

*All students could learn...
if we only knew how to teach
them...*

Learning Styles - Here to Stay

***Barbara Prashnig, MA, Emeritus
Professor, and Director of
Creative Learning in Auckland,
explains how through a 10-Step
Action Plan the introduction of
Learning Styles in our schools
could help eliminate so called
learning disabilities,
underachievement, drop out
problems and students at risk.***

Most teachers really try to help students who struggle with learning, want to support them, are willing to go out of their way, because they care a lot but soon begin to feel frustrated and helpless themselves. They know (have the gut feeling) that no matter how hard they try, they will never break through these students' learning barriers, will never really reach these 'reluctant learners', these underachievers' and 'at-risk students'. As these very devoted and often stressed out teachers have experienced highly frustrating learning situations with their students time and again over the years, they have come to believe - as one principal expressed it so accurately 'learning disabilities and underachievement are facts of life we have to live with.'

This is exactly what I am going to challenge. It is NOT true - and an ever growing body of research findings proves this - that the learning potential of human beings is limited due to their social environment, their upbringing and their physical abilities; is NOT true that teachers should never be made accountable for the learning success of their pupils. Quite on the contrary: it is every teacher's duty to create a learning environment and use methods of instruction which match

their students' learning styles, their individual needs and skills during the learning process.

There are three simple but uncomfortable truths behind these claims:

1. If students cannot learn the way we teach them, we have to learn to teach them the way they CAN learn.

2. There are no learning disabilities - only TEACHING DISABILITIES.

3. Students are not failing because of the curriculum, they can learn almost any subject, when the instructions are matched with their individual learning style strengths.

Before giving a clear definition of Learning Styles, I want to put some thoughts forward because the above mentioned simple truths are often seen as provocations because they conflict with the belief system of many principals, teachers and parents. To provoke my readers further, I ask you to consider the following: it is insanity doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results, and where is the scientific proof that traditional frontal teaching methods are the best way to impart theoretical knowledge to our high school and tertiary students?

Resistance and scepticism

Ever since I began introducing the concept of learning styles to educators in New Zealand I have met some kind of resistance and scepticism, mostly from people in leading positions in the education field and particularly from high school teachers who cannot or do not want to accept the fact that there is a diversity of learning styles in every student group they teach. I understand that caution towards any innovation is appropriate, but slowing down the process of necessary change in teaching methods is irresponsible, especially as too many students get switched off from learning and we are losing too many good minds in our secondary school system.

A much greater chance

If we accept that no two human beings learn the same information the same way at the same time, we also

have to accept that, if we introduce learning styles and individualised instruction, that every student has a much greater chance to fully develop his or her learning potential despite social, gender, ethnic, and/or cultural differences.

Despite the fact that the term 'Learning Styles' has become nearly 'overused' recently, I daresay that not too many educators actually know what it really means. Even as different researchers define the concept differently, there is general agreement that Learning Style is the way each person begins to concentrate on, absorb, process, and retain new and difficult information and skills (R. Dunn). Every human being has a learning style regardless of their IQ, achievement level, or socioeconomic status, and there are no "good" or "bad" learning styles.

Although style can change over time as a result of maturation and practice, strong preferences change only slightly over the years, and when students are taught in ways that complement their styles, a significant increase in their academic achievement, improved attitudes, motivation and better adjusted behaviour are the results.

There is ample evidence that the following groups of students benefit most from learning styles programmes: underachievers, slow learners, learning 'disabled', and/or at-risk students. For these problem students even the process of assessing their learning style is usually a big event, and receiving a learning style profile which describes preferences and strengths is in itself a revelation not only for the students but also for their teachers and parents. In many cases it might be the first time for such students with a very poor track record of academic achievements and very low self esteem to find out that there is nothing 'wrong' with them, that their needs are somewhat different from other students' needs and that they will be able to help themselves in learning situations. For the teacher, such a profile and the personalised report is a wealth of information about the real needs and true abilities of the student.

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Successfully applied

How can schools get started if they want to introduce the Diversity Concept to staff and students? Following is a 10 – Step Action Plan (from my book 'The Power of Diversity') for implementing learning styles on a school-wide basis. This plan has been successfully applied in many schools in NZ and overseas and allows the integration of a school's own change programme, actually enhancing it.

1. Teacher training (Day 1) "Learning Styles and Student Centred Teaching" including teachers' own personal LSA-Ad profiles: learning about style features of underachievers, slow learners and 'gifted' students, and how to set up Learning Style classrooms

2. Student assessments with LSA questionnaires, production of computer-generated student profiles by the school itself

3. Teacher training (Day 2) "Learning Styles and Classroom Management" including teachers' own TSA-Ed profiles and focusing on interpretation of student profiles with trained facilitator; production of learning style tools

4. Observation period carried out by teachers trained in learning styles

5. Sharing results with students and parents: interpretation of LSA profiles, homework and study strategies for students; parent evening

6. Classroom redesign: based on students' preferences and with students' input; school-wide co-operation is necessary to achieve the desired outcomes

7. Creating and using learning style tools, produced initially by teachers, later by students and/or parents

8. Adaptation of classroom teaching to suit analytic and holistic students - lesson preparation to accommodate L/R brain processing, plus strategies for multi-sensory teaching to accommodate auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic needs.

9. Evaluation phase: monitor students' progress and evaluate impact of programme on teachers, students, parents and the community at large

10. Continuation: incorporate new students, train new teachers and continue to build the 'School of the Future Based on Learning Styles' through our comprehensive 'Diploma in Holistic Education' programme.

A cohesive group

By training the whole staff of a school it is possible to grow together as a cohesive group, achieve future goals more easily, implement the desired changes without 'pain' but with lots of fun and joy, create a positive, multi-sensory learning environment where students' learning styles are accommodated, and influence the wider school community by setting a positive example. Educators around New Zealand find it extremely helpful to discover what their students' learning strengths are so that they can be taught in ways matching their styles. For many teachers, when they have their own learning and teaching styles assessed, it comes as a great surprise to actually see black on white how different they are from each other and to see in the LSA group profiles how great the diversity is among their students. Learning Style results from New Zealand students are well in line with international research findings but also show clearly, the longer some students remain in our educational system, the more they get switched off from learning and that the instructional methods generally used do NOT match their learning needs.

The fastest way to help students who are struggling with traditional western teaching methods and who are dropping out of our secondary system, is through assessing their learning styles, giving them (and their parents) guidelines for doing their homework successfully by accommodating their needs and teaching them with matched instruction in class.

As evidence gathered in NZ and studies in the US have shown, it takes an average of six to eight weeks to

turn around underachievers and help them become successful learners in their own right. Yes, they do not fit the traditional picture of a successful student and do not respond to mass instruction very well, because they do have different needs, but they are not learning disabled. The truth is that everyone can learn if we just knew how to teach them!

'School of the Future'

We are proud to offer our services to education institutions, and when they join the 'School of the Future' programme based on Learning Styles, the LSA software is available at significantly reduced rates. Participating in this programme means, schools can choose their own time frame (up to three years) for completing the change process which does not only include teachers, BOT members and students but also their parents and therefore has a great impact on the local community. Every participating teacher will be able to complete the 'Diploma in Holistic Education' within the framework of 'The School of the Future'.

For further information about Learning Styles and our 'School of the Future' programme, please contact:

Technology Based Solutions
Email: asktbs@aol.com

"Human Beings have an amazing ability to learn.....The good side to this is that you can learn things exquisitely and rapidly. The bad side is that you can learn garbage just as easily as you can learn useful things."

Richard Bandler.

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