns a topic until one is called upon to talk about it?

Like listening, **reading** is right in line with classical paradigms. The "information revolution" notwithstanding, human society has not yet beaten the book as a versatile

## TEACHERS' CORNER



by Lindy Davies

and comprehensive means of purveying ideas. But perhaps a little more can be said, because the textbook is not the only thing our students need to read. Some people are adept at processing information **spatially**. For them, diagrams and charts are indispensable. (Incidentally, the teacher need not be good at drawing to use diagrams effectively. I remember one professor whose chalkboard after a lecture would look like a work by Jackson Pollock. But **during** the lecture, none of his students doubted the relevance of all his squiggles and slashes!)

Last but not least, there are those who learn by **doing**. For many students, too much reliance on abstract reasoning can be irritating or confusing. They are the ones who will key into an activity or a simulation. They aren't unable to grasp abstract ideas; they simply have an easier time of it if they can see the ideas in context. Indeed, they have an advantage over the abstract reasoners in being able to see principles behind action. They come up with the best examples, relating ideas to real-life events.

Any class you teach will have a mix of these four types of learners. In the standard classroom situation, the listeners will do just fine - it is practically impossible to slight them, because of the overwhelming practicality of public speaking in this context - but the talkers and doers and spatially-minded folk will feel frustrated. Students, however, tend not to give much thought to theories of learning styles & such. They simply feel frustrated. Other pupils listen attentively and understand the lecture; why can't they? We owe them a bit of consideration.

No single technique will suit all the students in a class. The best way to raise interest and lower frustration is to present a mix of diagrams, activities, simulations and discussions. (*Next time: mixing it up in P & P, or, 1001 ways to teach the Law of Rent!*)