

# Teaching Every Student: A Demonstration Lesson That Adapts Instruction to Students' Learning Styles

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If our goal in legal education is to assist *all* students in the development of the knowledge, skills, and values that they will need to become lawyers, we cannot be satisfied with instructional methods that merely reflect our own learning preferences because our preferred instructional methods may not connect with every student. Instead, armed with the knowledge that law students have unique and diverse learning styles,<sup>2</sup> we have an opportunity and perhaps an obligation to mold our teaching to the way our students best learn new and difficult information. Through the vehicle of a demonstration lesson that was used in a first-year legal research and writing class at Stetson University College of Law, this article briefly illustrates what such molding might look like and accomplish in a legal research and writing classroom. The article first describes how the authors developed the demonstration lesson. It then describes the lesson itself, and it concludes with student and professor feedback on the lesson.

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<sup>2</sup> See Robin Boyle, Jeffrey Minneti & Andrea Honigsfeld, *Law Students Are Different from the General Population: Empirical Findings Regarding Learning Styles*, 17 *Perspectives, Teaching Legal Res. & Writing* 153 (2009).

## A. Development of the Demonstration Lesson

Because incoming students at Stetson complete the Building Excellence Learning Styles Survey prior to the start of classes, professors have access to students' learning preferences.<sup>3</sup> With this information, the authors sought to create a legal research and writing lesson plan that would adapt each facet of instruction to the group's dominant learning styles. The authors are aware that the many different methods utilized in the demonstration lesson could not reasonably be incorporated into a typical first-semester class. However, they sought to challenge themselves to plan each facet of the class around the students' learning styles so that they could better understand the kinds of methods that worked well with the students.<sup>4</sup>

Substantively, the demonstration lesson's goal was to assist students in writing effective topic sentences for case description<sup>5</sup> and argument paragraphs.<sup>6</sup> That goal required instruction in

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<sup>3</sup> Building Excellence generates a group profile of students' learning styles. The profile that formed the basis of this lesson plan is included as Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> Prior to our session, the students drafted a 1,200-word memo predicting whether a mock client could obtain an annulment of her marriage based on an allegation of fraud. The students were given the case law and statutory law to analyze for this memo, so the focus of their assignment was solely the writing of the memo.

<sup>5</sup> In predictive-objective legal writing, case description paragraphs are those that explain a case to the reader, distilling it to its most essential and relevant parts.

<sup>6</sup> In predictive-objective legal writing, argument paragraphs are drafted for each party to the litigation, so that the drafter can illustrate each party's argument and then evaluate the arguments to determine which will most likely prevail. See Roy Stuckey & Others, *Best Practices for Legal Education* 55 (2007) ("Law schools should describe the specific educational goals of each course ... in terms of what students will know, understand, and be able to do, and what attributes they will develop by completing that component.") (hereinafter *Best Practices*).

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two parts: the concept of an effective topic sentence and the skill of drafting one.<sup>7</sup> From the preceding instructional goal, the authors derived the following set of learning objectives:

- Understand the unique function that topic sentences play in paragraph structure.
- Select the best topic sentence from a list of possibilities.
- List the attributes of well-constructed topic sentences.
- Select a topic sentence from among other paragraph sentences.
- Draft well-constructed topic sentences for case description and argument paragraphs.<sup>8</sup>

To meet these objectives, the authors targeted specific learning preferences and created learning opportunities that appealed to those preferences.<sup>9</sup> The targeted preferences included Tactual, Kinesthetic, and Global—preferences common among the law students but rarely addressed in the law school classroom.<sup>10</sup>

The authors worked with a fact pattern familiar to the students and distributed in advance of class two imagined precedent cases. Prior to the class meeting, students compared the fact-pattern facts to the facts in the imagined cases, recording their

observations on a case comparison chart.<sup>11</sup> Once in class, the demonstration lesson proceeded as outlined below. Appendix B includes a set of diagrams that illustrates the connections between the targeted learning preferences and the lesson activities.<sup>12</sup>

