



Spotlight on Learning

Spotlight on Learning: Using the HBDI® Assessment to Improve Learning Process, Quality, and Outcomes at Yale College, Wrexham

In July 2004, the Coffield Report was published. This report, commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council in England, investigated the wide range of learning style instruments designed to make learning a more successful process for students. The report evaluates the main theories about learning styles, selects the most important studies from literature, assesses the theoretical robustness of each model, and evaluates the implications of these models for pedagogy in post-16 contexts. The report also presents the key problems besetting learning styles, indicates major gaps in the current state of knowledge and comments on prospects for learning styles.

OBJECTIVE:

In the conclusion of the report, many of the current learning style questionnaires in common use are found to be lacking. Coffield concludes that learning style models are not of equal worth and writes that “it matters fundamentally which instrument is chosen.” The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®), Herrmann Whole Brain® Thinking Model, was designated as one of the six recommended models and especially for use in Further Education. Coffield writes that the HBDI® Assessment is intended to throw light on group dynamics as well as to encourage awareness and understanding of self and others. His research led him to the conclusion that Herrmann had “devised well tried procedures for facilitating personal and organizational change.”

“Herrmann’s model,” he goes on to say, “may prove especially valuable in education and training since its raison d’être is to foster creative thinking and problem solving”. Coffield concluded that the Herrmann Whole Brain® Thinking approach to teaching and learning needs further research, development, and evaluation within education because ‘it is grounded in values which are inclusive, open, optimistic, and systematic.’ “It encourages flexibility, adaptation and, change, rather than an avoidance of less preferred activities.”

Since the Coffield Report stresses that “it matters fundamentally which instrument is chosen” and sees the HBDI® Assessment as possessing the potential to encourage “flexibility, adaptation, and change” in individuals as well as facilitating “personal and organizational change,” it seemed that within the HBDI® Profile, lay the possibility of transforming the learning culture within Yale College as well as improving the learning process for individuals and groups. However, since Coffield writes too, that the Herrmann Whole Brain® Thinking approach needs further research, it seemed sensible to combine educational research with the provision of an innovative and valuable learning experience for students within a Learning to Learn project, which motivated the learners by involving them in a dialogue about learning.



CHALLENGES:

The report seemed an excellent starting point for planning a Learning to Learn project in Yale College, Wrexham, North Wales, (now Colege Cambria) designed to improve the learning experience for students and help them become independent, confident learners who would attain better results. The aim of the project was “To raise the quality of learning and teaching from good to outstanding throughout Yale College.” Though there are pockets of outstanding practice in the college, as with any large institution, practice is variable. The intention was to put the focus firmly on teaching and learning, raise awareness of the latest research findings, and to create both a theoretical and practical debate about learning. In essence, an excitement about learning would emanate from the project.

The HBDI® Assessment provided the key to unlocking the learning potential of students across the college by using it as a motivating catalyst, as a means of identifying high, and low learning preferences and as the key to finding appropriate learning strategies to address learning challenges.

In more detail, outcomes were identified as:

For students

- *Improved learning*
- *Improved attainment*
- *Improved motivation*
- *Improved confidence*
- *Improved self-awareness*

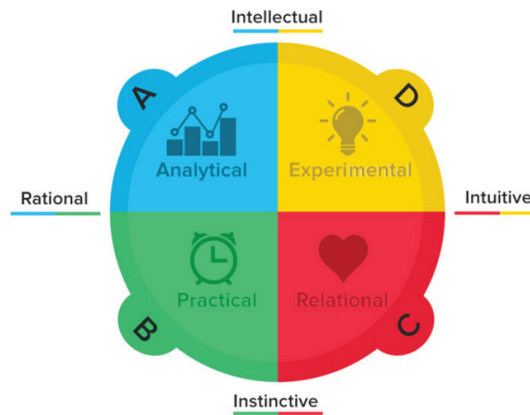
For staff

- *Improvement of established practice*
- *Improvement in knowledge and understanding*
- *Improvement in relationships with students*
- *Sharing of good practice, collaboration on learning*
- *Continuous professional development*
- *Publication of work*

In a corporate sense, the project was designed to improve the client (in this case, the learner) experience, but also to improve the

Return on Investment for the organization - Yale College.

