



# High achiever's learning style: a case study of a student on the president's list at a public university

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## ABSTRACT

A lot of researches on student learning styles found that each student exhibits unique characteristics, learns differently and possess a particular learning style (Zhang, 2000). However, it is not clear if students need to possess certain learning styles to be high achievers. Therefore this study aims to explore the learning style/s of a high achieving student. An interview was conducted on a student who has achieved excellent grades in the study with at least two semesters in the President's List. The results showed that the student has not adopted any specific learning styles in her study; rather combination of styles has been utilized.

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## Introduction

Why do some students get straight As whereas others with equal abilities flunk out? There are various ways to answer that question to explain individual differences in academic achievement. Collinson (2000) found that people differ in the way they acquire information, perceive, process and form value judgment of any information. Individuals have the basic capability to learn, however, they are not able to learn effectively in the same exact way (Gregorc, 1979).

Traditionally, individuals' abilities was the main attribute to students' success or failure, but for the past few decades, scholars have found that styles, which refers to preference, has the influence on learning outcomes (Zhang, 2001).

Learning styles is defined as the process that the learners use to sort and process information (Cano, Garton & Raven, 1992). Garger and Guild (1994) described learning styles as the characteristics of individuals which are stable and pervasive that is expressed through the interaction of one's behaviour and personality when he/she approaches a learning task.

### Theoretical Framework

Kolb Learning Styles (1984) is utilized to understand the learning styles used by a high achieving student. The theory establishes that individuals learn from experiences and ideal learning process engages all four modes of approaches namely Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC), which relate to grasping experience; and Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE), which relate to transforming experiences.

While individuals attempt to use all four approaches, they tend to develop strengths in one experience-grasping approach and one experience-transforming approach, which, these combinations resulting in four learning styles: 1) Converger; 2) Diverger; 3) Assimilator; 4) Accommodator.

Furthermore, Kolb (1984) found that undergraduates who major in Arts, History, Political science, English and Psychology tend to have Diverging learning styles, while those majoring in more abstract and applied areas like Physical science and

engineering have Converging learning styles. Individual with Accommodating learning styles have educational backgrounds in Business and Management, and those with Assimilating styles in Economic, Mathematics, Sociology and Chemistry.

However, the theory does not point out at the learning styles specific to high achieving student. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the learning style/s used by a high achieving student.

### Previous Research

The relationship of student achievement and learning styles has widely studied over the years. A study done by Collinson (2000) found that students who are high achievers are independent learners and benefit more on informal learning environment such as pillow and soft chairs compared to low achievers.

Furthermore, research based on theories of styles has indicated that style plays an important role in student learning. Learning styles are the support students to learn (Rovai & Grooms, 2004). Chongcharoenpanich (2007) utilised Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to conduct a study to identify the personality types and learning styles of the participants, found that Asian students who studies in America have different learning styles from American students. Chiou (2008) found that students' learning styles is influenced by their course category (technical vs. General courses) in order to achieve in academic. Another study suggested that students who favoured on deductive thinking and de-emphasis on human relationship rated themselves as higher academically than those who were people-oriented in their approach to learning (Matthews, 1996). Nevertheless, previous research did not explore any specific learning styles adopted by high achieving students.

Hence, the study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What kind/s of learning style/s is/are adopted by a high achieving student?
- 2) What are the strategies the student use to study?

### Research method

The participant was a student who has been in the President List for 2 semesters in a selected university in Kelantan. She is 23 years old, originated from Kuala Lumpur. Her father is a lecturer in a university in Klang Valley area whereas her mother is a medical doctor who works in a public hospital. She is studying in the program of Sustainable Science in the university. An in-depth interview with open-ended questions was carried out to the participant. The content of the interview is based on the specific research questions. The probing technique was utilized in order to enrich the descriptions of the experiences of the student such as "Why" and "Anything more?" (Nik Suryani, 2008).

Observation was also done on the student's work and assignment in order to validate the achievement of the student. The quality of validity in qualitative research is the trustworthiness the researcher has upon the data collected and it can be maximized with credible and defensible results (Golafshani, 2003).

The interview was scheduled at the convenience time of the respondent since she is doing her practical study at present. She was aware that the study is on her learning style. The interview was done once with the data collection was done on the same day. The responses of the interview were transcribed verbatim, and it was compared with her assignments to gain the validity and reliability of the interview response. The interview transcript was coded and several themes emerged from it. The themes were interpreted and reflected in the result section.

### Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview revealed the findings.

#### Unplanned study time

The data revealed that Ms. R was not aware of Kolb Learning styles but she has some idea of vision, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles. She believes that she has visual and auditory learning styles since she needs to see the notes and listen to what the lecturer says in the class. She also kept on repeating that she will try at her best to understand what is delivered in the classroom. She emphasized that the need to understand the lesson is crucial to her study.

