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DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS?

A Critique of Learning Styles

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I WORK WITH a lot of different schools and listen to a lot of teachers talk. Nowhere have I seen a greater conflict between "craft knowledge" or what teachers know (or at least think they know) and "academic knowledge" or what researchers know (or at least think they know) than in the area of learning styles. Over the years, my experience has told me to trust teachers; it has also taught me that teachers' craft knowledge is generally on target. I don't mean to say that teachers are always right, but they have learned a great deal from their thousands of observations of children learning in classrooms. So, when teachers talk about the need to take into account children's learning styles when teaching, and researchers roll their eyes at the sound of the term "learning styles," there is more to it than meets the eye.

The whole notion seems fairly intuitive. People are different. Certainly different people might learn differently from each other. It makes sense. Consider the following from the Web site of the National Reading Styles Institute, a major proponent of the application of learning styles to the teaching of reading:

> We all have personal styles that influence the way we work, play, and make decisions. Some people are very analytical, and they think in a logical, sequential way. Some students are visual or auditory learners; they learn best by seeing or hearing. These students are likely to conform well to traditional methods of study.
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> Some people (we call them "global learners") need an idea of the whole picture before they can understand it, while "analytic learners" proceed more easily from the parts to the whole. Global learners also tend to learn best when they can touch what they are learning or move around while they learn. We call these styles of learning "tactile" and "kinesthetic." In a strictly traditional classroom, these students are often a problem for the teacher. She has trouble keeping them still or quiet. They seem unable to learn to read. (http://www.nrsi.com/about.html)

This all seems reasonable, but it isn't.

Research and Learning Styles

The reason researchers roll their eyes at learning styles is the utter failure to find that assessing children's learning styles and matching to instructional methods has any effect on their learning. The area with the most research has been the global and analytic styles referred to in the NRSI blurb above. Over the past 30 years, the names of these styles have changed—from "visual" to "global" and from "auditory" to "analytic"—but the research results have not changed.

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Some of these are *learning preferences*, or how an individual chooses to work. These might include whether a person prefers to work in silence or with music playing, in bright light or dim light, with a partner or alone, in a warm room or a cool room, etc.

Some of these are *cognitive styles*, such as whether a person tends to reflect before making a choice or makes it impulsively, or whether a person tends to focus on details or sees the big picture.

Some of these are *personality types*, such as whether a person is introverted or extroverted.

Some of these are *aptitudes*, like many of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. Gardner suggests that people vary along at least seven different dimensions—*linguistic* or the ability to use language, *logico-mathematical* or the ability to use reasoning especially in mathematics, *spatial* or the ability to use images or pictures, *bodily-kinesthetic* or the ability to control movement, *musical, interpersonal* or the ability to work with people, and *intrapersonal* or the thinking done inside oneself. The last two are more like personality types, rather than aptitudes or even learning styles. The others are Gardner's attempt to expand the notion of what we think is intelligent behavior to people who are skilled in music, or dance, or even in interpersonal relations. In contrast to the traditional vision of learning styles as either/or categories (either a person is visual or he or she is auditory), multiple intelligences are put forth by Gardner as separate abilities. A child may be strong in a few of these areas, or none of these areas.

What is a teacher to do with all this? If there are children who prefer to work with music, then the teacher might either provide Walkmans for those who prefer music or play music openly and provide earplugs for those who don't. If there are children who prefer to work in bright light, the teacher might seat those children over by the window. Children who like to snack while reading can be allowed to eat during class (healthy foods, of course). It would be easy to see how accommodating all of these preferences in a class could lead to chaos. How would a teacher lecture, give assignments, or even call to order a class in which a sizable proportion of the students was wearing earplugs? Or how does one regulate the temperature so part of the room is warm and part cool?

Others have used learning styles theory as a way of making sure that all the needs of diverse learners are being met. Marguerite Radenich used Gardner's model to examine literature study guides.[9] Her ideal was one that incorporated all of these ways of knowing into an integrated whole to be used to study adolescent literature. Thus, Gardner's model was used here to create more multidimensional instruction. This is very different from using these different styles to segregate children into groups where they would receive fairly one-dimensional instruction.