The improvement in learning through use of the HBDI® Profile would lead to the following:



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Figure 1: The Herrmann Whole Brain Model

A quadrant

Greater customer satisfaction; improvement in performance indicators (retention and attainment); growth in student numbers and therefore increased funding; more efficient of teacher and learner time – focused directly on challenges identified by HBDI® Profile; logical rationale for selected teaching and learning strategies; analytical approach to project; marketing of college through publicity from conferences/presentations/press articles; analysis of results.

B quadrant

Secure, controlled environment for learners; high quality of learning sessions; careful planning of Spotlight on Learning Project and of learning sessions; organized, structured project; sequential nature of project; planned outcomes; clear sense of direction; planned prepared resources for learning sessions; staff satisfaction and security; measured, quantifiable results.

C quadrant

Better, effective professional relationships between staff and students, and between students and students; improvement in relationships in staff teams, professional development of staff; improved satisfaction of learners/clients, evidenced in questionnaires; improved communication between teachers and learners with regard to a clear dialogue about learning; improvement in morale and motivation of both staff and students; improved PR in the local community and in Wales; improved results for staff and students; improved personal development for staff and students.

D quadrant

Innovative original project; innovative research; innovative teaching and learning strategies; opportunities to be creative for both staff and students; enjoyment/fun with learning; unexpected findings; strategic decisions about improving learning in the future.

The Intervention

In essence, the HBDI® Assessment was used as a motivating catalyst, as a means of identifying low and high learning preferences, and as the key to finding appropriate learning strategies to address those low preferences, some of which may be essential to success in a particular subject. Staff in the pilot subject areas, both academic and vocational (and including one Welsh medium course), began by identifying topics which students usually found difficult specifications and syllabuses, and then selecting the Herrmann® thinking skills that underpinned those topics.

The next step was to profile the students in each group, using the HBDI® Profile, so that staff could then identify the students who had low learning preferences for the thinking skills essential to achieve in that topic area. The staff, too, were profiled so that they were aware of how their own brain profiles were influencing the ways in which they taught and the methods that they chose to use with students. The staff therefore had a personal development tool that they could use to enhance their own professional practice.

The Herrmann® model not only identifies preferred thinking skills, but also indicates the preferred teaching and learning strategies of each type of thinker. Using their expertise, staff selected appropriate strategies (largely chosen from the methods found to be most effective by the research into effect sizes of Professor John Hattie, Auckland University) that would encourage students to challenge and improve their low thinking preferences and therefore improve achievement and attainment in particular topic areas. After teaching a topic in the usual way, most staff assessed the students then employed the teaching and learning innovation, and then re-assessed the students using a test which was identical in format but with different questions. They measured the difference to see how much improvement students had made.

Staff teaching Biology worked with control and experimental groups using the innovation with the experimental group only. The reason for this was that the large number of students studying Biology made such a research experiment possible. Both groups sat externally assessed A level examinations and results compared via Alis residuals (see How it Works). The students were involved in the learning process at all stages, knew why they were being taught differently, and were involved too in ongoing evaluation and feedback.

How it Works/Process

As said before, the HBDI® Assessment provided the key to unlocking the learning potential of students by using the profiling as a motivating catalyst, as a means of identifying high and low learning preferences, and as the key to finding appropriate learning strategies to address learning challenges. The methodology worked by identifying in a rank order, from high to low preferences the thinking styles preferred by each subject area in the study. Course content that students found difficult was identified, and the thinking skills required to succeed with such content were compared with the rank order of thinking preferences. This analysis led to a review of the teaching strategies used to deliver difficult content. The attainment results were analysed. In order to ensure that variables affecting student attainment were addressed attainment was analysed using Alis residuals.

The Advanced Level Information System (Alis) provides performance indicators for post-16 students across all sectors of education in the UK and in the context of the study at Yale College which includes analysis of A level, AS level, and BTEC National assessment results: The reason that Alis was used to compare results was that the value-added approach provides fair comparisons between the progress made by students as it takes into account prior attainment based on GCSE performance. To ascertain student opinion of the use of HBDI® Profile, a questionnaire was completed by respondents involved in the research to establish if they valued the use of the HBDI® Assessment instrument as a way of improving attainment and/or enjoyment of their educational experience.

