

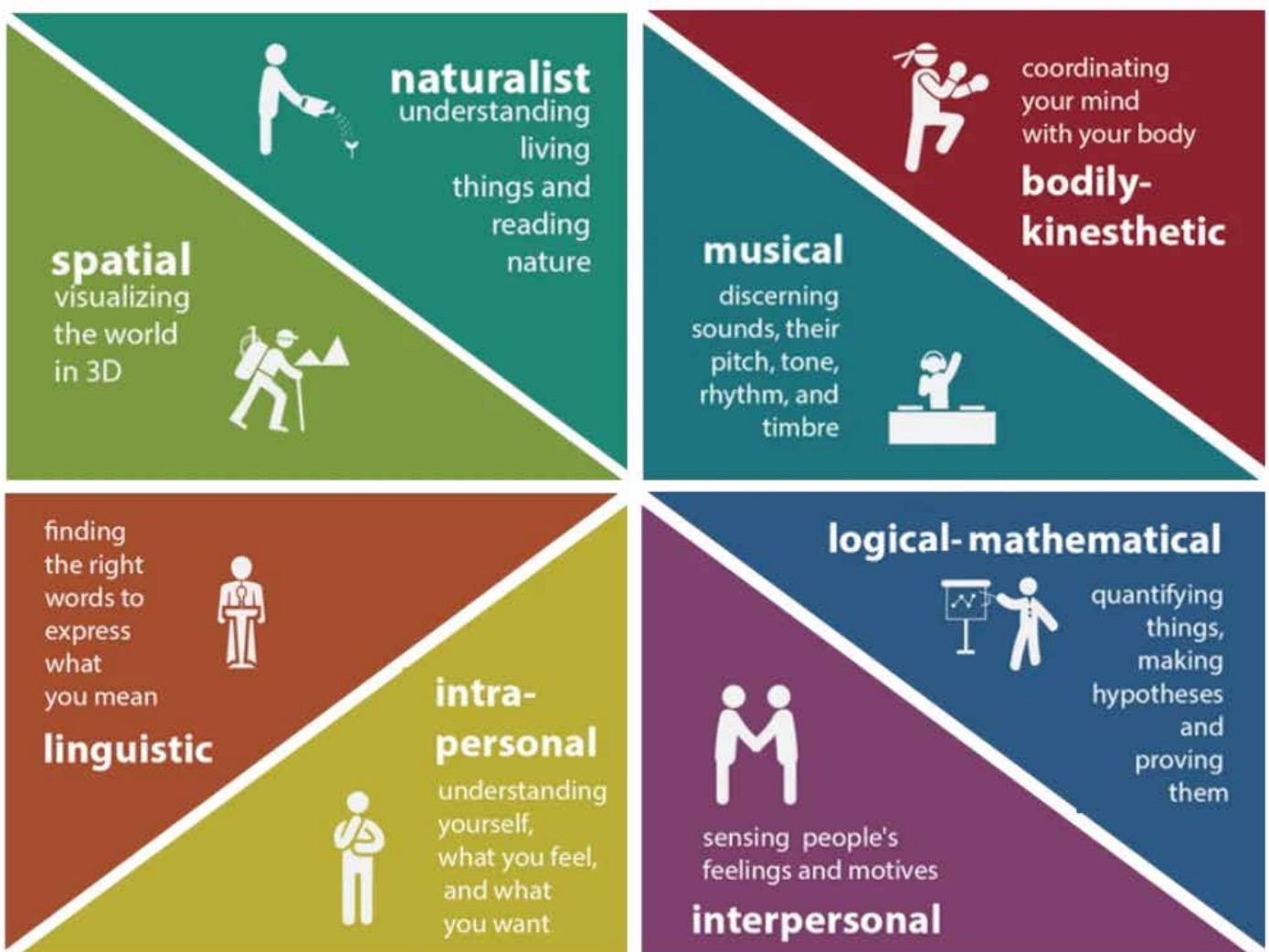


Relational Learners:
A Few Considerations

Introduction

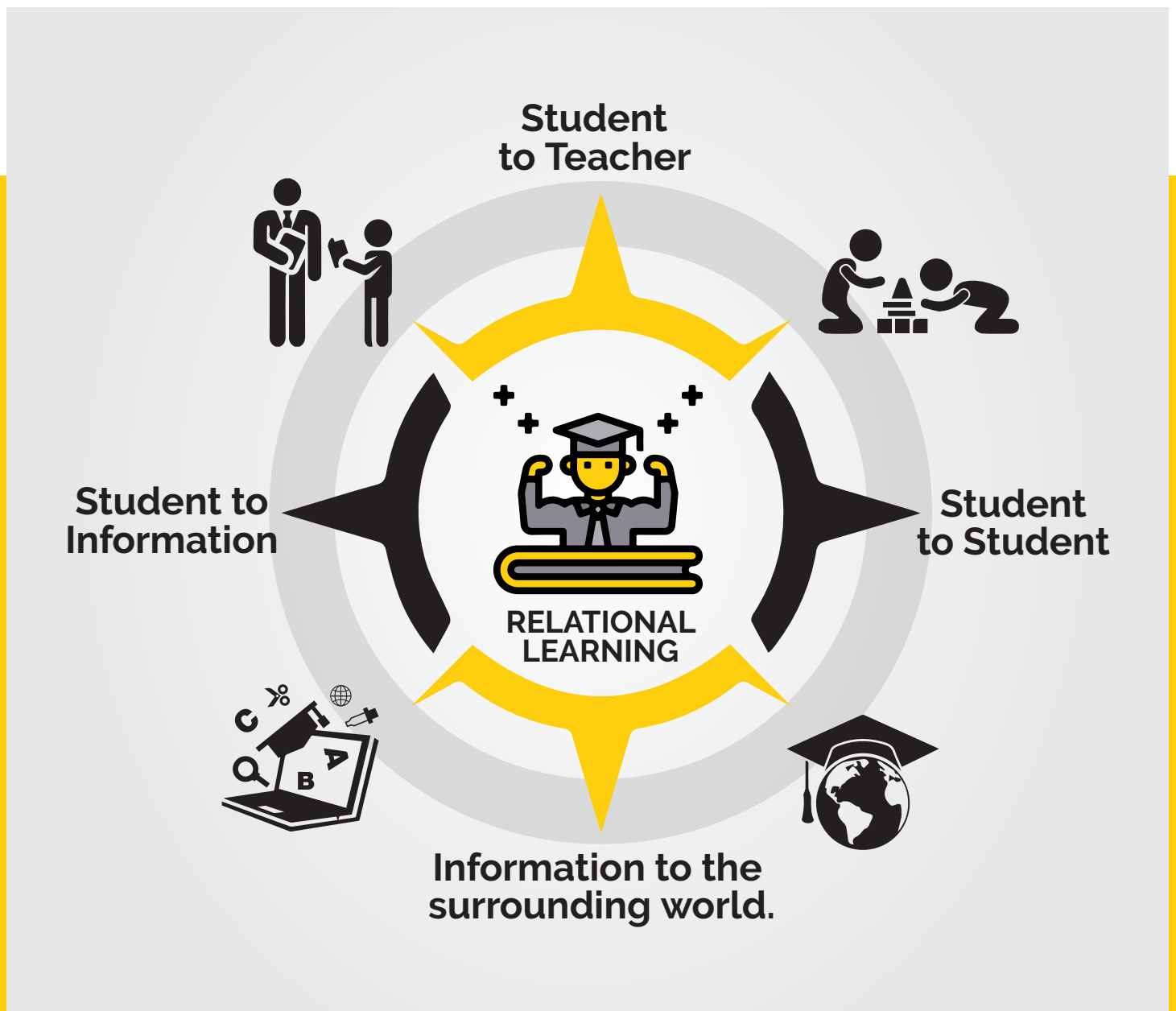
Understanding students as learners is critical for classroom teachers. Though this can be a moving target for younger children, it is valuable information. It helps teachers program for students and differentiate to meet learning needs. Not all lessons can or should account for all learning styles; it's not sustainable. But as teachers differentiate, we can account for student learning modalities over time. It is also important to note that though students have a dominant learning style, most have a secondary learning style that supports learning and information processing. But what are learning styles?