## B. Description of the Demonstration Lesson

### 1. Overview

For the benefit of the Analytical and Visual-Text learners, the authors began the class by showing the students a PowerPoint slide that listed the objectives they sought to accomplish through the class. The authors then spoke briefly about the various exercises they would go through to achieve the objectives. To bring the Global learners on board, they used some demonstrative devices to give the students a visual idea of what a good topic sentence is meant to do and a big-picture idea of what they hoped the students would learn through the class. For example, they used a cookbook to demonstrate how a picture of a dish may make a cookbook reader want to read the recipe because it gives the reader an idea of the finished product before delving into the specifics of the recipe, just like a good topic sentence can sum up the paragraph in a manner that gives the reader an idea of where the paragraph is heading before delving into the specifics of the paragraph.<sup>13</sup>

### 2. Case Description Topic Sentence Exercise

After the overview, students began individually working on an exercise handout. Students first completed a set of multiple-choice questions that required them to select the best topic sentence for the case descriptions they had read, an activity that

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<sup>7</sup> See Susan E. Provenzano & Lesley S. Kagan, *Teaching in Reverse: A Positive Approach to Analytical Errors in 1L Writing*, 39 Loy. U. Chi. L.J. 123, 131 (2007) (describing “research in the field of instructional psychology touting the benefits of contrasting ‘positive’ instructional examples . . . with corollary ‘negative’ examples to help students understand the range of acceptable variations on a concept or rule.”).

<sup>8</sup> See Benjamin S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1984); see also Christine M. Venter, *Analyze This: Using Taxonomies to “Scaffold” Students’ Legal Thinking and Writing Skills*, 57 Mercer L. Rev. 621 (2006).

<sup>9</sup> “Effective teachers consider the various learning styles of students and employ a variety of teaching and learning methods.” *Best Practices*, *supra* note 6 at 122.

<sup>10</sup> See Eric A. DeGroff & Kathleen A. McKee, *Learning Like Lawyers: Addressing the Differences in Law Student Learning Styles*, 2006 BYU Educ. & L.J. 499, 536 (2006).

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<sup>11</sup> See *id.* Note that the preliminary exercise, a chart, connected well with students who had a preference for learning through visual picture; the cases contained in the exercise appealed to visual text learners.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> Other demonstrative devices included: 1) a diagram that showed students graphically that a topic sentence supports the other sentences in a paragraph, and 2) three sizes of plastic bags, only one of which properly enclosed a piece of bread to illustrate that an effective topic sentence is one that is properly tailored to the scope of the paragraph.

appealed to Visual-Text learners and Analytic processors. Once students made their selections on paper, they used a polling system to respond to the multiple-choice questions by entering their answers into an electronic keypad. Within a few seconds of receiving all responses, the system posted a graph for each multiple-choice question, illustrating how many students picked each answer.<sup>14</sup> The polling results gave way to a group discussion of why one answer was preferable to another. The results and ensuing discussion also enabled the authors to determine student competency with selecting effective topic sentences. The polling exercise targeted five additional learning preferences—Tactual and Kinesthetic, through the use of the electronic keypad; Visual Picture, through the graphs of student responses; Global, through a big-picture illustration; and Verbal Kinesthetic, through the discussion of results. In addition, the polling exercise accommodated students who preferred to learn individually by allowing them to anonymously make and receive feedback on their responses.

Once the authors felt that the students had reached a level of mastery with the topic-sentence concept, they asked the class to generate a list of attributes for a well-crafted topic sentence. Using those attributes, the students then individually drafted their own topic sentences. When completed, students worked with a partner to revise and edit their sentences in light of the criteria the class developed. This exercise allowed the students to verbalize their understanding of topic sentences with a partner. Several students volunteered to share their topic sentences with the class, and the class measured the sentences against the topic-sentence criteria. This activity again targeted Verbal-Kinesthetic learners.

