Japanese Learning Styles:
The relationship between learning styles and transformative learning

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to examine how learning styles theory has been applied in Japanese contexts and how it is possible to use learning style theory in transformative learning. In particular it examines Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Kolb’s Experiential Learning Styles Theory. It also looks at ways in which these theories have been used with Japanese adults to examine the learning styles of Japanese. Even though the studies were found to be generalizable to certain groups of Japanese adults, it is impossible to show it as generalizable to Japanese people as a whole. The principal reason lies in the nature of learning style theories. Learning style theories imply that they are preferred styles that individuals utilize, but that they are flexible and may change at any given time in an individual’s lifetime. Because the nature of learning style theories is flexible, they lend themselves to active frameworks in which transformational learning can be affected. Giving adult learners additional tools in which to examine and influence their own understanding and reflection on experiences can provide them with more choices of what kind of learning they want as a result. This can in turn lead to transformative learning within an individual, of relationships with others and in communities. During this process it is also important that the learner, educator, and community work together to create a mutual learning and becoming process resulting in a much more satisfactory and enriching transformative experience.

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Introduction

One purpose of education is to create a population of people who have been socialized to follow the rules of a society. Another goal is to create individuals who have a well-integrated relationship between thought and action (Cajete, 1977). However, adult education goes beyond that and causes change that in time can become a profound transformation of self. This transformation is a dynamic creative process that is anything but peaceful. The process of exploration of self, and relationships with others, require a tearing apart of preconceived notions to create a new order and higher level of consciousness. Knowledge of developmental models such as Kolb’s Experiential Learning Styles Theory and models that show alternative perspectives such as Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences can give learners choices with which to examine their preconceived notions, which in turn can create transformative learning experiences. This paper examines how learning style theory has been applied in Japanese contexts and how it is possible to use learning style theory in transformative learning.

Learning styles (multiple intelligences and experiential learning styles)

Two learning style theories closely related to research carried out with Japanese students and business managers are Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Theory (Gardner, 1993) and Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984). It is useful to examine these two theories to examine how they are applicable in a Japanese context and how they can be used to affect transformational learning.

Kolb’s (1993) Experiential Learning Theory focuses on learning as a transformative experience. Learning styles are a way to create knowledge through experiential learning and are an individual’s preferred way of processing that knowledge. It puts forth the idea that during the process of learning, specialized learning modes and preferences for learning are developed. There are basically four key learning modes: concrete experience (CE), abstract conceptualization (AC), reflective observation (RO), and active experimentation (AE) (Kolb, 1984). Concrete experience is characterized by understanding experience through feelings and sensing, while abstract conceptualization involves the idea that there is reflected experience and created ideas and concepts. Reflective observation requires transforming the acquired experience by reflecting and viewing it from various perspectives. Finally, active experimentation transforms ideas and concepts through actions, which lead to new experiences and learning.

The Experiential Learning Theory has been largely used in research concerning Japanese adults, predominantly university students in language education, as well as...
in research dealing with business managers. In adult education, Kolb (1984) sees learners as utilizing a combination of two learning modes. These modes are titled the diverger learning style, combining the concrete experience and reflective observation styles, the accommodating learning style, a combination of the concrete experience and active experimentation styles, the assimilating style, which includes the abstract conceptualization and reflective observation styles, and the converging learning style, characterized by a combination of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation styles. These learning styles are dynamic states resulting from synergistic transactions between individuals and their environment. Thus, factors such as gender, level of education, age, personality type, and adaptive competencies have a bearing on learning styles (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This is especially important in the fields of education and management where diverse student populations and multicultural teams have become more prevalent (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The second learning style theory examined was Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1993). Gardner asserts that all people have multiple intelligences, and defines intelligence as “the ability to solve problems, or to fashion products, that are valued in one or more cultural or community settings,” (Gardner, 1993, p.7). He makes the assumption that not all people have the same interests, abilities, and learning styles, and thus, no one person is capable of learning all there is to learn. It is inevitable that one make choices in deciding what to learn. He also assumes that it is the student’s role to learn skills that will be useful in future vocations and valued in the larger society. The teacher’s role is to help students develop skills useful in society based upon the student’s interests, goals, and styles of learning. The school is seen as having the role of helping students develop culturally valued skills necessary for future vocations for use in the larger community. Thus, Garner views the learning process as one in which there should be individual-centered schools which seriously addresses a multifaceted view of intelligence.

