Do Teachers Have Preferences?

An unpublished article by Neil Fleming, designer of the VARK Questionnaire. (June 2015)

Of course. Teachers have preferences for the clothes they wear, the food they eat and their choices for communicating. They also have preferences for the way in which they learn. But their preferences for learning as indicated by the VARK questionnaire may or may not influence the way that they teach. So there is no support for the proposition that a teacher who prefers to learn using VARK's Read/write strategies (text, books, lists, word, diaries…) will use those same strategies to teach. That teacher may use a whole variety of teaching strategies to inspire their students. There is an understandable gap between how we prefer to learn and how we prefer to teach.

How can we detect teachers' preferences for teaching methods?

There is no easily found questionnaire or information about this aspect of teaching. The choices that teachers make when they enter an online environment or a classroom are based on a whole range of variables ranging from how they feel that day to how they were taught when they were learning and includes the multitude of accessible resources. It is a difficult task to unravel how teachers teach or even to assess in VARK terms the methods they are using. After observing 9000 lessons in New Zealand High Schools and another 11 years working with teachers at Lincoln University in New Zealand it would be reasonable to expect that a methodology for identifying the teacher's methods and the range of appeal for students would have arisen. Not so.

Surely teaching methods can be categorised according to VARK's four modalities?

Maybe, but it is a very skilled job. While it may seem obvious that a teacher who **reads** a definition and its explanations to a class is colloquially a *"Read/write| "* teacher using *Read/write* methods, that could be quite incorrect or only partially true. What the teachers is reading could have been written in colloquial or conversational language that would seem more like an *Auditory* strategy according to VARK. Or the reading may include many real-life experiences, case studies or examples well within the grasp of the students, in which case it would be classified as a *Kinesthetic* strategy in VARK's terms. It is the content not the mode that should determine the category that we assign when we watch a teacher teach. That requires very skilled observation.

So, can a teacher speak Kinesthetically or write Aurally or read a Visual description?

Yes. The term *unimodal* is often used for something that uses only one of the four VARK modes but there are very few instances where a teacher could be teaching using only one mode. Yet some research projects that use VARK's terminology and concepts try to design their approach so that a teacher is asked *"to teach using only one mode."* That is unlikely to have any useful results.

Why not teach a concept in four ways?

It is possible to teach a concept emphasising each of the four VARK modalities but a teacher who do so risk boring the students who "*get"* the concept using only one of the ways. But which one, will be different for different students. If the teachers used strategies in this order viz: mainly Visual, mainly Read/write and mainly Kinesthetic the students who preferred using graphs, diagrams, charts and maps (Visual) would be *"absent"* for the presentation of the others.

Does that mean that the concept of *"matching"* a teacher's methods to students' learning preferences is impossible?

Yes. Imagine a class of ten students where the students' preferences for **learning** have been indicated by the VARK questionnaire as follows: Among their four individual VARK scores, one student has a strong *Visual* preference, one has a strong *Aural* preference, one has a strong *Read/write* preference, another a strong *Kinesthetic* preference and the remaining six have these VARK preferences:

Student No.	VARK Preference	Student No.	VARK Preference
Student 5	*VA - Visual and Aural*	*Student 8*	*VARK Type Two*
Student 6	*ARK - Aural, Read/write and Kinesthetic*	*Student 9*	*VARK Type Two*
Student 7	*VARK Type One*	*Student 10*	*VARK Type Two*

Note: This allocation mirrors the VARK database where 65-70% are multimodal and the remainder have a single strong preference among their four VARK scores. All participants, of course have a score for each their four preferences. None are unimodal!

Any teacher with this class (online or face-to-face) will have some difficulties trying to match their teaching to each student's so-called needs. No matter what teaching strategy they use they will annoy some of the students some of the time. One would hope, not all of the students all of the time. If they choose to use diagrams, graphs and charts for most of the time (*Visual* strategies) they will, of necessity, be speaking and answering questions (*Aural*) and if they elaborate using examples that draw on the students' own experiences they will be using *Kinesthetic* strategies. That will appeal to three of the students with a strong single preference for V, A and K and for Student 5 and partially for Students 6, and 7. The remainder of the students, especially students 8, 9 and 10, will want something else or something more. Asking a teacher to teach to all the preferences in a class is asking that teacher to be a chameleon and no matter what strategies are chosen there will be some students who miss out on what they say they need. All that we can ask teachers to do is to offer varied strategies that use the four VARK modalities at some stage in every three or four sessions. Not more.

Does that mean that teachers are <u>not</u> responsible for students' learning?
Yes. Teachers are responsible for teaching as best they can and in a varied way. Students are responsible for their own learning. Regardless of the strategies that teachers use it is the responsibility of the students to *"bend"* the intake from the teacher into their own way of learning. And that means using their preferences. Students who find academic success difficult may have problems, of motivation or persistence or language or culture or they may be using the wrong strategies for their learning. It is of little use for a student who has a zero score for their Read/write preference to write longs lists of what has to be remembered or to spend hours reading and re-reading chapters or writing important definitions ten times. *Use your own VARK preferences not somebody else's.*

Was VARK designed only for students?
VARK was originally designed to help students. There was no intention of challenging teachers to teach everything four ways. The challenge for teachers, a by-product of VARK, was to ensure that in any three or four teaching sessions they vary their teaching strategies to provide more variety. That should reduce the number of students who claimed that teacher as helpful for their learning.

So what students are at risk in our classrooms?
All of them to some extent, but especially those who are categorised as VARK Type Two – those with total scores for the 16 questions of 30+ summing all four modes. They need all four modes to be used either by the teacher or through their own efforts. If they succeed in that quest they have the potential to do well but if any mode is missing they will need help to get that *"complete"* understanding. They may be like a glass half full – unsatisfied and lacking in confidence to express their learning when there are substantial gaps.

So what students are likely to do well?
Those who have learned how to use their own preferences to take in the information they want and that they can use. They may be skilled at bending the information intake into the modes that they prefer. They may *translate* the graph that the teacher uses (or that is in the book) into an oral explanation of what the graph shows or means (*bending* V into A). They may listen to the teacher's vivid examples and bend those into their own notes of definitions and causes. (*bending* K into R/w).

What research do we need?
We need research that investigates the successful students to understand what and how they learn. Attribution is a difficult task and we seldom know when and how we learned something or what our learning can be attributed to. That is a rich research field. How do we know what we know, awaits help from neural science but what students do and how they succeed in academic study can be done now using straightforward social science techniques. We need less of *"blame the teacher for my lack of learning"* or *"Why can't the teacher teach me the way I want to learn."*