### 3. Argument Paragraph Topic Sentence Exercise

When the authors were convinced that the students had sufficient familiarity with the skill of drafting topic sentences for case descriptions, the authors

shifted the focus to topic sentences for argument paragraphs. As with topic sentences for case descriptions, students selected the best topic sentence for argument paragraphs by completing multiple-choice questions and entering their responses into the polling system. Once the students discussed their responses and generated criteria for argument-paragraph topic sentences, the class moved to an exercise designed to reach Tactual and Kinesthetic learners. The students were asked to piece together a good example of an argument paragraph, including an effective topic sentence that analogized the facts of the students' memo problem to the facts of the imagined cases, from strips of paper that included the individual sentences that made up the paragraph. The authors gave each student a set of the sentences and asked that they identify the topic sentence and reassemble the paragraph. The authors gave students the opportunity to complete the exercise individually or with a partner. When the students completed the exercise, the authors solicited responses for the best topic sentence. Working as a group, the authors guided the students through measuring the sentences against the criteria the class developed until there was a consensus regarding the best topic sentence. In addition to reaching the Tactual and Kinesthetic learners, this exercise appealed to Peer-Oriented and Verbal-Kinesthetic learners by giving the students an option of working with a partner and sharing their ideas.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Note that the exercises described herein engaged the students in active learning because the exercises had the following attributes:

“Students [were] involved in more than listening.

Less emphasis [was] placed on transmitting information and more on developing students' skills.

Students [were] involved in higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation).

Students [were] engaged in activities (e.g., reading, discussing, writing).

[The professors placed] greater emphasis ... on students' exploration of their own attitudes and values.”

Gerald F. Hess, *Principle 3: Good Practice Encourages Active Learning*, 49 *J. Legal Educ.* 401, 401 (September 1999) (quoting Charles C. Bonwell & James A. Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* 1–2 (1991)).

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<sup>14</sup> The responder system we used created polling and results slides within a PowerPoint presentation.

“Once students made their selections on paper, they used a polling system to respond to the multiple-choice questions by entering their answers into an electronic keypad.”

“The law students preferred learning on their own or in pairs, as opposed to learning in small or large groups.”

Time did not permit the authors to move to the last phase of the class—giving students an opportunity to draft their own effective argument-paragraph topic sentences. Such an exercise would have engaged the students in active learning and would have provided the students, especially the Visual-Text and Tactual learners, with an opportunity to employ newly acquired skills in an environment where they could receive constructive feedback.

### C. Feedback on the Demonstration Lesson

Before the authors released the students, they asked them a few reflective questions using the polling system. The students indicated that they preferred this set of exercises to any other portion of the class—including the initial lecture that illustrated effective topic sentences by using demonstrative aids and discussions with peers.<sup>16</sup> Students also indicated that the exercise they preferred most was the sentence-strip exercise that required the students to reassemble an argument paragraph.<sup>17</sup> One student reported that she liked the sentence-strip exercise best because it allowed her to consider a set of sentences and “put it into something . . . that makes sense.”<sup>18</sup> The students additionally indicated

that they preferred to work alone,<sup>19</sup> but when given the opportunity in class, they chose to work in pairs.<sup>20</sup> One student indicated that although “in general” she preferred to work individually, when working on in-class exercises she chooses to work with other people because “it’s nice to have feedback from other people to see their input.”<sup>21</sup> Finally, the students expressed an overwhelming preference for answering questions using the anonymous polling system, rather than discussing an answer with peers or responding individually in front of the entire class.<sup>22</sup> When asked to explain this preference, one student indicated that she liked the responder system because it was anonymous and active.<sup>23</sup>

### D. Conclusion

The students’ responses to the lesson confirmed what the authors learned about the students from the BE Survey. The law students preferred learning on their own or in pairs, as opposed to learning in small or large groups. Most students needed ample opportunity to verbalize what they were learning, and many students preferred Tactual and Kinesthetic learning opportunities. The demonstration lesson

<sup>16</sup> The question posed to the class was “I learned most about topic and thesis sentences from: 1) the initial overview; 2) the objectives of the class; 3) the diagram; 4) the exercises; 5) discussion with peers; 6) discussion with the whole class; 7) I learned nothing about topic sentences and thesis statements.” Of those students that responded, 62 percent chose “4) the exercises,” 28 percent chose “6) discussion with the whole class,” 7 percent chose “3) the diagram,” and 3 percent chose “1) the initial overview” (statistical slides on file with the authors).

