BOOK REVIEWS


For anyone interested in discovering what a group of well-informed psychologists believe about styles of thinking, of learning, and of cognition, this book is a good place to start. The volume is composed of ten chapters written by a total of 16 authors from universities in Australia, England, Hong Kong, Russia, Scotland, Sweden, and the United States, so the book offers a diversity of perspectives on the subject of intellectual styles. The first chapter orients readers to the central topic by means of “A Capsule History of Theory and Research on Styles.” The chapter’s authors (Robert J. Sternberg of Yale University and Elena L. Grigorenko of Yale and Moscow State University) propose that abilities identify only a part of why people differ in their performances. Much, if not all, of the remaining unidentified part can be explained in terms of styles (sometimes called approaches) which are “habitual patterns and preferred ways of doing something (e.g. thinking, learning, teaching) that are consistent over long periods of time and across many areas of activity” (p. 2). Hence, an ability is what a person can do; a style is how the person prefers to do it. The chapter then continues with descriptions of 12 prominent theories of style, past and present, as a preview to what readers will meet in the book’s remaining pages. Each of the next eight chapters is written by one or more authors who discuss matters of style from a variety of vantage points.

Renzulli and Dai (Chapter 2) assert that the act of learning involves interaction among three factors: (a) the teacher’s knowledge and methods of instruction, (b) the curriculum (skills and knowledge to be acquired), and (c) the student’s abilities (cognitive and nonintellectual), interests, and learning styles. Effective learning for a student occurs when there is a compatible match among those factors. Riding (Chapter 3) proposes that a person’s cognitive style is determined by where that individual’s thinking processes are located along two fundamental dimensions: wholist-analytic and verbal-imagery. Style probably has a physiological basis and is fairly fixed for the individual. By contrast, strategies are ways that may be learned and developed to cope with situations and tasks, and particularly methods of using styles to make the best of situations for which they are not ideally suited (p. 48).

Biggs (Chapter 4) uses the word approaches in preference to styles, and defines an approach as (a) the mental processes adopted during learning and (b) the predisposition to adopt particular processes. He identifies three approaches, each producing a qualitatively different learning outcome. The surface approach is motivated by the student’s desire to complete the learning task with as little investment of time and effort as possible, thereby leading to students often rote memorizing answers to questions rather than comprehending the principles underlying answers. The deep approach involves seeking to discover the essential meaning of an assignment that resides in
main ideas, themes, and principles “rather than [being limited to] conceptually unsupported specifics” (p. 85). The achieving approach is guided by learners’ desire to enhance their egos by visible symbols of success, such as high grades and commendations. In Chapter 5, the connection between learning-style theories and university students’ everyday experiences is investigated by Entwistle, McCune, and Walker, who offer suggestions about how learning efficiency can be improved by instructors and students understanding in depth when and why to apply particular study techniques. Cultural likenesses and differences are the focus of Chapters 6, 7, and 8, with Chapter 6 comparing the approaches to learning found among (a) Indigenous Australian university students and (b) Australian students of Western European heritage. Learning for Aboriginal people . . . comprises a mix of traditional perspectives and current practices in education that cannot be easily explained [by traditional Western] theoretical styles and approaches. . . . Additionally, it is clear that informal learning experiences for the Aboriginal university students provided useful means by which they could gain skills and knowledge [that] differ from their experience of formal [university] learning (p. 144). To investigate likenesses and differences in approaches to learning across cultures, Watkins (Chapter 7) performed a statistical meta-analysis of questionnaire results from 55 separate studies that included 27,078 secondary-school and university students in 15 countries. The questionnaires focused on (a) one or more approaches to learning (surface, deep, or achieving) and (b) measures of self-esteem, locus of control (whether individuals consider learning success to be dependent on oneself or on environmental factors), the learning environment, and level of academic achievement. The countries included Australia, China/Hong Kong, Fiji, India, Japan, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Philippines, South Africa, Spain, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, and Zimbabwe. Among the conclusions Watkins offers is the observation that self-esteem and locus of control are related to the approach to learning a student will adopt in both Western and non-Western countries . . . [and] deeper approaches to learning are more likely to occur when the students are more confident in their capacity to learn and accept responsibility for their own learning (p. 189). From the results of seven questionnaire studies of thinking styles in China (including Hong Kong) and the United States, Zhang and Sternberg (Chapter 8) derived three implications for improving students’ learning. First, teachers should realize that the reason some students do not do well in school may not be due to their lack of academic abilities, but to a mismatch between students’ thinking styles and those rewarded by their learning environment. Second, teachers should be aware of the kinds of thinking they are punishing. Third, teachers should be well informed about the gender and cross-cultural differences in thinking styles so they can better accommodate individual differences among students (p. 211).

Following the three cross-cultural chapters, Chapter 9 advocates an experiential learning theory (ELT) as an improvement over “cognitive learning theories, which emphasize cognition over affect, and behavioral learning theories, which deny any role for subjective experience in the learning process” (p. 227). ELT is described as a modern-day amalgam of John Dewey’s pragmatism, Kurt Lewin’s social psychology, and Jean Piaget’s model of cognitive development. In the book’s closing chapter, Sternberg addresses a problem that readers have already discovered while moving from one chapter to next – the problem that the realm of cognitive styles lacks a unifying theme or set of principles that can encompass the field’s disparate theories and that renders the theories easily compared. To remedy this shortcoming, Sternberg proposes a common conceptual framework that focuses on the psychology of choice and decision-making. To implement his proposal, Sternberg identifies a series of questions about people’s choices that investigators might seek to answer about how people make decisions in their daily lives. In summary, Perspectives on Thinking, Learning, and Cognitive Styles is a timely effort on the part of the editors and their colleagues