

# The Individualization of Education: WebCT and Learning Styles in Language Instruction

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Classroom restraints of time, space and resources have always burdened the language teacher. This has required him or her to cut back on various activities that could help students in the language learning process. In the traditional classroom, students are required to learn at the same pace and teachers must use the same teaching style or activity to reach all students. These limitations can put individual learners at a disadvantage since they might not be exposed to the style that would be most beneficial to them. Learning styles have been classified in different ways, and one well-known classification is Colin Rose's (1985) Visual/Auditory/Kinesthetic system. Visual Learners prefer to learn with visual reinforcement such as charts and diagrams. Auditory Learners prefer to learn by listening, while Kinesthetic Learners prefer to learn by doing. The student who learns primarily via the auditory style would prefer model-based activities; the visual learner may want more reading and paper-based practice activities, while the kinesthetic learner would prefer more role play and simulation. Honey and Mumford (1992), on the other hand, break preferred learning styles down into four groups:

- Theoretical Learners prefer to learn by reading and listening to the experts.
- Pragmatic Learners like to be able to see the practical application of theory. They like to use deductive reasoning to focus on problems and they prefer situations where there is a single correct answer or solution.
- Reflective Learners tend to be imaginative and emotional and work well in group discussions.
- Activist Learners are action-oriented and learn by doing.

Because of classroom constraints, not all learning styles can be accommodated simultaneously. The fundamental problem is that even if a teacher can briefly touch on each style in a given class period, specific needs of individual students are not always adequately addressed.

Web-based or web-supplemented instruction can offer a solution to this problem by considering and accommodating all learning styles, and individualizing the learning experience.

While there are many technologies to choose from, course management systems are becoming a practical and feasible choice for many institutions around the country. These systems, more aptly called on-line educational environments since course management system has a teacher-centered, business like connotation, offer many potential benefits for language teachers and learners. One of the leading on-line educational environments on the market today is WebCT.

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WebCT, like all on-line educational environments, has the ability to cater to different learning styles through the use of various on-line tools, or modules. Each module can address a different learning style so that students learn in the way most beneficial to them. WebCT has the basic modules that all on-line educational environments have, such as a module to house content, a chat room, discussion room, grade book, and so on. Most obviously beneficial to language teachers and language learners are, of course, the communication tools. The asynchronous communication tool allows students time to think through an answer, practice it, check it and then post their work. Other students or the instructor can then respond. The time and thought involved here is impossible to duplicate during limited classroom time. Beyond communication modules, there are other modules that offer great potential to the language-learning student.

In WebCT, teachers can go beyond the more typical, traditional classroom-based "lessons" by attaching various modules to each unit of language being targeted. In a traditional classroom setting, the teacher would introduce the targeted point, talk about the grammar of the point, have the students do some communicative practice activities, and then perhaps assess learning via a quiz or test. Unfortunately, this method of instruction, although well rounded and thorough, benefits only those students whose particular learning style is addressed by each section of instruction. However, if an on-line educational

environment is used to enhance learning, various learning styles can be addressed:

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- The target language point can be presented via the video module, which addresses those who learn kinesthetically or theoretically, or it can be presented more traditionally in written format, which would benefit verbal learners.
- Audio examples are available for aural learners. These examples allow for individualized repetition.
- Students can test their understanding of the target language via the self-test, which helps students who learn via immediate feedback, a luxury not always available in the classroom. This would benefit those who are pragmatic learners.
- Authentic communicative practice is available through the communication tools, either via email, threaded discussion or chat. Students have the ability to communicate in the target language for "real-world" meaning, rather than for isolated practice. This kind of learning benefits students who learn through communication and practice and would be particularly suited for reflective learners; Hyperlinks can be used for access to target language web sites for further study, practice and information, thus making available cultural and language resources from around the world. This is excellent for activist learners.
- A built-in glossary is available via hyper-linked words to give students immediate and continual access to target vocabulary.
- Students can work together via email to create a presentation based on the target point, which can be uploaded and shared among classmates, an activity well-suited to reflective learners.
- A traditional quiz module is available for formal assessment and for the pragmatic learner.

Unlike other on-line education environments, WebCT does not restrict what an instructor is able to do at any given time. An instructor is not limited to teach by only a linear content module, but can connect video, audio, self-test, quizzes, hyperlinks or any supplementary material to that page to better accommodate all learners and their styles. What this means is that for the instructor who is a skilled technology user, there are

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no limitations on what he or she can do. Although WebCT is easy to learn and use for the language instructor who has basic technology skills, it is also a program that computer-savvy instructors can use to implement technologically advanced instructional tools. WebCT allows for complex file structuring and linking, which in turn allows the instructor to do almost anything, technologically speaking, within the environment. The instructor can incorporate into WebCT complex JavaScript activities, java applets, multimedia files from a CD-ROM, pre-existing course Web sites, publisher-produced sites, and, most importantly, complex, non-linear pages. Since not all students learn in a linear fashion, the more creative an instructor can be, the more learning styles are addressed amongst the student population.

One of the great benefits of WebCT for language teachers and learners are the Language Plug-ins that allow the courses in WebCT to be displayed in a different language. A WebCT Language Plug-in is a set of library files that allow WebCT to be displayed in some of the major world languages. Plug-ins are currently available in French, German and Spanish. The language plug-in does not translate the content uploaded by the instructor, but rather the entire interface of WebCT is in the target language, which enables students to learn the target language by necessity — they must use it to navigate WebCT.

Across campuses nation-wide, Web-based and Web-supplemented courses are becoming more and more common. This phenomenon is affecting all involved in higher education. Faculty are trying to adjust to the new American college student — the student who is demanding to learn and be taught on-line. Administrators are talking about “shifting demographics,” “overburdened faculty resources,” and “increased competition.” Technical support staff are dealing with the daunting issues of how to train faculty and maintain resources. Technology is thought to be the answer to attracting and retaining students and faculty, expanding campus boundaries and reducing costs. While technology may be solving these issues, the real benefit is not being addressed. While there is talk of a “paradigm shift,” the shift is misunderstood. The shift is not in numbers or retention, or even student demand. The shift is that for the first time, language learning and learning in all forms is no longer restricted to the

## *Bibliography*

classroom. On-line educational environments such as WebCT have enabled educators to cater to individual student learning styles, making language learning more practical, realistic, enjoyable and successful.

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