<sup>17</sup> The question posed to the class was “What part of the exercises was most helpful in furthering your knowledge of thesis and topic sentences? 1) Multiple choice questions; 2) Listing attributes of thesis and topic sentences; 3) Drafting topic and thesis sentences; 4) Paragraph puzzle; 5) Peer conversations; 6) Whole class discussions; 7) Nothing furthered my knowledge of thesis and topic sentences.” Of those students that responded, 38 percent chose “4) Paragraph puzzle,” 24 percent chose “3) Drafting topic and thesis sentences,” 24 percent chose “1) Multiple choice questions,” 14 percent chose “6) Whole class discussions,” and 7 percent chose “2) Listing attributes of thesis and topic sentences” (statistical slides on file with the authors).

<sup>18</sup> DVD: Class recorded on February 25, 2008, in the Florin and Roebig Courtroom at Stetson University College of Law, Gulfport, Fla. (on file with the authors).

<sup>19</sup> When the class was asked “Generally, do you prefer 1) Working individually; 2) Working with a partner; 3) Working in groups,” 72 percent of those students that responded chose “1) Working individually,” 14 percent chose “2) Working with a partner” and 14 percent chose “3) Working in groups” (statistical slides on file with the authors).

<sup>20</sup> The question posed to the class was “When you were given the opportunity to work in groups, did you: 1) Choose to work individually? 2) Choose to work with a partner? 3) Choose to work with a group of other students.” Of those students who responded, 55 percent chose “2) Choose to work with a partner,” 24 percent chose “1) Choose to work individually?,” and 21 percent chose “3) Choose to work with a group of other students” (statistical slides on file with the authors).

<sup>21</sup> *Supra* note 19.

<sup>22</sup> When asked “What type of responses did you favor? 1) Responding to questions asked by professors to the whole class; 2) Responding to questions with the responder system; 3) Responding to questions of your peers,” 83 percent chose “2) Responding to questions with the responder system,” 10 percent chose “3) Responding to questions of your peers,” and 7 percent chose “1) Responding to questions asked by professors to the whole class” (statistical slides on file with the authors).

<sup>23</sup> *Supra* note 19.

described herein made effective and efficient use of those learning opportunities.

By teaching nontraditionally and outside their own teaching and learning styles, the authors may have had to devote more time to planning the demonstration lesson than they would have spent planning a traditional lecture-format class, but the class was so effective for the students that the extra time was well worth it. The professors also took several risks by using some creativity in developing lessons, especially with the demonstrative aids, the polling system, and the sentence-strip exercise.

These lessons could have failed and in that manner, inhibited learning. However, in the end, such risk-taking increased the authors' enthusiasm in teaching the class, which in turn amplified the students' enthusiasm for learning,<sup>24</sup> and the risks the authors took actively engaged the students. Gerald Hess has written, "[A]ctive learning methods are essential tools to achieve many of the critical goals of legal education. . . ."<sup>25</sup> As the demonstration lesson illustrates, when professors adapt instruction to student learning preferences, students actively engage and are more likely to master the material.

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#### Appendix A: Stetson Group Profile of Spring 2008 Entering Class

Physiological Elements	Strong	Moderate	It Depends	Moderate	Strong
<b>Early Morning</b>	10 (20%)	16 (32%)	11 (22%)	8 (16%)	5 (10%)
	Not Early Morning			Early Morning	
<b>Late Morning/Early Afternoon</b>	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	20 (40%)	16 (32%)	3 (6%)
	Not Late Morning/Early Afternoon			Late Morning/Early Afternoon	
<b>Late Afternoon</b>	2 (4%)	20 (40%)	12 (24%)	14 (28%)	2 (4%)
	Not Late Afternoon			Late Afternoon	
<b>Evening</b>	13 (26%)	9 (18%)	11 (22%)	13 (26%)	4 (8%)
	Not Evening			Evening	
<b>Intake</b>	4 (8%)	11 (22%)	23 (46%)	11 (22%)	1 (2%)
	Less Intake			More Intake	
<b>Mobility</b>	4 (8%)	21 (42%)	16 (32%)	6 (12%)	3 (6%)
	Less Mobility			More Mobility	

<sup>24</sup> *Best Practices*, *supra* note 6 at 125.

