

THE NATURE OF PREFERENCE

There are some who believe that preferences can be easily changed and that those who dislike something can be made to like it by using behavior modification techniques. In higher education this is expressed as attempts to *improve* or *gap-fill* what is seen as a deficiency in a learner's skill set. Our work with modality preferences using the VARK questionnaire is not supportive of these ideas as we believe that a learner's preferences for the ways in which he/she takes in and expresses their learning are difficult to modify or change.

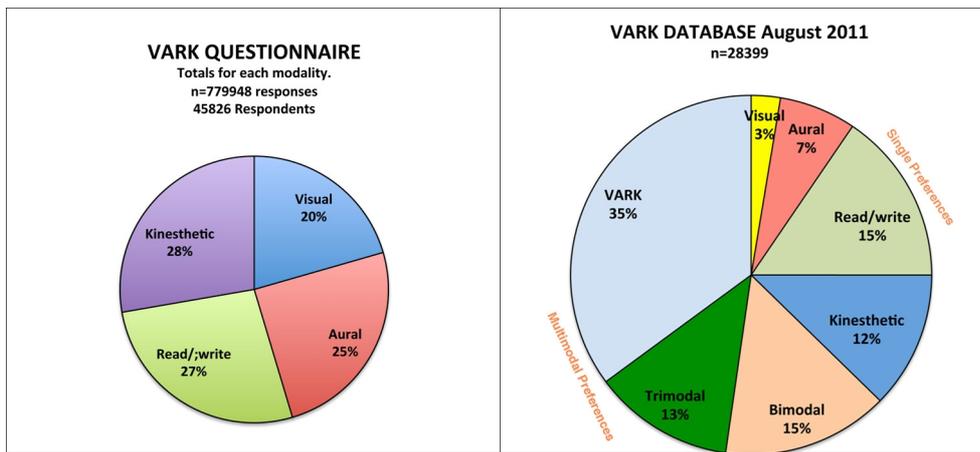
Before examining learning preferences in particular there are some aspects of preferences in general that are interesting. Where do they come from? Our preferences are built upon our life experiences and are added to or modified as we meet new situations. Some become quite hardened and become part of our definition of who we are while others can switch and change quickly. Our age, the sum total of our previous experiences, our ability to act on a choice, the options ahead of us, our different sensing abilities are some of those variables that affect our decision to prefer something and dislike others.

Our preferences are diverse and innumerable. We have views upon purchasing food, wine, clothes, houses and cars. We like and dislike character traits in others and build or discard relationships because of the strength of some of those. We belong to organizations, worship in different religions, obey or disobey authorities and use our preferences for learning, exchanging and mastering skills, reading, relaxing and achieving our goals in work, sport, art and music or...

The characteristics of preferences are also interesting. Some of our preferences will insist that they be always used, others that we always avoid. Some will want to be used first or last while other preferences may be so strong that they become the main or only criterion that we reference for a decision or a particular behavior – a critical factor. Our preferences may at times be regular or random, used alone or linked to other preferences. Many will lead to a behavior; an action or an avoidance of action. Some preferences are forced upon us. Coeliacs have little choice but to avoid certain foods and diabetics also have forced choices if they want to stay healthy. On the other hand, vegetarians and vegans make choices that become equally rigid for some.

VARK is about modality preferences or the preferences that we each have for taking in and expressing our learning. How we process information inside our brain is not something that the VARK questionnaire explores although there is, and will be, considerable work done on that aspect by neuroscientists that may lead to a deeper understanding of preferences in future. The questionnaire uses observations of behaviors, concrete incidents that respondents can recall or imagine and identify. In that sense VARK is indicative rather than diagnostic. And it is focussed on only one of many elements of a *learning style* although many prefer to call VARK a learning style instrument. VARK is not, as it has nothing to record about a learner's preference for choosing to learn early in the morning or in large groups or by using mobile phones or about the other 20 or 30 elements that make up a learning style.

The four VARK-defined modalities are not evenly spread. The statistics indicate that respondents do not live in a *Visual* world; at least not the visual world defined in the VARK model. Of course, VARK statistics come from a biased sample of those who go online (computing skills) and are students and teachers so that is skewing the results. However, the graphs below show that any attempt to even-up the proportions is unlikely to happen quickly. Educators have a difficult task if they want all their students to have well-rounded modality preferences.



So do our preferences change? Yes. Many of them do, especially in early age but some are very resistant to change. If you have a distaste for broccoli or right-wing politicians that may determine a number of actions in a restaurant or a polling booth. In an interesting exchange of ideas a prestigious medical school requested assistance with their curriculum for producing doctors. The issue that they faced was that although they had very smart and hard-working students achieving excellent examination results, some of them, when faced with real patients, had little preference for working with sick people. Their preference was to work with healthy people. One could say that funds earmarked for their education was being wasted. It was difficult to convince them that they should like sick people. This raises the difference between skills and preferences.

Skills and abilities may be developed by education and life experience but they do not always match preferences. It is quite possible that a person may be very good at something but not enjoy doing it. Conversely a student may enjoy some aspect of learning but not achieve the skill levels required. A four-part diagram without fixed boundaries results (below).

		Strengths, skills and abilities	
		<i>I am good at it.</i>	<i>I am not good at it.</i>
P R E F E R E N C E S	<i>I like it.</i>	Go to it! Continue with your present strategies. Enhance them.	Develop it. Practice it. Use it. Try it.
	<i>I don't like it.</i>	Leave it till later. Motivation will void it.	Discard it. Don't go there! Use your other strengths.

The table indicates that if a student does not like something (preference) and is not good at it then efforts should be made in other directions. Those who use VARK quickly find out what they like. They have to make their own assessment of whether they are good at it (skill levels) but it seems pointless to spend time on areas of study where you have neither the interest or their aptitude to succeed. Those who advocate that students should fill the deficiency gaps in their preferences and work on the modalities that are their weakest, are obviously not paying for the education of those students. While a well-rounded. Multimodal student may be the aim for some pundits, those who know VARK well and use it wisely advocate staying with your strengths and your preferences rather than working on your weaknesses and things you dislike. Any gaps may be open to development at some later stage but most students have enough to focus on at a stressful time in their lives without accepting an additional development challenge.

VARK proposes that students learn in different ways and that all can be successful if they use their preferences and not somebody else's. Certainly they may have to express their learning in ways decided by their society (written examinations, oral vivas or practical tests) but the strategies they use for their learning should be based on their preferences and VARK can help with that.