The Results

The project culminated in the Spotlight on Learning Conference where the results of the project were disseminated to an audience from a range of educational sectors across England and Wales. Ann Herrmann-Nehdi, Chair of the Board of Herrmann, spoke about recent brain research and the impact of the findings on learning while Dr. David Frost, from Cambridge University, delivered a presentation on teacher-led research. Carolyn May explained the genesis of the project, its rationale, process, and method, while Paul May provided an analysis of the overall research findings. Discussions with staff revealed that teachers thought that the project focused attention on learning, created debate and discussion, and provided a systematic method devoted to improving learning. Conversations with learners established that the personal attention and the individual focus of the HBDI® profiles gave students a tangible illustration of their own thinking skills. They found this both interesting and motivational. Students who had previously resisted particular teaching and learning strategies now appreciated the reasons why they were being asked to employ them and were far more willing to do so.

The learning dialogue between staff and students improved relationships and motivation. Many students felt that they firstly had been given clear reasons why they found certain skills difficult, and secondly that they were given the means to overcome them. This involved them in the learning and made them feel that they could move from “I can’t” to “I can.” They also felt that the staff was listening to their views, taking account of them, and acting upon them, which improved professional relationships. The awareness of how they were thinking and learning instilled a sense of confidence in most learners. They believed that they were able to attain results that previously they had thought to be impossible.

Outcomes

As previously explained, after profiling the students using the HBDI® Assessment, staff identified a topic that students found difficult and then, using their professional judgement, chose appropriate teaching and learning strategies to encourage students to challenge and improve their low thinking preferences and therefore improve achievement and attainment in these particular topic areas. After teaching a topic in the usual way, students were assessed, then staff introduced the teaching and learning innovation, and then re-assessed the students. In order to provide the staff with detailed information about the range of student thinking skills within individual subjects, an analysis of the rank order of student cluster preferences within quadrants was produced (Fig. 1).

A							B							C							D						
Cluster							Cluster							Cluster							Cluster						
PGCE							PGCE							PGCE							PGCE						
Child Care L3 Diploma							Child Care L3 Diploma							Child Care L3 Diploma							Child Care L3 Diploma						
English Lang & Lit AS							English Lang & Lit AS							English Lang & Lit AS							English Lang & Lit AS						
Spa Therapy							Spa Therapy							Spa Therapy							Spa Therapy						
Travel & Tourism							Travel & Tourism							Travel & Tourism							Travel & Tourism						
Biology AS							Biology AS							Biology AS							Biology AS						
Factual	16	14	19	21	11	7	Conservative	11	22	24	20	7	Emotional	4	5	1	2	1	1	Imaginative	16	5	2	1	4	15	
Quantitative	16	22	26	23	20	15	Controlled	6	11	8	9	3	26	Musical	8	14	10	8	8	Artistic	14	14	15	3	20	7	
Critical	11	7	15	12	22	7	Sequential	24	11	13	23	20	4	Spiritual	16	18	3	15	11	Intuitive	8	18	6	6	11	4	
Rational	7	10	15	17	15	15	Detailed	24	7	10	4	2	15	Symbolic	14	14	15	15	18	Holistic	6	14	8	21	6	1	
Mathematical	14	11	26	23	20	21	Dominant	16	3	15	12	4	26	Intuitive	8	22	6	8	11	Synthesizer	16	22	19	23	21	2	
Logical	1	6	19	12	8	1	Speaker	1	1	3	4	6	26	Talker	1	1	3	8	8	Simultaneous	4	1	24	23	11	21	
Analytical	16	13	15	15	15	15	Reader	16	18	19	9	11	7	Reader	16	18	19	9	11	Spatial	28	18	26	15	19	26	

Fig. 1 Numeric Rank Order of Clusters by a Sample of Subjects

It can be seen that the distribution of rankings varies between subjects. In some subjects, such as English, the highest preference of 1 is found only in one key descriptor (D – imaginative), while in others, the highest preference of 1 is found across several key descriptors, for example Biology (A – logical, B – speaker, C – talker). Where high preferences are found in one key descriptor, there will be less difference in preferred thinking styles compared to a situation where the high preferences for key descriptors are distributed more widely. In the latter case, to ensure effective learning, differentiated teaching strategies will be required to address the wider range of thinking styles, and in such cases, the extent of differentiation will need to be greater than in subjects where the range of thinking styles is less.