<sup>25</sup> Hess, *supra* note 15 at 417.

<b>Emotional Elements</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>It Depends</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Strong</b>
<b>Motivation</b>	0 (0)	3 (6%)	43 (86%)	4 (8%)	0 (0)
	Internally Motivated			Externally Motivated	
<b>Task Persistence</b>	0 (0)	7 (14%)	22 (44%)	16 (32%)	5 (10%)
	Multi-Task Persistent			Single-Task Persistent	
<b>Conformity</b>	3 (6%)	15 (30%)	31 (62%)	1 (2%)	0 (0)
	Less Conforming			More Conforming	
<b>Structure</b>	0 (0)	5 (10%)	34 (68%)	9 (18%)	2 (4%)
	Less Structure			More Structure	

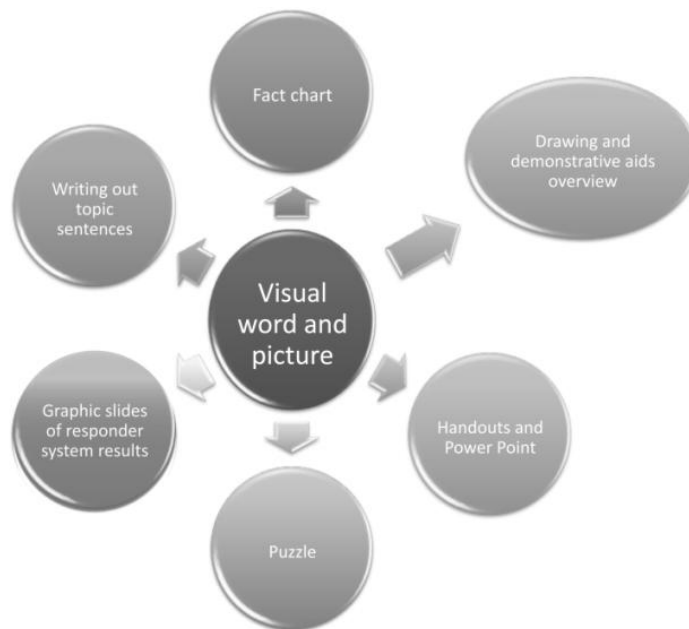
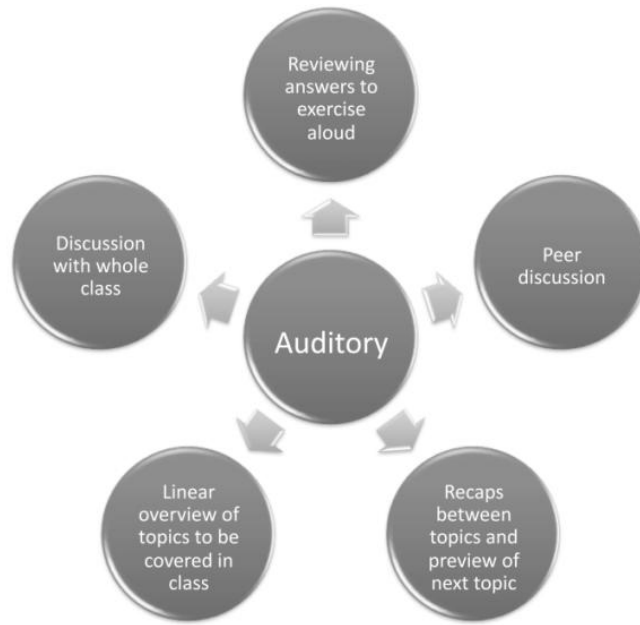
<b>Sociological Elements</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>It Depends</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Strong</b>
<b>Alone</b>	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	13 (26%)	23 (46%)	12 (24%)
	Alone Less Preferred			Alone More Preferred	
<b>Pair</b>	1 (2%)	7 (14%)	24 (48%)	14 (28%)	4 (8%)
	Pair Less Preferred			Pair More Preferred	
<b>Small Group</b>	8 (16%)	18 (36%)	22 (44%)	2 (4%)	0 (0)
	Small Group Less Preferred			Small Group More Preferred	
<b>Large Group</b>	25 (50%)	16 (32%)	9 (18%)	0 (0)	0 (0)
	Large Group Less Preferred			Large Group More Preferred	
<b>Authority</b>	1 (2%)	6 (12%)	19 (38%)	16 (32%)	8 (16%)
	Less Authority			More Authority	
<b>Variety</b>	9 (18%)	22 (44%)	17 (34%)	2 (4%)	0 (0)
	Less Variety			More Variety	

