

Harnessing the Learning Style Preferences of Criminal Offenders

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The educational histories of most criminal offenders reveal strong similarities and common problems. Though one history could never fit everyone, there is enough data to support the fact that many of these individuals share an educational experience full of failure and frustration. Like their public school colleagues, correctional educators know these histories by heart. The typical list reads as follows: doesn't reach his/her potential, seems disinterested, excessively truant, easily bored, disruptive, short attention span, needs immediate gratification, loves competition, refuses to do homework, rude, often uncooperative, excels in hands-on experiences.

Though this list is not exhaustive, it should help us to understand the problem that exists when we attempt to conduct educational programs in correctional institutions. Too often we ignore these histories as we design and implement educational programs aimed at the criminal offender or any other at-risk population. The results have been the creation of programs that are simply a mirror image of the educational structures that presently exist in most of our public schools.

Standard educational approaches and the learning style preferences of most criminal offenders are simply not compatible. Therefore, correctional education programs must be carefully tailored to fit the style in which offenders learn. Well-meaning as we are, many of our educational attempts are clearly out of touch with the needs of this population. Greater success will only come when we are willing to change our approach. This does not mean we have to give up our goals, objectives and evaluation process. It means that we must adjust our presentation to fit the way this target population learns.

In order to determine the specific learning style of a particular offender population, it is necessary to adopt a suitable personality testing instrument. There are many available, but most are overly clinical and hard to administer. I have developed a simplified instrument based on David Keirsey's interpretation of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. This tool identifies his four major personality types—SP, SJ, NT, NF—using a color designation. Each offender that enters our cognitive program takes this test to help the facilitator personalize the learning process for each group.

Agencies/Departments that are using Myers-Briggs-based instruments to test the personality styles find that the largest numbers of offenders have an SP personality. Describing the SP learner, Dr. David Keirsey states, "In school, the SP style is the most misunderstood and the most subject to denigration. This group is the least represented in institutions of higher learning and tends to have the lowest correlation between academic ability and grade point average. The truth is, unfortunately, that the usual classroom does not fit the unique learning style of the SP."¹

Research conducted in the state of California and other states reveals that most educators and administrators have an SJ or NT teaching style. This greatly adds to the problem because the SJ and NT teaching styles are very different from the way the SP is most comfortable learning. Comparing the following summaries of the styles of the SJ and the NT teachers to the SP student will immediately reveal the nature of the problem.

¹ David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates, *Please Understand Me*, 1984, p.122.

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SJ teachers focus on traditional educational content and approaches. They believe that students should want to learn and follow rules because it is expected; they rely on firm but fair discipline; their classrooms must be neat and orderly; they establish appropriate routine to let people know what to expect and to maintain the proper learning atmosphere; they present their lessons in carefully outlined lectures that relate directly to the course text or other reference materials; and they usually measure the success of their work through reading and writing assignments and tests.

NT teachers live to share their research with students. They expect students to engage in analytical and critical thinking; they believe that real learning is linked to the art of asking and answering important questions; they focus their educational emphasis on futuristic applications of ideas and theories; they are very comfortable with a lecture/discussion classroom format; they use logical but flexible lesson plans; they rely heavily on outside materials to aid in their classroom activities; and they expect students to be disciplined out of sheer interest in learning and exploring new things.

SP students seek a classroom environment that is open and free. They enjoy stimulating learning activities that are fun and physical; they dread pencil and paper projects; they become bored easily unless a teacher uses a wide variety of instructional strategies; they require immediate recognition for the accomplishments they make; they love to learn in competitive ways; they get involved when they can actually do what is being taught; and they need to see a direct application in their life of the things being taught.

Statistically, SPs can represent as much as 60-70 percent of an offender population, while 50-60 percent of a correctional education staff are typically SJs or NTs. Is it any wonder that most of the current offender programs are designed by SJ and NT teachers? On this subject Keirse states, "Neither the SJ teachers nor the SJ administrators feel any need to defend their views on instruction or administration, even if it occurred to them to do so. Belonging to so massive a majority, the SJ educators unconsciously assume their views to be the norm and are continuously surprised when colleagues take issue with them on basics and fundamentals."²

NT and SJ administrators and teachers need to learn important secrets for reaching the offender population from their SP and NF colleagues. If we focus our attention on using the best of the four teaching styles, we will have the greatest chance of reaching a higher percentage of our target population. This varied educational approach will have the ability to reach SP, NF, SJ and NT learners (listed in order of their percentage of the offender population).

² Ibid., p. 155.

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Contrast and compare the styles of SP and NF teachers listed below to those of SJ and NT teachers. Though their style of teaching is better suited for the majority of offenders, SJ and NT styles are necessary to provide the structure for the exploratory style that helps SPs to thrive.