Travel and Tourism is an interesting example as the results of this particular research indicate that the “spatial” key descriptor ranks at 18, while “simultaneous,” “talker,” and “speaker” rank at 1. This would suggest that prospective employees for the travel industry, from this particular group of students, are more interested in the customer care aspect of the travel industry rather than the spatial (geographical / travel) aspect. This feature also requires particular learning activities to address what may well be a “spatial” low preference, and future research could be productive in this area. The range of the differences can be more clearly seen if displayed graphically (Fig. 2). These results once again highlight the fact that individually targeted differentiation is crucial for effective learning to take place.

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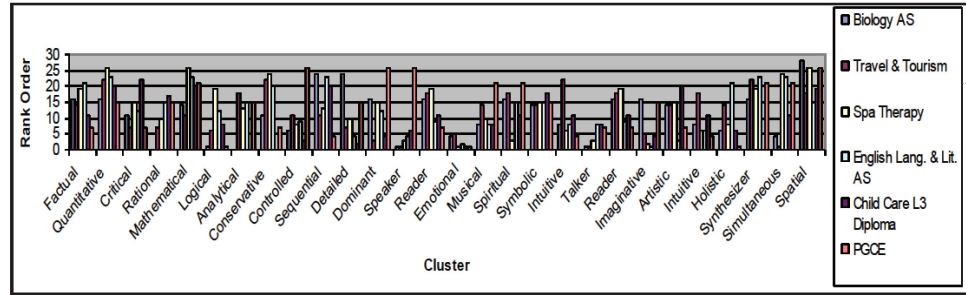


Fig. 2 Graphical Rank Order of Clusters by a Sample of Subjects

In some subjects the research involved an assessment before and after an intervention in teaching (Fig. 3).

Subject	Assessment Score (%)		% Change
	Before Intervention	After Intervention	
Administration	73	90	17
Child Care	39.3	70	30.7
Civil Engineering HNC	65	70.9	5.9
Fabrication & Welding	62.8	71.2	8.4
Media A2	57	61	4
Spa Therapy	70	70.8	0.8
Spanish A	74	86	12
Theater Studies A	61	66	5
Travel and Tourism	37.8	89	51.2

Fig. 3 Assessment Scores; Before and After an Intervention in Teaching (based on HBDI® Profile)

In this sample of subjects, there was an increase in assessment score following the intervention in teaching in all cases. The intervention used was decided upon after an analysis of the HBDI® Profiles of students in each class which indicated the high and low preferences. Once the content and skill of the session to be addressed via the intervention was determined, then a suitable teaching strategy was decided upon, based on the preferences to be supported.

While the evidence from this small sample does not constitute a causal relationship, as there were other variables that could have produced an increase in performance, not least the “Hawthorn Effect”, qualitative case study evidence suggest that the use of an intervention in teaching based on the use of HBDI® Profile results, profiling may well have produced an improvement in learning outcomes. This is a rich area of interest for future research using larger samples.

Travel and Tourism is one of the areas that produced exceptionally good assessment results after introducing an intervention after HBDI® Profile analysis. The subject demands that students be proficient in quantitative skills in order to be capable of working out accurate costings for holidays. The HBDI® Profile analysis indicated that the group of 21 BTEC National Diploma Travel & Tourism students in their 2nd year (of a 2-year course) had low preferences for “mathematical”, “quantitative”, and “reader” key descriptors but strong preferences for “talker”, “speaker”, and “imaginative”. This cohort had demonstrated difficulty in completing tour operating calculations in the Autumn term.

In order to improve the mathematical skills of the students, the teacher devised a game called the “Battle of the Borderlands”. This was designed to appeal to their preferred ways of thinking (talking, speaking, and imaginative) and was also underpinned by Hattie’s high effect size for co-operative learning. The game encouraged the students to improve their skills by introducing calculations in a competitive, fun, but non-threatening manner, and combining a range of learning outcomes and subjects (linked to two BTEC units: Tourism in the Countryside and Tour Operations).

The usual manner of teaching the students calculating skills was through worksheets, so the teacher taught in the traditional way and then assessed the students, who achieved an average of 38% in the test. After HBDI® Profile analysis and the consequent innovation of the “Battle of the Borderlands” game, the students achieved 90% in a similar mathematical test. While it is not possible to establish a definite causal link, it is nevertheless likely that this dramatic improvement was a result of the teaching innovation that was introduced as a result of the HBDI® Profile analysis. Media students traditionally found the genre module difficult. An intervention was carried out to support students in using a Whole Brain® Thinking approach to their thinking. Such an approach had a particular emphasis on synthesizing material using a holistic approach to ensure that an evaluation of how a film contributed to the development of its genre was produced. The standard of the evaluation was expected to improve after the intervention. Media students had right brain preferences (see Fig. 4 and 5).