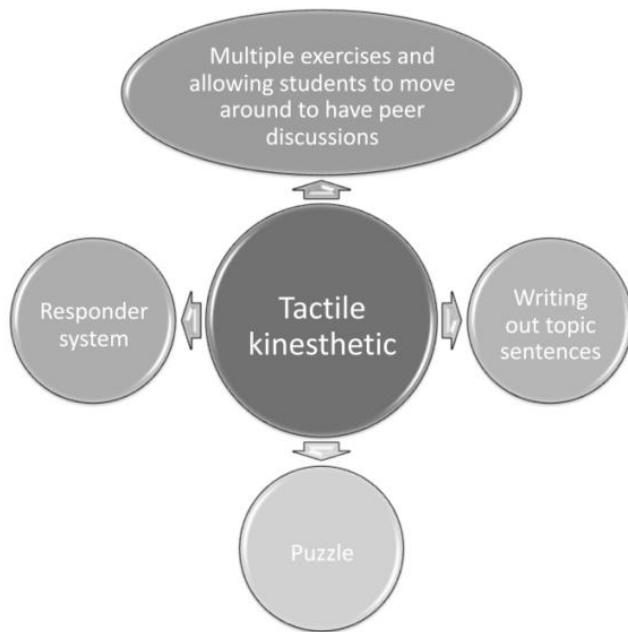
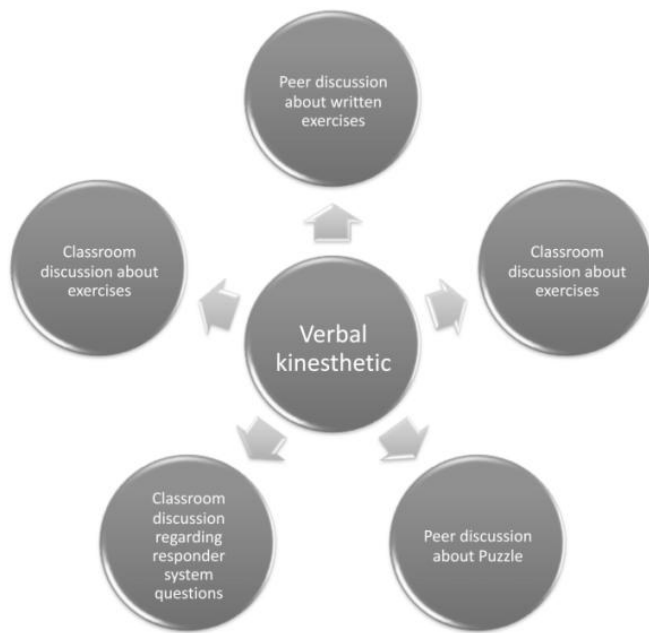
<b>Perceptual Elements</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>It Depends</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Strong</b>
<b>Auditory</b>	4 (8%)	5 (10%)	13 (26%)	23 (46%)	5 (10%)
	Less Auditory			More Auditory	
<b>Visual Picture</b>	0 (0)	4 (8%)	20 (40%)	22 (44%)	4 (8%)
	Less Visual Picture			More Visual Picture	
<b>Visual Word</b>	0 (0)	0 (0)	15 (30%)	28 (56%)	7 (14%)
	Less Visual Word			More Visual Word	
<b>Tactual</b>	0 (0)	1 (2%)	33 (66%)	15 (30%)	1 (2%)
	Less Tactual			More Tactual	
<b>Kinesthetic</b>	0 (0)	6 (12%)	35 (70%)	8 (16%)	1 (2%)
	Less Kinesthetic			More Kinesthetic	
<b>Auditory Verbal</b>	0 (0)	0 (0)	11 (22%)	25 (50%)	14 (28%)
	Less Auditory Verbal			More Auditory Verbal	

