RESPONSE TO MEUNIER-CINKO

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At the core of Lydie Meunier-Cinko's paper lies a question which deals with diversity in humans: Can we account for and measure their differing abilities, affinities and motivations for learning? Are certain learners more inclined to learn faster and better in specific situations? Is the manner of presentation, sequencing, mode likely to make an impact on the amount of learning? While Meunier-Cinko focusses on a particular problem, namely gender differences in CALL-based group activities, she implicates the broader issues and, at the same time, deals with two adjacent problems that I would like to identify and briefly discuss.

Learning Styles

The notion of learning styles was introduced relatively recently to describe a possible relationship between learners' personality profiles and their learning performance. More specifically, the Meyers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator has been generally used for personality assessment as well as in the context of second language learning. The MBTI instrument was originally designed according to Jungian theories which base personality variations on orderly and systematic characteristics. Four characteristics are used to describe personalities: extraversion/intraversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, judgment/perception. Learners' assessments are expressed in terms of these axes and they reflect preferences in learning styles.

While it makes sense to try to address various learning styles in classrooms, the instructors' ability to do so is very limited since classroom time unfolds linearly while addressing different learning styles implies a parallel process. Instructors may, at different times, teach using different learning strategies, stressing symbolic, audio, graphic, or other approaches, but only a small segment of the student population would be affected at any given time. The rest must bear with the presentation, whether the approach is useful for them or not.

The computer is the only medium through which learning styles may be addressed directly in an interactive environment. It is the only means presently available to address multiple paths or multiple approaches to the same materials. Since one can design materials with many different presentations, it is possible to address several learning styles. What's more, it is possible to give the student the choice of manner of presentation.

The technology is progressing such that it will make a major impact on learning. Because it is now possible to store large amounts of information, including several media (a CD ROM can store the equivalent of 300,000 pages of information: audio, high resolution color images, video as well as text and programming), software which addresses multiple approaches will become available. No longer will students be forced to take a single path, but will be allowed to explore the medium and control the rate, the style, and the type of material they learn, thus accounting for individual differences in learning. The rigidity of traditional software will disappear.

Gender as a Socioeconomic Issue

Meunier-Cinko's paper also discusses at some length differences in learning patterns associated with gender. It may be argued that the concept of gender is in itself a more restricted form of broader distinctions, namely distinctions based on social factors. Monique Wittig, in a

recent essay entitled "The Category of Sex" argues that male/female distinctions are actually manifestations of a social struggle:

> Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order. Every system of domination establishes divisions at the material and economic level. Furthermore, the divisions are abstracted and turned into concepts by the masters, and later on by the slaves when they rebel and start to struggle... For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. [...] The class struggle is precisely that which resolves the contra-dictions between two opposed classes by abolishing them at the same time that it constitutes and reveals them as classes. The class struggle between women and men, which should be undertaken by all women, is that which resolves the contradictions between the sexes. (Monique Wittig, The Straight Mind, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 2-3.)

Following along this line of thought, Meunier-Cinko's paper could very coherently be expanded to include factors such as socioeconomic background differences which may rightly derive from the issue of gender. The project could be broadened to investigate such issues as learning differences in group activities where the groups are composed of students with similar economic backgrounds or groups with dissimilar economic backgrounds. Of course the issue of access to computers may also be investigated to determine if owning or being able to use computers regularly in the student's education makes any impact on learning. Cultural differences in the use of CALL may also be the subject of an expansion of the project.

Fundamentally, Meunier-Cinko proposes a project which touches on and tries to quantify the impact that CALL has on various human paradigms. As such, it is an important project.