Learning styles can be defined as the dominant manner in which individuals process, learn, manipulate, and receive information. Howard Gardner was a developmental psychologist and educator at Harvard concerned with American's focus on testing and students regurgitating information. Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Friere calls this banking: the idea that students are empty vessels in which teachers pour in knowledge. But both Friere and Gardner noted that children are filled with capacity for conceptual learning and possessed talents that school typically stifle. Gardner's research expanded our view of intelligence and learning. His theory of multiple intelligences postulates that humans have multiple ways of absorbing and expressing knowledge and expertise. These ways were dubbed learning styles and include intrapersonal, interpersonal, logic/mathematical, linguistic, naturalistic, spatial, body/kinesthetic and musical. The graphic below provides more information on Gardner's learning styles and theory of multiple intelligences:



Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is part of a larger conversation about learning. Other learning theorists include Bernice McCarthy's 4MAT learning styles. Roger Sperry postulated on the differences between left and right brain dominant learning propensities. Buried in this conversation is the work of Dr. Asa Hilliard. He was a prominent educational psychologist who wrote and lectured on the challenges of African-American children in American schools. Hilliard forwarded that many students were relational learners. Relational learning forwards that learners consider the impact of knowledge and information from a global and universal perspective. There is no knowledge for knowledge's sake; it must have practical application. Relational learners consider the information and how they relate to it, what it means for their existence, and how the information impacts or influences the world of the learner and the world in a larger context. In Dr. Janice Hale's book *Black Students: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles*, she postulates that relational learners have more difficulty in schools because Eurocentric pedagogy and psychology rewards analytical tasks.

Relational learning can encompass knowledge acquired through relationships with teachers. Relational learners are sensitive to their relationships, including relationships student to teacher, student to student, student to information, and information to the surrounding world.



The chart below compares analytical and relational learners. Because schooling is linear, logical, and sequential, analytical thinking is emphasized more than relational learning. See below:

Relational vs analytic learning style

Relational Tendencies	Analytical Tendencies
freedom	regulations
variation	standardization
novelty	regulation
approximation	precision
meaning has context	meanings are universal
inductive	deductive
affective/ emotional	cognitive
global, holistic	atomistic, detail
people-centered	object-focused
intuitive	structured/sequential thinking
relationships impact learning	relationships have less impact on learning

Relational Learner tendencies



Freedom

Students need choice and dominion. Schools are predicated on compliance and conformity. When children are not given choices they lack control of their education which is ultimately the loss of their identities. For African American children, the lack of voice and freedom is a process of indoctrination and identity theft. Freedom allows children to explore their character, strengths, identities and how they fit into the world around them.



Variation

There is more than one answer, and multiple ways to arrive at answers or conclusions. This is not to say that $4+5=10$. It does mean that variation is part of learning and growing. There are multiple perspectives and they need to be shared and embraced. Teachers and students make allowances for divergent interpretations of events and meanings. Variation embraces that students come to conclusions or thoughts that differ from dominant paradigms. Variation also asks teachers to change things to avoid the mundane and predictable.



Novelty

There is growth in creative processes and perspectives when premium is placed on novelty. This is not to say that analytic learners are not creative or spontaneous. But relational learners are not stimulated by the opportunity to think outside of the box and use the power of their imaginations. Rote memorization and regurgitation are mundane for relational learners. It stifles their ability to create or think critically of their own responses. Because relational learners on average focus less on details and more on the bigger picture, they have an easier time turning the "big picture" on its head. This is especially true when teachers embrace novelty and variation.



Inductive

Learners use their observations to create theories about the world. They move from the specific to general. This is the opposite of deductive reasoning where learners are given general facts and make their own conclusions or observations. There is more focus on probability than certainty. Inductive reasoning flows from the bottom up as opposed to the top down. In classroom settings, this is closely related to novelty and variation. We listen to children's ideas and observations even though they are not attached to facts or trends, instead of dismissing ideas and observations because they are not derived from science.