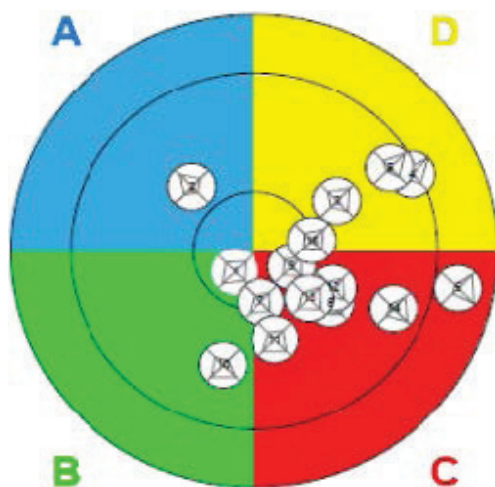


Fig. 4 Media Students – Team HBDI® Profile Cluster

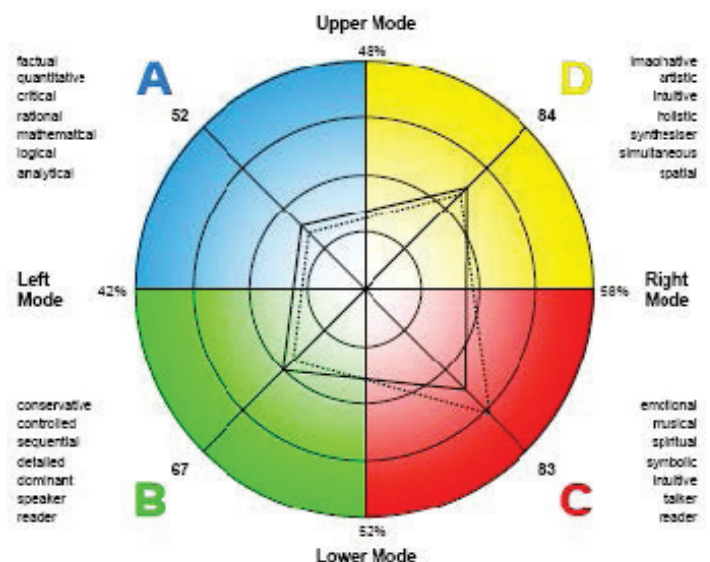


Fig. 5 Team Profile HBDI® Profile Score

The high preferences for right brain clusters were identified when the clusters were placed in rank order (Fig. 6)

Cluster	Rank
Logical	1
Emotional	2
Artistic	2
Imaginative	4
Simultaneous	4
Detailed	6
Dominant	7
Reader	7
Musical	7
Reader	7
Critical	11
Sequential	11
Spiritual	11
Intuitive	11
Intuitive (Solutions)	11
Factual	16
Rational	16
Analytical	16
Controlled	16
Speaker	16
Symbolic	16
Talker	16
Mathematical	23
Conservative	23
Synthesizer	23
Spatial	23
Holistic	27

Fig. 6 Rank Order of Clusters for Media Students

As a result of the intervention, overall class assessment result increased by an average of 15.79%, thirteen students improved their mark, one student remained the same, and only one student had a lower mark (of 1.72%). The student whose mark remained the same had a Whole Brain® Thinking profile and so was receptive to any teaching method. The student who attained a lower grade had a profile which indicated strong preferences in the green quadrant, but very low preferences in the yellow quadrant (score of 35), so really disliked the lesson that was directed at the group profile of strong yellow preferences. One student with low preferences in the A quadrant (score of 42) and the B quadrant (score of 44) actually improved his mark by over 17%, suggesting that the use of a Whole Brain® Thinking approach did improve thinking skills for this particular student.

One particular student achieved a D grade at A2. He therefore re-sat the examination a year later. He had very strong preferences in the blue and green quadrants (1122) and therefore did not fit the overall profile of the Media group who had strong red and yellow preferences. The Media tutor worked with this student during the year using his green and blue preferences to try to improve his essay writing which had always been a problem for him. The support offered by the tutor was structured, sequential, and logical. For every essay he was given a grid with questions which he had to fill in with the relevant answers. He would then write the grid as an essay with each block written up as a paragraph. As a result, his grade in the final examination improved from a D to a B. He is now studying Mathematics at university.