There are two main principles of Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences; 1) there are multiple intelligences and 2) The various intelligences work together to solve problems and to yield various kinds of natural endstates. Gardner identifies eight intelligences and asserts that there may be even more than eight (Gardner, 1999). He identifies the eight intelligences as linguistic, logical or mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily or kinesthetic, naturalist, and two forms of personal intelligence. The two forms of personal intelligence he identifies are interpersonal and intrapersonal.

The second main principle of Gardner’s theory is that these various intelligences work together to solve problems and to yield various endstates. Every
person is seen to have different combinations of these intelligences, with no two people having the same combinations in the same amounts. Thus, each person has different cognitive abilities, or multiple intelligences with which to use in solving problems and to yield various cultural endstates, such as different vocations and avocations.

**Japanese learning styles**

Research on Japanese regarding experiential learning styles has found that Japanese adults mainly prefer the diverging learning style, which emphasizes concrete experience and reflective observation. In a study conducted with Japanese, Malaysian, Chinese and Thai managers by Yamazaki, Kayes and Attrapreyaangkul (Yamazaki & Attrapreyaangkul, 2011; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2007), Japanese managers were shown to have a preference for CE more than AC, and RO more than AE, meaning that they largely used the diverger learning style. In addition, according to a study carried out by McMurray (1998) as cited in Yamazaki (2005), Japanese undergraduate students majoring in Economics and Science preferred the concrete experience and reflective observation learning styles. Their studies showed that Japanese managers and undergraduate university students preferred to feel and sense a situation while reflecting from various points of view in order to process knowledge in order to utilize it in activities such as making decisions. While not broad enough to be a formal study, I have also conducted Kolb’s Learning Styles Inventory (1993) with undergraduate university students and found more of them to prefer the diverger category than the other experiential learning styles.

Besides Kolb’s Experiential Learning Styles, I have introduced Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1993) to undergraduate students. The purpose was to introduce the idea of learning styles and various ways to become aware of how people prefer to gain knowledge and utilize it in formal education settings as well as informal settings. This in turn was examined to create awareness of how learning styles influence behavior and how an awareness of them can aid in communicating with others who have similar or different learning styles. While there have been several studies carried out with Japanese students using Reid’s (1987) Perceptual Learning Styles, (Hyland, 1993; Chiya, 2003; Rausch, 1996; Cherry & Hayashi, 2004). Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences was more useful for my purposes due to the fact that I was not focusing on students’ skills in learning a second language, but more generally in their preferences for acquiring and utilizing knowledge. However, while studies using Reid’s theory found that Japanese students as a group did not prefer one learning style more than another, my students who filled in a questionnaire regarding their multiple intelligences mostly used their
interpersonal intelligence as well as their verbal intelligence. In a university classroom environment, particularly in a language classroom, this was to be expected since in this particular case, participation was a large part of their grade and language classes focused on verbal and language skills.

Introducing Kolb’s Experiential Learning Styles Theory and Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory were beneficial since students themselves found them to be useful. When asked, some students preferred the Multiple Intelligence Theory, while a few more preferred the Experiential Learning Styles Theory. Reasons given were that the multiple intelligences were easier to understand and seemed almost common sense. One student who was studying to become a teacher especially noted the usefulness in application of the Multiple Intelligences Theory to create better learning environments for students in classrooms. Nevertheless, the students viewed Kolb’s theory as more useful because they could apply it to work situations. Students commented on the fact that knowledge of their own experiential learning style would help them find a job that suited them and that knowledge of those of coworkers could help them work together better in work teams.

