Student athletic therapists can be good learners if they are given enough time to learn as well as instruction that is appropriate to their individual learning style. The task of effective instruction is to accommodate individual learning differences so that students can acquire the knowledge and skills and develop the attitudes required in the athletic therapy professions (Ford, 1978).

Inherent in this accommodation is the belief that equal treatment of all students may not produce equal results.

This article analyzes what contributes to effective learning for athletic therapy students: What are the students’ learning strategies? What conditions facilitate learning? How do students acquire clinical skills? How can learning experiences be structured in clinical education?

Learners usually have anxieties, needs, and problems that interfere with learning (Bradford, 1958). Mann et al. (1970) portrayed eight types of learners, five of which are germane to medical students and athletic therapy students:

1. Compliant: Good students who work hard and want to grasp the material and comply with the teacher’s requests.
2. Anxious Dependent: Students who depend on the teacher for learning and are anxious about evaluation; they worry about grades, find it hard to engage in dialogue, and favor lectures.
3. Independent: Students who approach the material in calm, unbiased, and often imaginative ways.
4. Sniper: Students who are uninvolved; may be argumentative but are often evasive when confronted with a specific issue.
5. Silent: Students who feel incapable and are often characterized by what they do not do.

Learning Strategies

In the past we have tried to understand learning by examining learning styles. This has not really predicted student success, however, so other means for evaluating how students learn are being examined (Bonham, 1989).

An area that is beginning to draw interest is in the field of learning strategies—the external behaviors an individual develops during the learning process which he or she elects to use in order to learn the task in question (Fellenz & Conti, 1989, p. 7).

Five areas of learning strategies have been identified (Conti & Fellenz, 1991). Individuals can be taught to use any and all of these learning strategies, but they eventually find a combination that proves successful for them:

1. Metacognition: Knowing about and directing one’s own thinking and learning process.
2. Metamotivation: Awareness of and control over factors that facilitate learning.
3. Memory: The storage, retention, and retrieval of knowledge.
4. Critical Thinking: A reflective thinking process that uses higher order thinking skills in order to improve learning.
5. Resource Management: The process of identification, evaluation, and use of resources relevant to the learning task.

Types of Learners

Research has revealed five distinct sets of learners based on their preferred choice of learning strategies (Kolody, 1997; Kolody & Conti, 1996):

Navigators

Navigators are very focused. They plan their learning, chart a course for success, organize themselves and their resources, and set about to follow this course of action. They are very goal oriented and make use of organizational skills.
to restructure information. They use lists and memory aids to stay on course.

Monitors

Monitors are very cognizant of their learning and will closely monitor their progress. They are similar to navigators but pay close attention to their progress by comparing it to external or internal standards as well as to previous learning. They make good use of resources and do well at testing assumptions. They also maintain direction by carefully planning when, where, and how to study.

Critical Thinkers

Critical thinkers rely heavily on all of the strategies for critical thinking. They test assumptions, generate alternatives, and practice conditional acceptance—assuming something to be true but keeping an open mind to other solutions. They are cognizant of their learning progress and also use organizational skills such as lists. They are very good at identifying resources and prefer a learning environment that encourages practical experience and hands-on activities.

Engagers

Engagers are passionate learners who are emotionally engaged in learning for the sake of learning and are confident in their abilities. They monitor and adjust their learning to accomplish goals, but these usually are internal rather than external. These learners place a high value on the emotional relationship between the learner, the task, the environment, and the teacher.

Networkers

Networkers are the people learners. They rely heavily on dialogue, discussion, and networking with others to generate opinions and insights. They also initiate learning for internal rather than external reward, and often the process is more important than the product. They usually use organized memory strategies to store and retrieve information. They prefer brainstorming and trial-and-error learning.

Learning Strategies and the Clinical Instructor

Athletic health care educators can expect to find approximately equal numbers of all five groups of learners in their classrooms (Kolody & Conti, 1996; Lockwood, 1997). Although students can be taught other learning strategies, they tend to rely on those that have worked well for them in the past.

In light of this, the instructor needs to (a) provide the types of experiences most suitable for each learner, and (b) teach new learning strategies as well as reinforce existing ones.

Providing Suitable Experiences

Providing the most suitable types of experiences for each learner includes, for example, supplying immediate and specific feedback to Navigators to keep them on track. For their part, Engagers and Networkers find brainstorming sessions to be very valuable while Navigators and Monitors see them as a waste of time. Navigators like time frames and due dates while Engagers and Networkers don’t do well with artificially imposed deadlines.

Critical Thinkers prefer practical, hands-on activities that allow them to explore several options. For example, student athletic trainers in this category would like to see several ways to tape an injured ankle, have the opportunity to practice them all, and be allowed to decide which method best suits each situation.

For that same reason, Critical Thinkers don’t do well on multiple-choice tests; they prefer open-ended questions. If they