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Learning Styles of Physical Therapy and Physical Therapy Assistant Students in Accredited Physical Therapy Programs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the learning styles of Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) students and associate degree Physical Therapist Assistant (PTA) students and identify any association between their learning styles and examine the association between gender and age by learning style. Participants included 337 DPT and PTA students attending CAPTE accredited institutions with doctoral DPT or associate PTA programs in Tennessee and southwest Virginia. The Felder (1996) and Soloman Index of Learning Styles (ILS) was used to determine learning style preferences within 4 learning style dimensions (active-reflective, sensing-intuitive, visual-verbal, and sequential-global). Demographics included program of study, gender, age, ethnicity, and highest level of education. Participants were 18-63 years (mean age 25.87, standard deviation 5.62, median age 24); 205 (60.8%) DPT students, 132 (39.2%) PTA students; 205 (60.8%) female, 132 (39.2%) male.

Five research questions with 20 null hypotheses were evaluated using Cross-tabulated tables with frequency counts, percentages, and chi square tests. Statistical significance was established using a .05 alpha. Only one null hypothesis was rejected (Ho5: There is no difference in the active-reflective learning style among PTA students by age). There was no significant difference between the learning styles of DPT and PTA students. Participants were found to be balanced on the active-reflective dimension, sensing on the sensing-intuitive dimension, visual on the visual-verbal dimension, and balanced on the sequential-global dimension; preferences were toward the active, sensing, visual, and sequential learning styles.

This study demonstrated that DPT and PTA students have a balanced learning style with a strong preference toward active, sensing, visual, and sequential. Therefore, teaching methods should provide an instructional environment that addresses these learning style preferences. The student's awareness of his or her learning style will enable the learner to capitalize on strengths and develop areas of weakness. This ability to employ effective learning strategies will equip an individual for the challenges of his or her chosen profession and lifelong learning.