

Learning Styles



Robin Lane

Associate Literacy Consultant

What do we mean by Learning Styles?

You have just learnt something new. Think about what you did, how you went about it? When you learn something new you probably approach the matter in a similar manner each time. Over time you are likely to have developed a pattern of behaviour to enable you to learn new things. This pattern of behaviour is called *a learning style*. You will not approach every new task in exactly the same way but will draw from a group of behaviours that you are comfortable with.

Each of us develops a preferred and consistent set of behaviours or approaches to learning. This very fact has important implications for the classroom as a centre of learning and for the style(s) adopted by the teacher.

Teachers also have their own approaches to the classroom and these may not necessarily suit all the pupils in their class.

When there are mismatches between the learning styles of the pupil(s) and the teacher's teaching style the pupil may become bored, inattentive, achieve at a low level and become totally disaffected with the curriculum and school as a whole.

The most important thing that a teacher can do is to acknowledge that there are different teaching and learning styles.

This leaves the teacher with a dilemma – whether to teach to the pupil's strengths or to attempt to expand their styles.

The existence of three distinct types of learning style is generally accepted by those who have researched this area in recent years. These are visual, auditory and kinaesthetic.

Visual learners learn through seeing. They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays – body language, facial expressions, written information, charts and diagrams, illustrations in books, OHT's and videos. It is suggested they make up about 65% of the population. (Mind Tools, 1999)

Auditory learners learn from the spoken word, the teacher's discourse and discussions. They use tone, pitch and other nuances to provide additional information. They would prefer to hear written information aloud and benefit from the use of a tape recorder. It is suggested they make up around 30% of the population. (Mind Tools, 1999)

Kinaesthetic learners learn best from actively exploring the physical world around them. They often learn new skills through imitation and practice. Their need for activity and exploration may lead them to become distracted and unable to sit still for long periods of time. They can appear slow due to the fact that information is not normally presented in a style that suits their own style of learning.

It is suggested they make up about 5% of the population. (Mind Tools, 1999)

Closely linked to these learning styles is the context in which the pupil prefers to work/works most effectively – whether the pupil prefers to work alone (*intrapersonal*) or co-operatively (*interpersonal*). This, of course, will affect the organisation of the classroom and the teaching style(s) employed.

These styles are characterised as:

- *Intrapersonal* – enjoys working and learning independent of other pupils; is an independent thinker, is self-reflective and understands their own inner feelings/behaviour; likes privacy and quiet for working.
- *Interpersonal* – enjoys working co-operatively and working on the ideas of others; is a good organiser; is sensitive to the feelings and moods of others; enjoys social events.

Learning and Teaching Styles in the Classroom

It has been successfully demonstrated that pupils' specific skills and competencies are aided by the provision of a wide range of learning opportunities both within the school and beyond. (Devine et al., 1998)

Research has shown (Brooks and Weeks, 1999) the value of individualising the learning styles of pupils, whether they be pupils with learning problems or normally developing pupils.

Indeed, teaching pupils according to their learning styles is seen as essential for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities who may only be able to use a limited number of styles of learning.

Realistically, therefore, the responsibility falls upon the teacher in particular, and the school in general, to help their pupils access learning by providing a range of learning opportunities that access the full range of pupils' learning strengths. For example, differentiated teaching, supported self study and extended pupil-teacher discussions. As a result of such an approach pupils will gain confidence in their own ability. It will also encourage them to explore how they learn best and to become more independent in their learning.

The long-term objective should be to enable pupils to be independent learners. How the school intends to approach this should be made clear in the school's *Teaching and Learning Policy*. (The Charter School provides an example of such a policy.)

How does the teacher determine the dominant/preferred learning style of individual pupils? Does the teacher use informal observation or a more formal assessment?

Two formal assessments that would appear to be appropriate for use in Primary Schools are:

- **Learning Styles** (See Appendix 1)
- **Learning Styles Inventory** (See Appendix 2)

Depending upon the age/ability of the pupils these could be used independently by the individual pupil or with the collaboration of the teacher as reader. Either one could also be used as an observation schedule by the teacher in the classroom.

While considering the learning styles of individuals and groups of pupils one is reminded of the fact that all teachers have their own approaches to the classroom as a learning environment. As such it is important that teachers reflect upon their individual teaching style and the impact it might have on the successful learning of their pupils.

Teaching is often characterised on a continuum from *individualised* to *traditional*.

Reference to a '*teaching style inventory*' could help the individual teacher understand how to make their classrooms more responsive to a variety of pupil learning styles. (Refer to Appendix 3)

For classroom learning to be successful it is necessary for the teacher to provide a range of alternative ways that the pupil can respond to the curriculum. This allows the pupil to find the one that is most appropriate to them. The most successful teachers are likely to be those who are willing to try out new ideas and take risks, accepting that they will not be successful on all occasions. Such risk taking needs to be part of the schools philosophy with the risk taking being accepted as a learning opportunity that, like successes, is discussed with colleagues.

The DfES has recently responded to this need by presenting a series of curriculum publications concerned with 'Learning styles and writing' in each area of the National Curriculum linked to the KS3 Strategy. The documents offer examples of learning opportunities linked to each learning style.

It is interesting to note that much of the early research on learning and teaching styles concentrated on adult education, basic skills and universities. The DfES has recently shown a very valuable interest at KS3. Does this represent a perception of teaching styles along the continuum adult (traditional) to primary (individualised)?