Furthermore, she also admitted that she has the attitude of last minute study person when she said "I'm kind of a last minute person"

Translated from

"saya ni agak last minute juga"

This is not a positive attitude of a student as it will make students cram for exams (Brandes, 2008) but it works well with her. She will make more time to study when it closes to exam but she emphasized the importance of understanding the lesson during the class.

Moreover, she also mentioned that she likes to study early in morning because it was her mother who taught and advised her to study during early in the morning than stay late at night. She has no specific reason on why she would choose that time to study but she believes that whatever taught by her mother is the best thing for her.

Additionally, the interview exposed that it was crucial for her to understand the subject during the lesson is on or during the class. She would instantly seek for assistance if she found that she confused about certain things in the lecture notes or slides.

### Comprehension of subject matter

Ms. R also believes that understanding of the lesson is better than memorization since if she memorizes anything from the topic, once she forgets, there is a potential of forgetting the whole content. Unlike understanding, once she comprehends, she can use her own wordings to answer exam questions

Looking at the way she studies, she was found to write notes during her class when she feels that the notes given by the lecturers beforehand were not adequate for her understanding. She will add more points to the slides notes when the lecturers have more input to that notes. Furthermore, she also will find additional books or articles related to the subject if it was instructed by the lecturers.

One of the ways to memorize what she learned which needs memorization, such as procedures or law acts, she will highlight the important points in her notes using a marker and she even created short songs to remember those points to ease the retrieval process when they are needed. She uses the first alphabet of the word to create the song:

"I would create short songs using the first letter of the words that needed to memorize such as procedures or law act that I think are difficult to remember"

Translated from

"saya reka lagu2 pendek yg menggunakan huruf pertama utk perkataan yg perlu dihafal cthnye kalau ada procedure ke, atau akta2 yg payah sgt nak igt.

This is a creative way to remember what was learned and it would be able to eliminate uncertainty in the study.

When she was asked whether or not she uses the internet to study, she answered that she would sometimes Google for the information that are needed for the assignment only, and not to add on to the notes given by the lecturers. This would indicate that she is motivated to find extra information for the assignments that she has to do in order to make them the good ones.

She also brought up the fact that she studies about an hour a day when the exam is not around the corner but when it closes to exam time, she would allocate two to three hours per day to do the revision.

Although she admitted that she likes to take notes and pays a lot of attention during her class, she also said that she has not have a certain way of learning styles as listed by Kolb in his Learning styles inventory.

Thus, this revealed that the respondent has her own strategies to study. She doesn't prefer to memorize what she has learned but rather to really understand them so that when she would answer the exam questions based on her understanding of what was taught and not by what she memorized word by word. This is due to the reason that if she were to memorize word by word, the chance of losing everything is greater when she starts to forget even one word from that she has memorized than if she were to remember what she understands

### Instruction driven

The other theme that emerged from the data was instruction driven. According to Ms. R, she would follow what were advised by her lecturers. It is a common thing that students would do, that is to follow the instructions of lecturers and their advices:

"That depends on the subjects, if the lecturers ask me to refer to other sources, then I will look for more books, but if the lecturers say that the notes are sufficient, I will not look for other sources..."

Translated from

“Tgk pd subjeklah, kalau lecturer suruh refer, saya carilah buku, tapi kalau lecturer cakap baca notes saja, saya tak referlah...”

The study revealed that the lecturers had given the lectures in a clear manner. The lecturers have made their preparation before coming to class in order to make better teaching and learning environment.

Moreover, the lecturers have the influence to motivate the students to refer to other sources as when the notes given from the lectures are insufficient for student knowledge. Ms. R also pointed out that she would find other books beside the text book if the lecturers instructed her to do so.

She admitted that she is not the kind of student that likely to add information to what was taught by the lecturers, but that depends on the lecturers' instructions. She believes that the lecturers would advise the students to find other sources of information and to add them to the notes if they feel that the notes given were not sufficient for the subject taught.

### Conclusion

The present study has found that the high achieving student with several semesters in President List and Dean List at a public university has not practice a certain learning style in her study. Even though Kolb (1994) suggested that by assessing the respondent's background of study, she would theoretically adopts the assimilating learning style, and Chiou (2008) stated that students' learning styles is influenced by their course category, these were found irrelevant to her.

However, the finding is in congruent with a study done by Collinson (2000) who stated that students who are high achievers are independent learners and benefit more on informal learning environment such as pillow and soft chairs compared to low achievers. This is clearly shown when the respondent disclosed that she prefers to study when it is almost the exam time as long as she understands what is taught in the classrooms. She allocates two to three hours a day to study when it is near to exam time, but she also study for an hour or so every day.

Therefore, even it was found that the previous researchers have suggested certain learning styles are adopted by students in tertiary education; the present research has found contradictory result. However, the student has her own strategies to study that fits her best and put her in the President's List and Dean's List throughout her study years.

Finally, the present study has brought up some recommendation as to complement this study. The first one is the interview session that can be organized in a longer duration so that more in depth and probing questions could be asked. Second, in future, it would be recommended to have a focus group to answer the interview questions for better understanding of the issue.

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