Approximation

Relational learners sometimes do not show precision of language. They are often close to the answer but may not express their thoughts with accuracy or academic language. They are in the ballpark. This is even true with written responses; grammar can sometimes be elusive or inconsistent. Their behavior sometimes more closely resembles acceptable norms in their home communities as opposed to following school rules to the letter.



Meaning has context

Relational learners appreciate connectivity between part and the whole, and parts to other parts. Meaning making must consider relationships between entities. These learners have the capacity to build bridges socially and empathize with others. These learners also foster creativity as they grapple with science, history, environment and social contexts. They provide more expansive explanations as to why phenomenon exists and interact the way they do.



Effective/emotive

Cognitive ability, logical thinking and rationality are critical to the way we interpret information. Relational learners remind us that effective and emotive interactions are important too. Effective learners are not governed by emotions, but they use their emotions willingly and seemingly without effort. Effective/emotive learners also are sensitive to the relationship between themselves and others and the relationship between other students. Strong relationships fuel their sense of belonging. Effective/emotive is closely related to Howard Gardner's interpersonal learning modality.



Global

Relational learners with a tendency to think globally, think whole to part. They are inductive thinkers. They consider entire structures and how different parts relate to each other. They make great mathematicians and engineers. But they also excel in social sciences as they consider the context of events and cause and effect. Global thinkers sometimes miss details because their focus is on the whole structure.



People-centered

Material objects have meaning but not as much as people. Rules and structures are only in place to support people. Being people centered means engaging tasks, but tackling those tasks with others. This also means that the connectivity with the others can be essential to task completion and authentic engagement.



Intuitive

These students have a "feel". Sometimes they land on correct answers because of gut instinct but may not be able to articulate how. They have a sixth sense. From an analytical perspective they may have difficulty sitting through standardized testing environments because of the sterile and unstimulating environment. Teachers sometimes need to show extra patience with these students. They tend to jump to conclusions about tasks or what's being asked because they are leaning on intuition, instead of following directions. They are not non-compliant, they simply jumped the gun.



What Relational Learners Say









Things have to be practical with real life applications for relational learners. These students are connected with the worlds they live in. Below is a cheat sheet of what relational learners say:

The Obvious	Not-So-Obvious
What does this have to do with me?	We just did this!
Why are we doing this?	How can this help me make money?
Can we work in groups?	This makes sense to me; it is easier. (especially when it is new content)
I like having a partner.	I do not have anything else to write.
They "sigh" when teachers introduce some material/content.	This is boring!
I do not remember everything you taught me, but I remember how you treated me!	Can we read (insert old text) again. I don't like this.
	This is wack!

Classroom support and suggestions

Relationships are critical. We must consider differentiated activities that connect to relational learners. Here are some ideas and considerations for the classroom. These are particularly important in middle and high school, when we force children to work individually with less conversation, group work, and even more testing for college preparation. Middle and high school teachers should also consider these suggestions because relationships are the bedrock of sound pedagogy, and it takes longer to build relationships at the high school level because of scheduling.

Suggestions include:

 <p>What percentage of activities involve working cooperatively in groups or pairs. Think at least 25% as a baseline.</p>	 <p>Give students the opportunity to think outside the box in reading, science, and social studies.</p>	 <p>What rules and structures can children make up or co-construct as they go?</p>	 <p>Infuse more arts integration into the product.</p>
 <p>Use less true/false or multiple choice and more presentations and skits that demonstrate learning. Can you say portfolio assessment?</p>	 <p>Ask children to create real world connectivity. Once units and skills are taught, ask students to articulate how it is impactful in daily life.</p>	 <p>Never tell children to do something because you said so, or because the district is making you do it.</p>	 <p>Exposure can take place on field trips (museums, business offices, the neighboring community etc.) Taking field trips may not seem revolutionary, but less than 10% of teachers take a field trip per month.</p>

For more information

on learning styles and differentiation for traditionally disenfranchised students

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