Thoughtful educators have tried to make this work, and perhaps it is workable, but trying to meet all of the preferences of a group of children would seem to take energy that would be better spent on other things. This is especially true since no one has proven that it works.

Learning Styles and Fortune Telling

Why does the notion of "learning styles" have such enduring popularity—despite the lack of supporting evidence? I believe that this phenomenon has a lot in common with fortune telling.

You go to see a fortune teller at a circus. She looks you over and makes some quick judgments—how young or old you are, how nicely you are dressed, whether you appear anxious or sad or lonely—and based on these judgments, tells your fortune. The fortune she tells may be full of simple and ambiguous statements—"you will be successful at your next venture," "you will be lucky at love," or may be more complex—"you are successful at home, but someone is jealous; make sure you watch yourself." Either way, the statements are specific enough so that they sound predictive, but ambiguous enough that they could apply to a number of situations.

When we read the statements on a Learning Style Inventory, they sound enough like us that we have a flash of recognition. These inventories typically consist of a series of forced choices, such as these from Marie Carbo's *Reading Style Inventory, Intermediate,* 1995.[10]

A) I always like to be told exactly how I should do my reading work.

B) Sometimes I like to be told exactly how I should do my reading work.

C) I like to decide how to do my reading work by myself.

Or

A) I like to read in the morning.
B) I don't like to read in the morning.

A) I like to read after lunch.
B) I don't like to read after lunch.

A) I like to read at night.
B) I don't like to read at night.

Or

A) I read best where it's quiet with no music playing.

B) I read best where there is music playing.

C) I read about the same where it's quiet or where there is music playing.

Since all of us have some preferences (my experience is that adults have clear preferences about music during reading, especially), these items tend to ring true. Like the fortunes told by the fortune teller, these statements at first light seem specific enough to capture real distinctions among people. But the problem with choices like these is that people tend to make the same choices. Nearly everybody would prefer a demonstration in science class to an uninterrupted lecture. This does not mean that such individuals have a visual style, but that good science teaching involves demonstrations. Similarly, nearly everybody would agree that one learns more about playing tennis from playing than from watching someone else play. Again, this does not mean that people are tactile/kinesthetic, but that this is how one learns to play sports. Many of these "learning styles" are not really choices, since common sense would suggest that there would not be much variance among people. In the class sample provided with the Reading Style Inventory above, for example, 96 percent of the fifth-graders assessed preferred quiet to work-

their motivation and appreciation of literature.[15] Different methods are appropriate for different goals. For example, approaches that involve the children in reading books of their own choice are important to develop motivated readers.[16] But whole language approaches, which rely largely on children to choose the materials they read, tend not to be as effective as more teacher-directed approaches for developing children's word recognition or comprehension.[17]

A language experience approach may be appropriate to help a kindergarten child learn basic print concepts. The child may learn some words using visual cues, such as might be taught through a whole word method. With some degree of phonological awareness, the child is ready to learn letters and sounds, as through a phonic approach. Learning about letters and sounds, in combination with practice with increasingly challenging texts, will develop children's ability to use phonetic cues in reading, and to cross-check using context. With additional practice in wide reading, children will develop fluent and automatic word recognition. None of this has anything to do with learning styles; it has to do with the children's current abilities and the demands of the task they have to master next.

What Do Teachers Get out of Learning Styles Workshops?

I have interviewed a number of teachers who have attended learning styles workshops. These were meetings of 200 to 300 teachers and principals, who paid $129 or so to attend a one-day workshop or up to $500 to attend a longer conference. They have found them to be pleasant experiences, with professional presenters. The teachers also feel that they learned something from the workshops. After I pressed them, what it seemed that they learned is a wide variety of reading methods, a respect for individual differences among children, and a sense of possibilities of how to teach reading. This is no small thing. However, the same information, and much more, can be gotten from a graduate class in the teaching of reading.

These teachers have another thing in common—after one year, they had all stopped trying to match children by learning styles. □

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