Outcomes revealed that gender played an important role in differences in thinking styles with more females having right brain (56% right and 44% left) and limbic preferences (54% limbic and 46% cerebral) compared to more males having left brain (52% left and 48% right) and cerebral (53% cerebral and 47% limbic) preferences. These differences in thinking styles were statistically significant between males and females' left and right brain scores ($n=414$, $F=37$, $\text{sig.}=0.0001$) as well as limbic and cerebral scores ($n=414$, $F=102$, $\text{sig.}=0.0001$).

Significant differences were also found between the sexes and the four quadrants, which would be expected to correlate with the differences already identified between left and right brain, and limbic and cerebral. (Fig. 7 and 8). There was a significant difference at the 0.0001 level ($F=67.2$) between quadrant scores between males and females. This reveals the importance of differentiation when teaching mixed gender groups associated skills that require high preferences in A and C thinking styles.

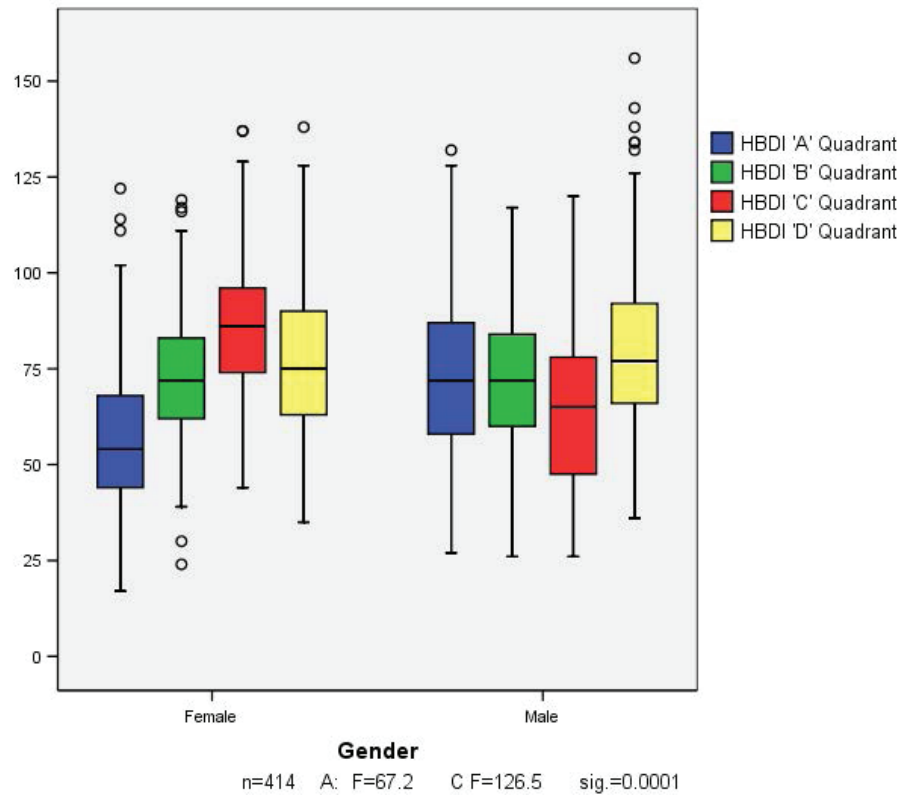


Fig. 7 Boxplot and One-Way Analysis; Quadrant Score by Gender

Gender	Quadrant	Score
Female	C	85
Male	D	80
Female	D	77
Male	A	73
Female	B	73
Male	B	72
Male	C	64
Female	A	56

Fig. 8 HBDI® Pro le Quadrant Score by Gender

The differences in thinking style had an effect on subject choice, self-belief, motivation, and performance. Differences in thinking styles were identified between subject areas as well as between group profiles of students in those subject areas. In general, it was found that students' thinking styles matched those required for a specific program of study. However, it was discovered that when students found a particular subject difficult, it was often due to them having a low preference for the thinking skills needed to achieve. Significantly, the performance of individual students, who were finding the subject difficult, improved dramatically in some subjects after the innovation had taken place. The research suggests that there tends to be a wider differentiation in some subject areas (for example, Biology), which further suggests that pedagogical practice needs to be considered by course teams in those areas.

