

Learning Styles

Kevin Wheldall

Statement of the Problem

It is claimed that many students are not learning to their full capacity because the instruction they are receiving is not being adequately tailored to their learning needs. Specifically, students may be disadvantaged if the instruction provided favours one *learning style* more than another.

Proposed Solution/ Intervention

Teachers should assess the preferred learning styles of the students in their classes and thereby ensure that the instructional needs of all learners are met.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

The idea behind learning styles as an educational concept rests on the intuitively appealing (and seemingly obvious) notion that different people tend to learn differently. The theory argues that students' learning will be optimized if their learning styles are taken into account by their teachers. A variety of taxonomies of learning styles have been proposed, a particularly common and popular one being the distinctions between auditory, visual and kinaesthetic (or tactile) learners. The theory suggests that teachers should assess their students to determine their specific learning styles and then to structure their instruction to meet the specific learning needs of their students. So, for example, teachers should ensure that kinaesthetic learners have the opportunity to handle and manipulate curriculum materials employing such media as clay.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

There has been a huge amount of research conducted on learning styles over many years,

in many parts of the world. Researchers have sought to demonstrate that learning styles can be adequately assessed and that if students are subsequently taught in a manner capitalizing on their assessed learning style, then they will learn more efficiently. The technical quality of much of the research on learning styles, however, in spite of its profusion, has been seriously questioned, so that it has proved difficult to find sufficient numbers of well-designed studies that put the theory to the test. Expert reviews of the research have concluded that there is no convincing evidence to support the idea that children learn better if taught by methods consonant with their assessed learning styles.

Conclusions

In spite of its popularity with both researchers and teachers, learning styles as a construct appears to have little to offer classroom practice. There is little or no evidence to support the notion that taking learning styles into account actually improves student learning. Skilled teachers will often need to adjust instruction in response to data on learner performance but learning styles assessments do not appear to provide useful guidance in making such adjustments. Moreover, a preoccupation with learning styles may prove distracting to teachers and thereby reduce the likelihood that they will address aspects of the teaching context over which they have real control using methods for which there is scientific evidence for efficacy.

The MUSEC verdict
Not recommended

Key references may be found at:
http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/co_brief.aspx

Macquarie University Special Education Centre
Building X5A, Macquarie University NSW 2109
Ph: 9850 8691 Fax: 9850 8254