The NF teacher believes in individualized programs. They teach to inspire and nurture students; they love to create cooperative learning environments; they base their curriculum on the individual needs of their students; their lessons are adjustable to fit the emotional needs of the student; they try a variety of approaches to create individual ownership in the learning process; and they try to create a democratic discipline model within their classroom.

SP teachers use unstructured discipline. They establish an environment where students learn by doing; they use games and activities to enhance learning; they strive to wrap information in a practical format for immediate applications; they shun routine and focus learning on the “here and now.”

Without abandoning basic cognitive skills and value enhancement, correctional educational programs must not appear to be old wine in new bottles. They must instruct in ways that run contrary to standard educational approaches and speak to a unique audience. Learning in these programs must be experienced in an atmosphere of exploration and discovery and not in a world of rote and facts. Theories must not be offered in place of practice and, finally, variety of approach and methodology must drive the overall experience.

Dr. Erin Bigler, neuro-psychologist and former professor at the University of Texas at Austin, described the power of properly designed programs this way: This approach is more suited for the task of training individuals who have already failed in more traditional educational settings. Programs must follow a more inductive educational approach designed to require full brain involvement of the students. This discovery model of education is more student-centered and requires a facilitator rather than a traditional teacher.”

This is by no means a call to do away with traditional education. It is, however, a plea for reason, for understanding and for a united educational front. If we will combine all teaching styles in an effort to reach all the learning styles, we all will be edified in our efforts. Our desire must be to speak to others in the educational language they understand.

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Keirsey's Four Major Personality Types

SJ - Gold	Highly organized; ability to stick to and complete detailed tasks; stable and dependable; highly responsible; neat and orderly; put work before play; believes it is important to obey the rules and follow those who are in authority; belong to organizations and groups that provide traditional reinforcement and support; important to be on time and prepared; uncomfortable with change unless it is fully explained and gradually implemented; strong sense of right and wrong; can be motivated by feelings of guilt.
NT - Green	Independent thinker; non-conformist; constantly analyzing; more comfortable working with data and information than people; work must be challenging in order to be motivated towards its completion; gets hooked on ideas and concepts and can't seem to let go of them; decisions are difficult—must be certain not making a mistake; issues are filled with a multiplicity of possible choices or outcomes.
NF - Blue	Nurturing person drawn to the helping professions where they can assist others as they learn to live more meaningful lives; loves to talk to others about their feelings; considers how others are affected by their decisions; will alter plans to avoid a conflict or contention; deeply romantic; looks for the true meaning of life; want cooperation to replace the need to declare winners and losers; skilled motivator; effective communicator; sincere.
SP - Orange	Thrives on excitement and physical challenges; endless supply of energy to try new and exciting things; easily bored by structured jobs; needs independence and freedom to explore hunches and ideas; following rules and procedures get in the way of completing a task; believes ends justify the means; thrives on physical contact and competition; learns by doing; would rather figure something out for themselves rather than ask for help; needs to take chances in order to obtain enjoyment.

Further information on this subject and cognitive programs can be obtained by contacting Positive Solutions Associates at 215-638-2340 or at www.information@ThinkRight.com

A Program by Any Other Name Would Still Be a Life Skills Program

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There are many different names given to the cognitive restructuring and life skills programs that are presently being adopted by the criminal justice world. Most, however, come from the same philosophical approach. They are typically based on the belief that criminal offenders have not learned to understand the consequences of their behaviors, or how to make proper decisions, and/or how to take their place as a productive member of society. The hope for the success of this approach is genuine, but we must be careful that we do not jump after this approach without healthy skepticism and an analytical eye.

Those adopting these programs should be aware of several factors as they work to create a systematic program to educate offenders. These factors should be very obvious but they still need to be discussed in detail. Each factor will be presented individually to determine the educational approach that will provide the highest likelihood for success.

Factor 1: No program will reach every person.

Anytime someone claims to have a program that will reach everyone a red flag should immediately appear. People are not like machines to be fixed by using the proper tools and carefully following the instruction manual. Each individual has the will to choose what they will do in any given circumstance.

We are truly involved in the only professions where we cannot touch the thing we want to change or fix. Imagine the frustration of an auto mechanic if all he or she could use to tune up an engine were words. Their recidivism rates would be even higher than those we are criticized of having, if they had to depend on their ability to convince a car to want to change before their efforts were considered successful.

A program should be designed to motivate people to want to participate. It should not resemble traditional educational models. To increase the likelihood of success, it must be based on educational principles that have proven to be most effective in meeting the learning style needs of offenders.

Factor 2: People who have never been involved in criminal behavior have a hard time understanding why an individual would commit a serious crime.

How can someone choose to hurt, maim, rob, rape or kill another person? It seems unimaginable. These feelings are the reason many in our field are constantly looking for an explanation for why a person would perpetrate these kinds of acts. "Surely it's because they are mentally ill or they were sexually or physically abused or bi-polar." There has to be some easy explanation. In the book, *Inside the Criminal Mind*, we were shown, many for the first time, that some people just choose to do these things because they like it.