In addition, it was found that students studying Biology, Civil Engineering, and IT had a higher A (logical) score than the other quadrants, while those studying PGCE (Teacher Training), Theatre Studies, Health and Social Care, Child Care, Media, Travel and Tourism, English, Human Biology, and Spa Therapy had a lower A score than other quadrants. A practical application of this finding was that students in Health and Social Care had a high preference in the C quadrant, but had to produce a project-based research methodology which contained the necessity for quantitative thinking in which they had low preferences. A delivery strategy was adopted which employed a teaching method appealing to the thinking preferences in the C and D quadrants (group discussion work/kinaesthetic materials) to address the thinking challenges in the A quadrant. This resulted in improved performance on the project work.

Further analysis took place to identify differences between subjects in the relationship between an individual quadrant and the three other quadrants (Figs. 6-9). The aim of this investigation was to find out if, within a particular subject, one thinking style identified by quadrant had a greater impact than the other three.

The research took one quadrant at a time and investigated if the other three quadrants had a higher or lower HBDI® Profile score. The results were then used to consider the most effective teaching strategies, and in particular, how differentiated methods should be applied. Overall it was found that:

- A quadrant; only technical / science subjects had a higher A score than BCD scores (Fig. 9)
- B quadrant; there was considerable differentiation in this quadrant between subjects (Fig. 10).
- C quadrant; technical and science subjects had a lower C score than A, B, and D scores. Humanities, Languages, and Child Care had higher C scores than A, B, and D scores (Fig. 11)
- D quadrant; in the majority of cases, the highest score was found in the D (Fig. 12)

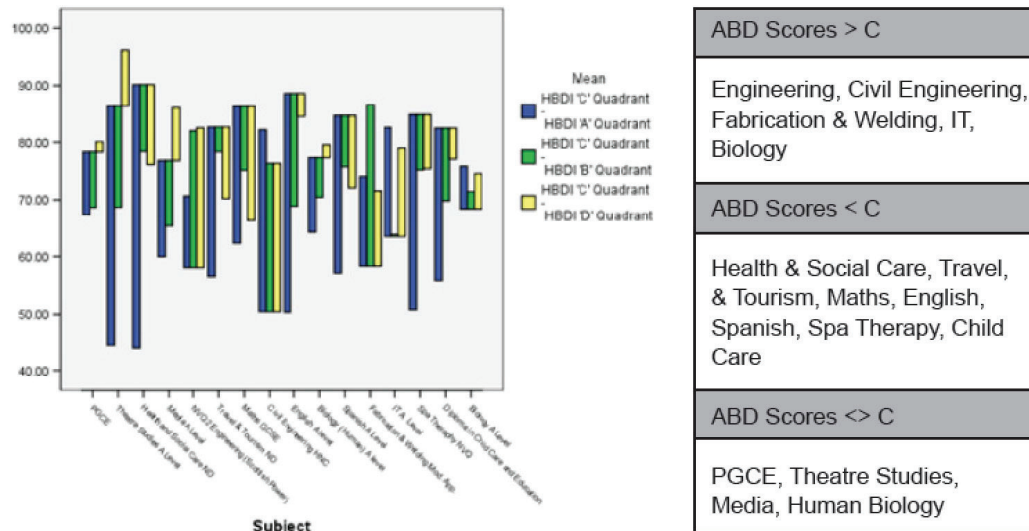


Fig. 11 Relationship of C to A, B, D quadrant

As would be expected Arts, and Care subjects have a higher C score than A, B, and D, which suggests that when teaching material requiring a preference in C, less differentiation is required as the group of students are likely to have high preferences in this area. Note the difference once again between Biology and Human Biology. Biology students have a lower score in C than A, B, or D, while those taking Human Biology have both higher and lower scores. Greater attention to differentiation is required to successfully teach Human Biology students.

