RON BRANDT

On Learning Styles: A Conversation with Pat Guild

Pat Guild, senior author of ASCD's *Marching to Different Drummers*, advises using several different learning styles models.

What are some of the ways educators use learning styles?

Broadly there are three different approaches. There's a focus on the individual: know thyself. And know the other person you're interacting with. It's very important for educators when working with other people to understand both their own and the others' perspectives. Personal awareness is an aspect of all learning style theories, but some advocates emphasize it more than others—Tony Gregorc, for example, and to a certain extent those who work with Jung's theories and the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*.

Another aspect of learning styles is application to curriculum design and to an instructional process. Knowing that people learn in different ways, you can use a comprehensive model that provides for adapting instruction to the major learning differences. That's the approach taken by Bernice McCarthy, Kathy Butler, and several others.

The third approach is diagnostic/prescriptive. You identify key elements of the individual's learning style, and as much as possible, match your instruction and materials to those individual differences. That's the method espoused by Rita and Ken Dunn and by Marie Carbo.



Photograph courtesy of Pat Guild

The matching approach has been tried in special education, hasn't it?

Oh, yes, but in my opinion, that application has often been far too shallow. All too often, special educators have tended to take a deficit approach. They've tried to remediate students' problems without looking at their strengths. That can lead to an emphasis on pieces of skills without enough attention to the ultimate *use* of the skills—for example, working on an auditory processing problem rather than actually reading.

That may help explain why learning styles has a bad name among some of the people who know the special education research.

Maybe. I'm not a special educator, but at conferences I have attended and in reading I've done, I've sometimes been shocked by the narrowness of approach of some of those who've dealt with this subject. For example, some special educators respect work on cognitive style, and yet they fail to see that learning styles is inclusive of cognitive processes.

Speaking of research, what do we know from research about learning styles in schools?

Well, we know that style exists. We know it's possible to apply it to all areas of education—curriculum and instruction, leadership, staff development, and counseling. We know there are different ways to apply the theories. We're beginning to know some things about the kinds of learners we have in schools and about which learners traditionally do better than others. We're beginning to be a little bit clearer about the difference between learning style and intelligence—people who have different styles can be equally intelligent. We're also understanding the relationship of culture and style—there are many diverse styles in any culture, but cultural values do impact a learner's style. It's the nature/nurture relationship. We know that some approaches for accommodating learning styles can produce impressive gains in achievement. We know that attention to learning styles can impact school climate and staff and student morale.

I should add, though, that much of the research that's been done in the last 10 years has been very short-term and has focused on a particular age group and on a particular element of learning style. So while we know there can be payoff from attention to learning style, we need more long-term research.

You say there can be payoff, but a lot of knowledgeable researchers are skeptical. They tell me that, yes, you can show statistically significant differences, but schools can do only so many things and the payoff from investing a lot of energy in this intervention is not as great as from other interventions that might be used instead—cooperative learning, for example.

We're beginning to be a little bit clearer about the difference between learning style and intelligence—people who have different styles can be equally intelligent.

But that's the wrong question; it's not one or the other. A high school math teacher told me she would never have done cooperative learning if she hadn't known about learning style. Why do cooperative learning? Because it's a fad? Certainly a better reason is that you understand that, for some learners, group process is very helpful for their learning. Why do direct teaching? The same reason—some students learn best that way.

It can be embarrassing, sometimes, to ask practicing educators why they are using a particular technique or a program, because they often can't give you a good reason. Learning styles provides that kind of legitimate criteria. Teachers I work with aren't using learning styles for learning styles' sake; for them it's a framework for decision making. Many of these teachers use a tremendous amount of cooperative learning. They use a variety of reading programs. They use the latest technology. They're always asking how to accommodate different learners and looking for strategies to try. Learning styles is not a program by itself.

One aspect of learning styles that generates quite a bit of controversy is the use of self-report instruments.

Well, there are several ways to find out what a person's learning style is, one of which is self-report instruments. Another way is to use tests of skills that correlate with certain styles—field-dependence and field-independence, for example. A very important way is to analyze students' work: their successes and their errors. Most learning styles researchers advise using more than one means of assessment. A teacher's observation is also key. Some of the self-report inventories have fairly high validity, but you

don't always need to diagnose style. There are many teachers who regularly adapt to students' learning styles but don't administer instruments of any kind.

I can hear somebody arguing, "Yes, but going through the process of taking an inventory and getting data showing that your kids have different styles can be very convincing to teachers."

And that's fine, if the purpose is clear, for example, to get a general profile of the group. We're just finishing a big study in Seattle in which we've been looking for general profiles. We're looking at low achievers, high achievers, middle achievers, and students in Chapter 1 programs, to see whether there are some general traits and characteristics that should be attended to. We will not be reporting on individual students, though.

You're saying that teachers shouldn't necessarily be expected to diagnose the styles of each of their students.

Not unless they really have control over the situation. A special education teacher who works carefully with a small group of students can do it. But I am not a fan of large-scale use of diagnostic instruments, although I would say an appropriate way to use them is to teach students themselves about style.