These premeditated acts are based on values. Except for those that are mentally impaired, a values-based educational program will help separate those whose values are negative from those who have simply not learned the skills and the peace that comes from living by their values. A life skills program must be heavily values-based in order to have the impact necessary to force people to face the truth about themselves. It cannot, however, exist to merely dictate values. It must create an atmosphere for individuals to own and examine their own values to determine how well they serve each individual.

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Factor 3: Some people commit crimes because they like it.

This is an ugly piece of truth about some human behavior. Offenders who have negative values will not get much from a life skills program. Some have identified these individuals as being amoral or psychopathic. We spend too much time trying to work with these individuals when it would be in their and the public's best interest if they were just kept out of circulation.

Factor 4: No program, no matter how well-designed, will help a person who is not sincerely committed to changing their life.

There's an old joke that goes something like this: "How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?" The answer is: "One, but the light bulb has to really want to change." It is true here. As mentioned before, a successful program must have the ability to draw people in and create in them a desire to change. For the vast majority of offenders that means the use of a nontraditional educational approach. If an offender can see that a program will help them attain what he or she has determined to be most important, they become personally committed to the process. Then, and only then, does a program have the power to affect lasting changes.

Factor 5: Most criminal offenders are nontraditional learners.

We know most offenders have failed in traditional educational settings. Many have never finished high school and have limited reading, writing, and math skills. They failed once when standard educational practices were used. Why do we think that using the same failed approach again will produce a different outcome?

Drastic times require drastic measures. The latest research is showing that nontraditional learners need to have information and new skills presented to them in ways that are consistent with the way they learn. The opposite is true of more traditional learners. They typically have better skills at translating and adapting facts and information to meet the needs of their learning style. Therefore, it is essential that we mold our approach to meet the learning needs of the nontraditional learners who make up the majority of our populations if we are committed to create the highest possibility for their future success.

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Factor 6: Most programs designed to help offenders change their behavior are based on traditional educational strategies.

Examine the classic drug campaign, “Just say no.” It speaks to those who see “no” as a viable option. Nontraditional learners respond to “Just say no” with a resounding “How do you spell it?” In the same way, most cognitive restructuring and life skills programs utilize traditional educational paraphernalia such as overhead projectors and transparencies.

Many are based on a lecture format with slight variations on the old theme of teacher talks-student listens or student talks while everyone else listens. This “one-versus-everybody” approach rarely generates the personal involvement necessary to create an intrinsic bond with the material or skills being taught.

Factor 7: Skill-based programs must provide a balanced educational approach.

In education, as well as corrections, we keep getting ourselves caught in a cyclic time warp. We are presently entering the period where we are beginning to reuse the failed programs and philosophies of the 1960s. We have witnessed the staggering increases in crime during our more recent “lock ‘em up” period and therefore many are looking elsewhere for answers.

The key to success is not to abandon altogether former approaches by jumping from bandwagon to bandwagon. It is by adopting sound educational philosophies that have proven to be successful. Typically, these successes have come from creating a balanced attack. From the traditional educational approaches, we need to learn to be and hold people accountable. We need to become more competency-based and result-oriented. From the non-traditionalist, we need to involve the whole person in the process. We need to make things immediately practical and usable. We need to allow for process and not be more concerned with product.

Factor 8: We need to stop spending our precious resources on offenders who are trying to con the system. Offenders that ruin the ability for others to learn should not be tolerated in programs. Ways should be found to make it less rewarding for them to disrupt the process so that those who wish to apply themselves can become the real winners. We spend entirely too much time dealing with troublemakers at the expense of those who are looking for a positive way out of their present situation. As heartless as it may seem, it is often necessary to sacrifice the one for the needs of the whole.

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Factor 9: External changes last only as long as a person is under supervision or in custody.

Programs look good when an individual feigns compliance to reduce the pressure placed on them. When the pressure to perform is lifted, all motivation to comply is also lost. Though it may look like a change was made on the surface, in reality nothing changed and the individual used their same old con to get what they wanted.

These programs must generate deep personal involvement in order to create the internal atmosphere necessary to motivate a lasting change. This approach must not be superficial, rather it must be deep-rooted and cause serious introspection and self-examination.

Factor 10: Lasting change is internal.

Programs that generate this serious introspection and self-examination can create internal change. This type of change is difficult to achieve, but it is wonderful to witness. It is when the lights turn on and a person realizes they have the ability to open up new worlds of personal discovery. Witnessing this type of intrinsic change is often the goal of individuals who have chosen this profession. It need not happen so rarely and can be greatly enhanced by making sure that these ten factors are considered carefully before implementing a cognitive/life skills program.

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