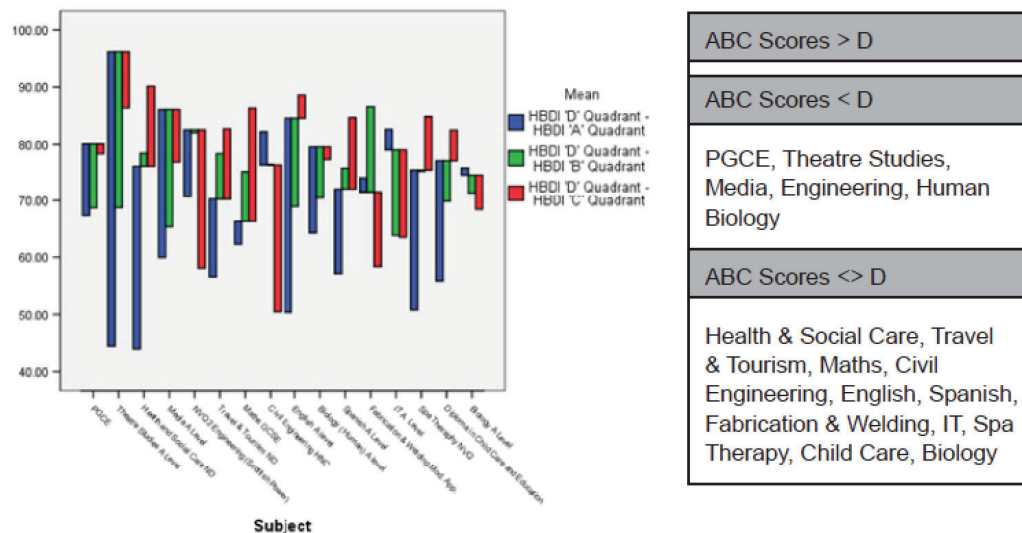


Fig. 12 Relationship of D to A, B, C quadrant

No subject had all three A, B, or C scores higher than D. Five subjects had one quadrant with a higher D score and three with two quadrants higher. Five subjects had all other quadrants lower than D. This suggests that overall there are high preferences in the D quadrant across all subjects in the sample, while in PGCE, Theatre Studies, Media, Engineering, and Human Biology, the D score is the highest compared to the other quadrants. This suggests that the preferences in the D quadrant can be used to plan differentiated lessons to address lower preferences in the other quadrants, and that this strategy could be successful across all subjects.

A questionnaire survey of the students was carried out to ascertain their opinion of the impact of the use of HBDI® Assessment on learning. According to the results from the questionnaires, overall, across all subject areas, 58% of students felt that they had learned more as a result of the teaching strategy used based on the HBDI® Profile findings. Students with low A scores did not like new methods, while students with high C scores did like new methods. High preferences in the B and D quadrants did not influence a student's enjoyment of new learning methods.

This is an important finding as there is a view in further education that adults need to be taught in a different way from younger students. This research suggests that from the age of 16 upwards no differences in thinking styles are found, therefore similar teaching strategies can be used with 16-18 year old students and those over 19. However, the research did not address the social-economic differences of 16-18 year old students and those over 19, which often results in very real tutorial and pastoral provision for these two age groups.

The Future

The research allowed teachers to precisely identify areas of thinking in which students may have difficulty, discuss these difficulties with the students, and implement specific teaching strategies to address such difficulties. As a result, students suggested that they enjoyed the lesson more as they felt that they had been included in the learning process and had learned more effectively. The application of the HBDI® Profile was therefore successful in terms of student motivation and achievement.

In order to use the HBDI® Profile effectively to improve student attainment in more institutions and learning situations, further research is needed, of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. This would provide more evidence of improved attainment and would therefore lead to a long-term investment in using the HBDI® assessment. Therefore, it is important to promote further research into relationships between changes in teaching strategies as a result of HBDI® Profile analysis of student thinking skills and the impact this has on attainment. Further research using control and experimental groups is also necessary to establish the impact of HBDI® Profile on improved attainment.

Other key results from the research need further exploration; in particular gender differences in thinking skill profiles and significant differences in subject group profiles. The relationship between these thinking skills and teaching and learning methods, need to be investigated. The greater differentiation between students in some subject areas, and the subsequent need to consider pedagogy, would be a rich source for research, as would the relationship of thinking skills and subject choice.

The learner voice is increasingly important in any analysis of learner satisfaction. England will be one of the criteria used to provide a score for the Framework for Excellence Self-Assessment regime, introduced from 2008. In Wales, too, the increased emphasis on Self-Assessment processes will necessitate evaluation of learner satisfaction. It would therefore be of interest to carry out further research to establish any relationships between the use of HBDI® Profile and overall learner satisfaction with either a course and/or an educational institution.



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