

## The learning modes of an incarcerated population

*As prisons become increasingly overcrowded and correctional budgets continue to shrink, many suggest that improved inmate education within the prison system might be an effective way to keep inmates from "coming back."*

*The typical approach to inmate education has historically been very individual-focused. The approach has been to test inmates, identify specific deficiencies and design educational plans to overcome academic weaknesses.*

*Prison educational systems have also tended to use a student-centred instructional style because inmates can, for the most part, freely enter and exit prison educational systems. Further, inmates tend to view the teacher as their only source of information because of the authoritarian environment in which they live. This is accentuated by the fact that small prison student populations allow for little freedom of choice among teachers and classes.*

*However, is the student-centred instructional style compatible with inmate learning styles? Learning style theorists contend that academic achievement is enhanced when a student is matched with a compatible teaching style. In fact, it has been argued that optimal learning occurs when learning and instructional styles are matched. Understanding the conditions under which inmates learn could, therefore, lead to improvements in prison education and reduced recidivism.*

*Studies have investigated the learning style preferences of college students, but there has been little consideration thus far of whether the learning styles of inmates are compatible with the instructional styles of correctional educators. General studies have shown that a discrepancy between instructional and learning styles can lead to dissatisfaction or maladjustment. Therefore, the wrong mix of learning and instructional styles might not only fail to help reduce recidivism - it could conceivably worsen the problem.*

*This article summarizes a recent research study that attempted to address this concern by pin pointing the mode of learning of inmates. The purpose of the study was simply to gather data on the mode of learning of inmates to provide a basis for further research.* Methodology The study was based on the hypothesis that inmates would prefer a method of obtaining new information. The four basic modes of learning tested were listening, reading, iconic and direct experience (see Table 1). The study also considered inmate levels of schooling (high school, college or none) and major offence type.

The study sample consisted of 120 male inmates at the Utah State Prison, who were selected to participate in a recidivism-reduction program called Project Horizons. Inmates chosen for this program cannot be sex offenders, intellectually handicapped or suffering from mental health problems. They must also have a parole date within a maximum of three years and a minimum of 10 months.

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**Table 1**

<b>Modes of Learning</b>	
<b>Mode of learning</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Listening	Obtaining new information by listening to such things as lectures, speeches and tapes
Reading	Examining written information and reading such things as pamphlets and textbooks
Iconic	Interpreting such things as graphs, charts, slides and illustrations
Direct experience	Hands-on situations, such as labs and field trips

The instrument used was Canfield's Learning Styles Inventory. This instrument is a highly structured questionnaire that breaks the motivational component into four major categories and a learning typology. The instrument is a pencil-and-paper self-report inventory for either individual or group administration. It presents 30 statements and asks respondents to rank their responses to the statements according to how well the responses describe their reactions or feelings.

The inventory was given to each inmate, along with a letter of introduction. The inmates were asked not to reveal their names, but were asked to indicate whether they were attending high school or college at the time of their offence and the nature of their offence. Frequency distribution and statistical analysis were performed on all inventory scores to determine whether a particular mode of learning predominated, or was correlated with, student status or a particular type of offence. Key results The frequency distribution for the four methods of obtaining new information revealed that the inmates had a significantly weak preference for the iconic mode of learning (more than one standard deviation below the average of the t-scores). of the 43 returned inventories, 22 reflected a weak preference for iconic learning (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

<b>Inmate Preferences for Modes of Learning (43 Inmates)</b>			
<b>Mode of Learning</b>	<b>Weak preference</b>	<b>Average preference</b>	<b>Strong preference</b>
Listening	5%	72%	23%
Reading	9%	61%	30%
Iconic	51%	35%	14%
Direct experience	23%	63%	14%

Note: Weak preference is more than one standard deviation below the average t-score. Average preference is within one standard deviation of the average t-score. Score preference is more than one standard deviation above the average t-score.

This suggests that most inmates preferred the other three modes of obtaining new information to iconic learning. There were no significant differences between the other three modes of learning.

Interestingly, cross tabulations between mode of learning and student status revealed that none of the inmates with some level of college education had a weak preference for listening or a strong preference for direct experience. A cross tabulation between mode of learning and type of offence revealed no significant differences, probably because of the small number of respondents compared with the number of offences. Discussion The clearest result is that more than half of the respondents rated iconic learning (interpreting slides, graphs and charts) as their least preferred method of obtaining new information. This should certainly be considered by prison educators when determining how to teach certain material.

As for student status, inmates with some level of college education may have shown average or strong preferences for listening because the dominant college teaching style is lecturing. Generally, college-level classes require students to gather new information by listening. As such, college students probably either have no general dislike for listening as a mode of learning or have adapted to it to the point where listening is, at worst, not their least preferred mode of learning.

Further, no inmates with some level of college education had a strong preference for direct experience as a mode of learning. This could also be because college students obtain information primarily by listening to lectures. College students may have adjusted to being presented with lectures or readings on new information before being permitted hands-on experience.

A chi-square test on the four modes of learning revealed that inmate preferences for reading (7.97,  $p < .05$ ) and iconic (44.38,  $p < .001$ ) modes of learning were significantly different from preferences found in the standardization population. This implies that inmates are significantly different from the general population as to their preferences for reading and iconic means of obtaining new information.

Some cautions are warranted, however, about the results of this study. First, it must be remembered that the study was based on a relatively small sample, although the return rate was greater than 35%. Further, consideration must also be given to the possibility that the inmates responded dishonestly to questions, to the potential impact of Utah's distinct religious ethic, and to the potential distorting effects of various socio-economic, racial, regional or other variables.

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