Tasks and Teaching Approaches

When a teacher sits down to prepare her teaching she is likely to think about what to plan for the class, more than the group, and what to plan for the group more than for the individual. It is quite impossible for a teacher to plan learning objectives and identify learning outcomes for each lesson at the individual level. As the teacher learns more about the preferred learning styles of her pupils so there is much to be gained from time spent helping pupils understand how they learn and ways of improving their learning.

The teacher will be more effective if she builds into the lesson activities that reflect different learning styles. This increases the chance that she will engage the pupils. Equally, in the teacher-led part of the lesson alternating between various styles will re-engage pupils.

The DfES (undated) stresses the importance of maintaining the three-part lesson structure when planning lessons with explicit starter and plenary sessions built in.

Essentially the teacher should be building on previous learning while making the learning task and purpose clear to the pupils. This requires language to be pitched at an appropriate level for the pupils.

The teacher should encourage pupils to explore different ways to learn and to evaluate which strategies and contexts are most effective for them. At the same time she should be aware of differences among learners, e.g. learning styles, pace of learning. The skilful use of questioning will allow all the pupils the opportunity to think about and respond to the issue.

Further support can be offered by circulating, responding to questions and undertaking direct teaching to a group of pupils. Acknowledging the efforts of the individual is particularly important even when learning remains insecure. Pupils should be encouraged to evaluate their own learning and to share effective learning strategies with others. Assessment should be closely linked to the learning objectives that have earlier been shared with the pupils; guidance should be given on the next stage of their learning.

Is there flexibility within the teacher's planning that accepts that the subject can be approached in different ways?

If the teacher can design a set of activities that utilise all learning styles, the completion of the project will challenge the pupils to develop their learning styles.

On a practical level.....

General Characteristics ~

Visual

- Opportunity to work on own in a quiet place
- Likes to write, draw pictures
- Make highlighters available; things to be learnt, main ideas can be highlighted
- Use basic software programs that offer encyclopaedic knowledge, drills or demonstrations to refresh background knowledge
- Finds spoken instructions difficult
- Notices details

Auditory

- Opportunity to work with a friend and talk things through together
- Read out loud whenever possible
- Talks aloud to self
- Likes to hear things explained and likes to explain to others
- Use a cassette recorder to make notes

Kinaesthetic

- Opportunity to walk around saying words to themselves
- Will not do best work sitting at a desk; may prefer lying on the floor; would actually prefer to work with music in background
- When studying take breaks frequently
- Enjoys doing activities
- Taps pencil or foot while studying

Learning Tasks

Cheshire County Council Education Department has published a range of practical ideas on the World Wide Web – methods of enhancing the learners' ability to learn and think.

www.salt.cheshire.org.uk/MFL/TOOLKIT
www.salt.cheshire.org.uk/MFL/THINKING/thinkframe
www.salt.cheshire.org.uk/MFL/TOOLKIT/thinkstrat

Cheshire C.C. also offers a Learning Styles Questionnaire.

It is also worth viewing the work on 'Self-Access Learning' posted on the World Wide Web at:

www.ppk.kpm.my/p&p/sal/chapter1.html

The Government White Paper 'Schools Achieving Success' sees ICT as the source of such learning opportunities:

ICT can....transform the way that education is delivered and open the way to a new pedagogy.....Critically, new technology can enable teachers to tailor their teaching more closely to the abilities of individual pupils.

DfES (2001)

Visual

- Online databases
- Online journals
- Online interest groups
- Interviews
- Programmed instructions offers self-instruction
- Presentation software, like Powerpoint, offering stand-alone tutorials or the opportunity for the individual to present information/their own ideas
- Publishing software
- Surfing to research project work

Auditory

- Electronic mail
- Programmed instruction – engaged with as a group
- Simulations
- Bulletin boards
- Publishing software
- Online conferencing

Kinaesthetic

- Data base programs offer the opportunity to conduct tests that immediately illustrate various scenarios
- Publishing software
- Online conferencing

References

Peter Brooks and Sally Weeks (1999)

Individual styles of learning to spell: improving spelling in children with literacy difficulties and all children in mainstream schools

DfEE Research Brief No. 208

Marion Devine, Margo Reid and Graham Thorpe (1998)

The impact of managed effective learning on key student outcomes

DfEE Research Brief No. 42

DfES (undated)

Teaching and learning in the foundation subjects

DfES (2001)

Schools Achieving Success

DfES (2002)

Learning styles and writing in English

Key Stage 3 National Strategy

DfES 0379/2002

Websites

The Charter School (undated)

Teaching and Learning Policy

www.charter.southwark.sch.uk/about/policy/tandlpolicy.doc

DfES (2002)

Learning styles and writing

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3/publications/?template

Learning Styles Inventories (undated)

- Talent for Learning Questionnaire
- Learning Styles Questionnaire

www.salt.cheshire.org.uk/MFL/Multiple_Intelligence/TEACHINV.HTM

Terry O'Connor (undated)

Learning Styles Site

Using learning styles to adapt technology for higher education

www.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html

Mind Tools (1999)

How your learning style affects your use of mnemonics

www.mindtools.com/mnemlsty.html

Pedagogy: Learning Styles (1996)

<http://cyg.net/~jblackmo/diglib/styl-a.html>

Teaching and Learning in the Foundation Subjects (undated)

A case study of good practice

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3/strands/casestudies/?template

Appendix 1

Learning Styles

www.chaminade.org/inspire/learnstl.htm

Appendix 2

Learning Styles Inventory

www.ncl.ac.uk/sis/docs/Training%20supplement/Learning%20styles%20Inventory.doc

Appendix 3

Teaching Style Inventory

www.snow.utoronto.ca/Learn2/mod3/tchstyle.html