
Learning Styles: Catering to students' needs

by Stephen McAtamney

Recently our elementary school held an "In-service Teacher Training Program" which focused on "Learning Styles". Our school invited Mr. Svend Eric Schmidt (Denmark SIS Academy Chief Consultant) to talk about the "Learning Style" approach to instruction within schools in Denmark. Mr. Schmidt showed pictures of a number of schools in Denmark with unique design features supporting this approach. One of the most obvious physical changes observed was the reduction of interior walls, providing openness and shared space. In one example, over 500 children were being instructed in the same open space, on different floor levels and in different areas with many teachers, but without walls. This enabled freedom for children and teachers to choose the best learning environment that catered to their learning needs. These learning spaces differed in size, the furniture used, audio and visual equipment, layout and organization, learning resources and proximity to light or windows.

During the presentation, Mr. Schmidt emphasized the need for teachers to recognize the variety of learning styles children bring to the classroom. "Learning Style" is described as "...the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information." (Dunn, R. and Dunn, K., 1967) and "... a biologically and developmentally imposed set of personal characteristics that make the same teaching method effective for some students and ineffective for others..." (Dunn, Beaudry, and Klavas, 1989)

We were presented with a "Learning Styles Model", developed by Dunn and Dunn (1967). The basic assumptions of this model are:

- * *All children can learn but not all children learn in the same way.*
- * *Different children learn best in different ways and there is not one approach that suits all children.*
- * *Consideration of different styles of learning should be made as instruction is designed and implemented.*

The Learning Styles Model, as developed by Dunn and Dunn, is built on the theory that each individual has a unique set of biological and developmental characteristics. These unique characteristics impact substantially on how a person learns new information and skills. (ETHICA – Research paper from UCLA, 2006).

The model draws on "cognitive style theory" (Kagen and Kogen, 1970) and "brain lateralization theory" (Orstein and Thompson 1984). The two main categories of cognitive style have been identified as "conceptual tempo" and "field dependence–independence". Conceptual tempo refers to the continuum of thinking style from impulsive thinking to reflective thinking that is observed as an individual responds to a

variety of situations or learning tasks. (Kagen and Kogen 1970). Field dependence–independence recognizes a continuum of thinking ability also. At one end of the continuum are individuals who perceive information in a holistic and/or simultaneous manner (global thinkers), and at the other end are those who perceive information sequentially in independent parts (analytic thinkers). The general goal of the model is to improve the effectiveness of instruction through the identification and matching of individual learning styles with appropriate learning opportunities. The model also suggests that more learning takes place as a result of individual or small group activities as opposed to large group activities. The speaker reinforced the point that if the child's learning style is accommodated, "there is a greater chance of an increase in productivity, creativity and achievement".

The belief that individual students learn differently is well established in educational literature (Good and Brophy 1986). However, too often teachers tend to teach the way that they learn best. Children whose learning style is different to that of the teacher may remain distant and disinterested and teachers may have difficulty reaching these students. Educational consultant, Teresa Dybvig (2006) suggests that when the teacher can make the shift in teaching style, results are extraordinary. "Students perk up when you teach them the way they learn best". If the teacher can learn to spot the child's general processing style, they can speed up learning by adapting their teaching practice.

While it is necessary to recognize individual learning styles and the need to cater to these, we might also consider Brown's (1994) suggestion that children need to be challenged by using a variety of different teaching methods which will promote greater acceptance of a wider range of learning styles. It would be wrong for the teacher to assume the extent and possibilities of learning style development. As Brown (1994) suggests "perhaps an intelligent and successful person is the one who is bicognitive – one who can manipulate both ends of the style continuum." What Brown suggests is that differing contexts will evoke differing styles in one individual. Ausubel (1968:171) noted at least 18 different styles and Joseph Hill (1972) recognized 29 different factors that make up the cognitive-style "map" of the learner.

This then poses the question;

"To what extent can the learner change and/or challenge their learning style and consequently affect their own learning"? Should we focus on accommodation of individual style preferences or promote flexibility and adaptation?

Research shows that when children come to school

- * ...they are basically parent/adult motivated.
- * ...most children are kinesthetic and become more

tactical around 1st grade.

- * ...auditory skills develop about 2nd grade.
- * ...visual skills develop about 3rd grade.
- * Students today move towards being peer motivated by 3rd or 4th grade.
- * By 9th and 10th grade students move towards being self motivated.
- * Younger children need more structure than older students.
- * Under achievers tend to remain peer motivated even into their late teens.

(The NC Education Place, 2006)

Recognizing the age/stage continuum, it is easy to understand how teachers come to expect students to move, not just through learning stages, but also through learning styles. It could be easy to assume that by the time students reach university level, they are content to sit in rows, in a brightly lit lecture theatre and listen, to absorb new information. Even in elementary school ESL classrooms, this is often the pattern. With large class sizes, teachers often assume this is the only manageable method of teaching. Sociological aspects of working with peers, in groups, as a team are neglected. Physiological aspects of touching, experiencing and viewing are neglected. Environmental stimulus is neglected affecting the emotional states of motivation, responsibility and persistence.

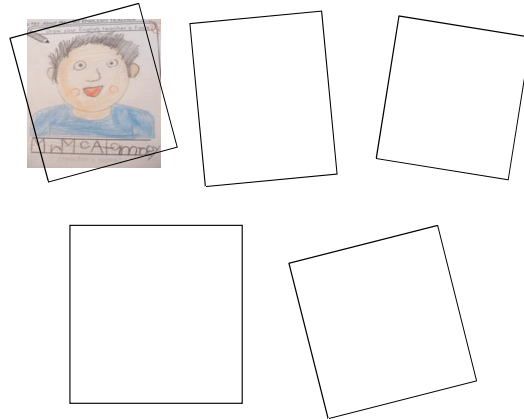
So far, working in Japan I have always been lucky enough to experience working with small groups with access to some form of alternative space. Sometimes it is outside, sometimes the gym, sometimes a different room. Always, I could change the learning style by using different spaces associated with different activities. Always, I could witness the change in attitude amongst a number of students once the change was made. For those with space restrictions it is still possible to change the learning environment in other ways to further stimulate students. Simply changing environmental aspects such as sound, light, desk/chair design or arrangement can have beneficial effects. Changing sociological aspects such as the arrangement of working by oneself, in pairs, in teams, with an adult, is another way to add variety to the way children learn. Changing physiological aspects such as the amount of time listening, viewing, touching, as well as mobility within the room and also the time of day for different activities helps to vary regular routines. Children will soon indicate when change is necessary.

Perhaps then it is important to consider both situations. As teachers we should be aware that children have unique learning styles and we should acknowledge this and adjust our curriculum to cater to their differences. We should also be aware that children need to experience a wide range of teaching methods to stimulate and develop their environmental, emotional, psychological awareness. Whether we try to cater to individual styles within the one classroom situation or involve the whole class in a variety of learning styles, the key issue may simply be the need for "change".

Of course it is difficult to cater to every learning style in

the ESL classroom. However, by keeping in mind that children all have a unique method of perceiving, thinking, remembering and problem solving, a little variation in our "tried and tested" teaching practices may draw in those who have been sitting on the outside for some time. When children witness variation and change within their learning environment, they may also learn to become more flexible in their thinking and accepting of other ideas and opinion. They may also eventually become more adaptable global citizens, with tolerance of diversity.

Our 1st term introductory lesson with 1st grade children asked that they draw their English teacher. At just 6 years old it is easy to see that my teaching style means something different to each and every child. The results demonstrated the great variation in perception and the need to recognize individual differences!



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