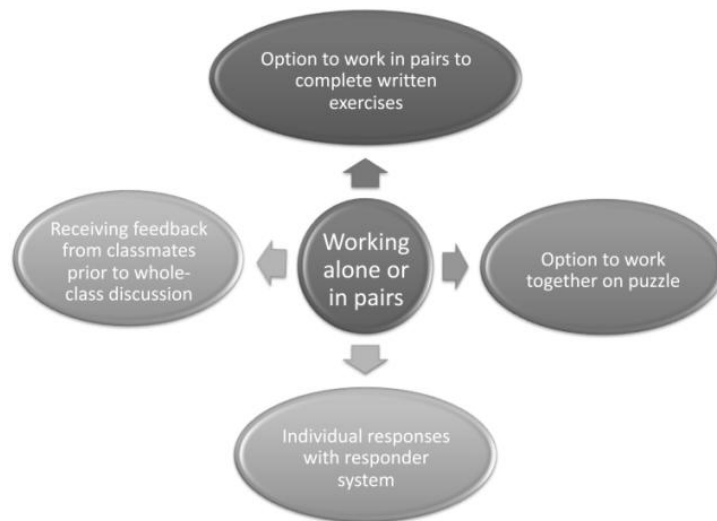
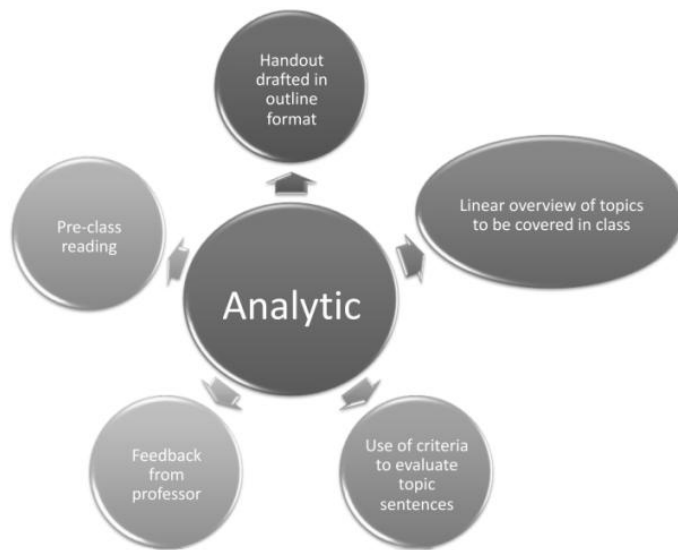
<b>Psychological Elements</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>It Depends</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Strong</b>
<b>Analytic/Global</b>	1 (2%)	17 (34%)	25 (50%)	7 (14%)	0 (0)
	Analytic		Integrated	Global	
<b>Reflective/Impulsive</b>	3 (6%)	12 (24%)	28 (56%)	7 (14%)	0 (0)
	Reflective			Impulsive	

<b>Environmental Elements</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>It Depends</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Strong</b>
<b>Sound</b>	19 (38%)	20 (40%)	10 (20%)	1 (2%)	0 (0)
	Quiet			Sound	
<b>Light</b>	1 (2%)	7 (14%)	16 (32%)	17 (34%)	9 (18%)
	Low Light			Bright Light	
<b>Temperature</b>	2 (4%)	16 (32%)	21 (42%)	9 (18%)	2 (4%)
	Warm Temperature			Cool Temperature	
<b>Seating</b>	0 (0)	4 (8%)	22 (44%)	13 (26%)	11 (22%)
	Informal Seating			Formal Seating	

Appendix B: Diagrams Linking Learning Styles with Demonstration Lesson Components







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