Toward an Interactionist Theory of Cognitive Dysfunction and The Research Project on Interactive Formation of Learning Difficulties

Olkinuora, E., Salonen, P. and Lehtinen, E. (1984) *Toward an Interactionist Theory of Cognitive Dysfunction* Institute of Education, University of Turku, Turku, Finland. (42 pages)

Lehtinen, E., Olkinuora, E. and Salonen, P. (1986) *The Research Project on Interactive Formation of Learning Difficulties* Institute of Education, University of Turku, Turku, Finland. (71 pages)

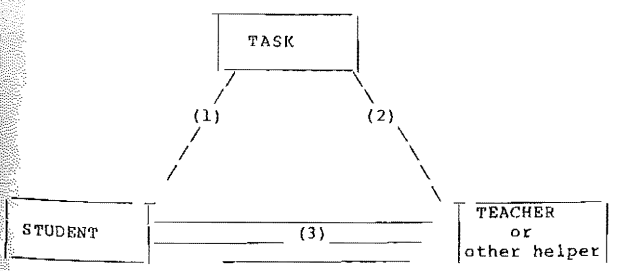
Would we judge da Vinci's style by the smile on the Mona Lisa? Is it an injustice to El Greco to judge him only by his "hands"? Of course it is! Yet as teachers we *sometimes* evaluate students by a single criteria, that is, how they perform on a test. We may be especially prone to this error when we look at students with learning problems.

Problems in learning are still seen as problems of the student. Occasionally the opposite approach is taken, that is, problems of learning are seen as problems of the teacher, of teaching. As the titles of the two works under reveiw indicate, the group of researchers at the University of Turku have a different vision of learning and particularly of learning difficulty. Interaction is the key word in their approach to understanding learning. The interactionist approach will hep us to *see* in ways which might be more comprehensive in our examination of students and learning difficulties.

Though interaction is not a new idea, the theoretical approach developed by this research team does provide some new insights, shows some new directions, and presents some imaginative research tools. This approach calls us to look at the task, the student and the teacher together.

The two works will be discussed as one, even though they are published separately and have different tones and styles: *Toward an Interactionist Theory of Cognitive Dysfunction* lays the ground work for the "specific individual and small group diagnosis" and "empirical descriptions of performance"; found in *The Research Project on Interactive Formation of Learning Difficulties.*

One of the central constructs which guides these works is the "Interpretative Interaction Model".



This model, one of several which define the interactionist position, provides an explanation of the learning styles of students. The first interaction is student to task or *task oriented style.* This learning style is found in students who are generally seen as strong learners, students who tune into the task and solve problems set forth within the task based on a solid understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses as well as the nature of the problem. Style two is a *teacher dependent style.* The teacher is the go between and influences much of the students' interaction with the task. These students are easily pulled off task by unrelated clues from the teacher as well as clues from other sources. The third style is the *ego defensive style.* The teacher has a strong influence on the way the student approaches the problem; to the extent that the student will ignore the problem to please the teacher or to defend their self-image as a person and/or as a learner at the expense of solving the problem.

This model, though only a small part of what is presented in these two monographs, can provide the beginning place for examining the extent to which our curriculum and methods allow for the expression of each learning style. The model provides a reference for identifying students who may benefit from remedial efforts and programs. For example, we have all noticed students who have not participated in class and who may not do well on test and other written material but who seem to come alive in a particular discussion — perhaps a student lead discussion, but not necessarily. The student appears to "hook into" the problem and make a personal connection which allows her to integrate new and old information and to contribute to the class understanding of the issue being discussed.

This model *may* provide some insight into the situation. Perhaps the student is bypassing the usual ego defense strategy because the task, that is, the discussion question, has some special interest or taps an area of expertise of the student. The authors suggest that the teacher has struck a "structure of relevance" for the student. During this sequence of activities, they ignore the side glance which they usually take in order to gain teacher or fellow student approval. Again this model may help explain why some students are so insightful and imaginative on the playground and so docile and dull in the classroom.

One insight concerns the way we might look at learning difficulties. The authors suggest that assessment of general performance levels by comparing the relative test scores on different sections of tests with each other may be useful in understanding performance differences between groups but do not help us understand weak performance as it relates to the formation of learning difficulties (Lehtinen, p. 24). We can understand the formation of learning difficulties by looking at the frequency and type of erroneous performances in the performance process (Lehtinen, p. 24).

The models, empirical observations, and field experiments in these monographs do not have all the answers nor do they pretend to be a complete theory on learning and learning dysfunction. They are what they purport to be - a beginning: "empirical descriptions of performance" and "generalizations 'in the direction of processes'." (Lehtinen et al, p. 65)

A question we might ask ourselves in thinking about curriculum development and problem-solving based on the model: Is this student more likely to approach this learning

task as a challenge to be taken on or will the student view it as another opportunity for failure. The authors suggest and the studies support the notion that the ego-defensive student is likely to engage in behaviors that get him or her out of the situation quickly, to stop the threat, such as reciting rules or quickly giving incorrect answers or nonsense responses.

By allowing ourselves to begin to consider the whole picture of learning difficulties, we are bound to gain a number of satisfying peeks, peeks that will enlighten us, enrich our teachingt and aid our students.

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