

Learning styles

This refers to the article on learning styles by Walsh.¹ The author has raised many important points. I receive many papers on learning styles for review, most of which erroneously seem to take VARK (visual, auditory, reading/writing preference and kinesthetic) as a learning style. It has been rightly pointed out that VARK is the preferred data collection approach rather than a learning approach. Learning styles may be a good research concept but are hardly useful when designing instruction. There are many reasons for this.

One of the apparent uses of learning style inventories could be to develop personalized courses. While this sounds good in theory, it is a difficult-to-implement proposition, the most important reason being the role of factors other than learning styles. There is conflicting evidence to suggest that matching results in better learning. Smith *et al.* rightly say, 'for each research study supporting the matching hypothesis, there is a study rejecting it. Even though we may accept that matching may help the learner, it will not do anything to prepare him for subsequent learning tasks, where matching may not be available.'²

Vermunt's inventory is one of the many but most frequently used in literature. Interestingly, Vermunt *et al.*³ themselves favour 'constructive friction', where the teacher pushes students to take more responsibility for learning by a deliberate mismatch between instruction and learning style. Kolb⁴ also favours mismatch, because this leads to personal growth and creativity.

It is important to look at the degree to which variance in test scores can be attributed to learning styles. Furnham *et al.*⁵ found the variance explained by personality and learning styles to be only 8%. Perhaps, it is time to look at the other 92% too. Most innovations in education tend to have a positive impact on learning; however, in view of limited resources and staff available for this purpose, it is wise to focus on innovations that have a greater impact. A meta-analysis by Hattie⁶ found an average impact size of only 0.14 for individualization as compared to 1.04 for instructional quality and 1.13 for feedback. Further, individualization might lead to labelling and implicit belief that traits cannot be altered and may promote a narrow view of matching teaching and learning styles, which could be limiting, rather than liberating.

One-to-one tutorials provide a good opportunity to personalize the content since the tutor is less bound by the curricular or time constraints. Even in that situation, personalization is restricted to a 'point of crises'. Wenger⁷ feels that too much personalization may be counterproductive, when students join the community of practice.

What can then be the use of knowing about learning styles? One of the potential uses is to make the learner aware of their preferred learning style so that they can make a deliberate effort to learn through other styles as well and secondly for teachers the message is that instead of tailoring the instruction to individual styles, try to provide a buffet from where not only each can pick what he wants but also try some new food.

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Tejinder Singh
Department of Pediatrics and Medical Education
Christian Medical College
Ludhiana
Punjab
drtejinder22@gmail.com