The role of learning styles in transformative learning

The main goal of introducing students to learning styles theories was to make them aware of themselves as well as how others around them acquire knowledge and make use of it. In essence, it was to attempt to create some kind of transformative learning in the students. Joy and Kolb (2009) see experiential learning as creating knowledge through transformation of experience, while knowledge is what comes from the combination of understanding and transforming experience. Mezirow (2000) defines transformative learning as a way to solve problems by defining a problem or by redefining or reframing problems by creating interpretations that are more justified. It is a deliberate effort to learn and involves serious reflection as well as serious self-reflection. It requires the learner to expand on existing frames of reference, learn new frames of reference, transform points of view, or transform habits of mind Mezirow (2000). In the classroom, Kegan (2000) points out that the role of educators of adult students is not to merely ask them to take on new skills, but to change the entire way they understand themselves, their world, and the relationship between the two. They are asking many of them to question the foundations that their lives have consisted of up until that time. Learners are asked to reflect critically on the validity of their opinions and assumptions and those of others in order to grow and come to understand their role and responsibility in constructing knowledge and, thus, to become more effective transition agents of changing societies. (Mezirow, 2000; Kegan, 2000) This is the
goal many educators have for their adult students.

Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) show how developmental theories, such as Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory, and how theories of intellectual development aid in adult education with the goal of transformation. According to them, adults prefer a problem-solving approach to learning and learn best when new information is applied to real-life situations. Kolb’s theory (1984) sees knowledge as something that is created as a result of an interaction between content and experience, through which each transforms the other. In other words, knowledge is created through experiential transformation. His model provides a practical model for experiential learning practice that can be used in formal education classrooms as well as corporate settings in which multicultural multidisciplinary teams must work together effectively; thus, appealing to the preferred problem-solving approach suggested by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005).

Additionally, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) show how Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983) offer an alternative perspective for educators and students to grow as learners. Nelson (1993) points out that the scientific model of reality has relegated other ways of knowing to the realm of unreal, primitive, unimportant, or unacceptable. However, by providing various frames of reference to view their own learning and experiences, adults can better apply their learning and manage learning processes. A multidimensional view of intelligence allows adult learners to seek more control over the learning process. (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) As educators, it is imperative that educators give adult students optional theories such as Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory and Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences with which to examine, understand and reflect upon their knowledge and experiences in order to have a choice to transform their world or not and to have a choice of what direction to take in their lives. In Cajete’s (1977) description of Indigenous education, he explains that the exploration of different approaches to learning was encouraged with the goal of creating individuals who realize a completeness in life. Freire (2000) points out that in order to change students from “beings for others” into independent beings, it is important to give the choice and to transform structures so that they can become “beings for themselves.”

Implications and future research

This paper has shown how Kolb and Gardner’s theories of learning styles influence transformative learning and how they have been applied by researchers to analyze the learning styles of Japanese adult learners. It could be beneficial to do a long-term project to examine the extent of transformational learning that has taken place within the adult learners, the educators, and the communities of the learners.
due to increased awareness of these learning styles. This is due to the great impact transformational learning can have on all those involved in the learning environment. In addition to the transformation of adult learners, Freire (2000) and Cajete (1977) assert that during the process of learning, it is necessary for the educator to have a more authentic dialogue in which there is a mutually reciprocal learning and co-creation of reality. In this environment, teachers, learners, and community would become partners in a mutual learning and becoming process resulting in a much more satisfactory and enriching transformative experience.

**Conclusion**

This paper is an attempt to examine how learning styles theory has been applied in Japanese contexts and how it is possible to use learning style theory in transformative learning. In particular it examined Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Kolb’s Experiential Learning Styles Theory. It also looks at ways in which these theories have been used with Japanese adults to examine the learning styles of Japanese. Even though the studies were found to be generalizable to certain groups of Japanese adults, it is impossible to show it as generalizable to Japanese people in general. The principal reason lies in the nature of learning style theories. Learning style theories imply that they are preferred styles that individuals utilize, but that they are flexible and may change at any given time in an individual’s lifetime. A Japanese person might prefer Kolb’s diverger style with a focus on concrete experiential feelings and reflective observation while a university student may prefer a different experiential learning style after having different experiences while living in an entirely culturally different country for many years. Because the nature of learning style theories is flexible, they lend themselves to active frameworks in which transformational learning can be affected. Giving adult learners additional tools in which to examine and influence their own understanding and reflection on experiences can provide them with more choices of what kind of learning they want as a result. This can in turn lead to transformative learning within an individual, of relationships with others and in communities. During this process it is also important that the learner, educator, and community work together to create a mutual learning and becoming process resulting in a much more satisfactory and enriching transformative experience. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine how increased awareness of learning styles affected Japanese adult learners to study the extent to which there have been changes to the learner, educator, and community with which the learner is involved.
References