Earlier, you outlined three approaches. What's your approach?

Eclectic. I see myself as a translator and communicator. I'm a teacher of teachers and therefore a teacher of learning style concepts. I tell people about the different approaches in learning styles and help them choose what seems right for their situations. I'm careful not to overwhelm practitioners with a lot of jargon, but I try to show that learning styles is a very broad area: broad in its information and conceptual framework and broad in its application. I'll use a particular framework as an example, and try to get teachers to ask, "How could I use this in my work? What makes sense for me?" I tell administrators, "It's reasonable to expect that everybody on your staff does *something* with learning styles, but please don't demand that they all do the *same* thing." It's so important to practice respect for learning styles by welcoming various applications.

One of the things that makes the subject of learning styles so confusing is that there are so many competing models.

Well, that's a problem. But it's also an asset. The positive part is the wealth of ideas and resources. I have a library of over 50 books on learning styles, many of them containing practical applications and examples from teachers. The problems come from the business aspect of the field and the competition to sell products.

When I teach at the university, I teach a variety of models, because I think it's important for people to learn about the *field* of learning styles. When I work with people on an application level, I pick two or three models representing different aspects of the theories. I advise people to look at learning styles conceptually. The key issues are: people are different, learners will respond differently to a variety of instructional methods, and we need to respect and honor the individual differences among us. I encourage teachers to know at least two models, because if you only focus on one, you try to make everybody fit it. There's more than one way to cut the pie, and depending on a teacher's situation, or an administrator's goals, one learning style may be more appropriate than another.

That leads to a related question, which is really the heart of the matter: the feasibility of attending to different styles in most classrooms. Teachers' workloads are so heavy and their problems so demanding that they are limited in what they can do to make learning activities stimulating, to adapt to even the most obvious differences. Is it realistic to expect a large majority of teachers to provide for style differences?

Yes, yes, yes, because it makes their job easier in the long run. Students really start learning. Teachers tell me they're not reteaching as many things. They're not beating their heads against the wall. They have more strategies for dealing with problems, whether they're curriculum problems or student behavior problems. They're reaching more students. Teachers tell me that and they show each other examples. Remember, I'm not asking teachers to diagnose every student's style; rather, I know that attention to learning styles brings variety to their teaching.

Suppose a leader is convinced by what you say. How should he or she encourage teachers to become concerned about learning styles?

What won't work is to treat teachers all the same. That's a contradiction in terms. What also won't work is for an administrator to go to a conference, get excited, come home and announce, "We're going to do learning styles." The worst way to start is to assess the learning styles of all the students and pile a stack of assessments on the teacher's desk. The teacher feels angry and threatened, and asks, "What am I supposed to do with these? Am I supposed to be a miracle worker and solve all these kids' problems?"

Instead, he or she should try to get teachers talking among themselves about style differences. You can do it formally by bringing in somebody who has training in learning styles. Or you can do it informally by having people talk about their own differences in the way they approach things, the way they see things, their values. Eventually it's a matter of saying to the staff, "Here's a very powerful concept that could help us with many of the issues we're dealing with."

I'd have a team of people who are most enthusiastic and excited do some investigation, make a plan, and then bring it back to the whole staff. They could try out ideas and gradually bring the rest of the people on board. It

might make sense to take one curriculum area and work with that, for example. But it has to be integrated with whatever else is going on in the school. It must not compete. It should not be learning styles *or* cooperative learning.

Where's all this going? What's the future of learning styles in education?

I'm very excited about the power of learning styles to contribute to our rethinking education. Certainly it can help us stop looking for the panacea. We're not going to find the one right way to design or restructure schools. We're not going to find the one right way to teach reading. We're not going to find the best way to teach multiplication or supervise staff. If we believe in learning styles, we know that there are always going to be many right ways.

Most of all, learning styles can help us in a practical way to value diversity. It can help us to realize that we can set uniform objectives but honor individual approaches. It can give us direction for changing schools and help us to find ways for every student to be successful.□

Pat Guild is the Director of Graduate Education Programs at Antioch University Seattle. She is a former elementary teacher and principal and most recently was the coordinator of learning style programs at Seattle Pacific University. She is the coauthor of ASCD's *Marching to Different Drummers*. Her address is Pat Guild Associates, P.O. Box 99131, Seattle, WA 98199. **Ron Brandt** is ASCD's Executive Editor.

KATHI L. HAND

Style Is a Tool for Students, Too!

By examining their own and their classmates' learning styles, students can learn new strategies for accomplishing tasks.

Long seen as a powerful tool for teachers, knowledge of learning styles is equally valuable to students. Teaching my 8th grade students about style has become my most important learning styles application. I don't emphasize the diagnosis of student style; my purpose is to help students become more aware of their own styles and to help them develop strategies for dealing with the diverse demands of school and of life in general. We learn about style in two ways: through informal debriefing of class activities and through formal instruction in style.

The informal debriefing is probably the most important element. Several times each week we take a few minutes to talk about the ways that our own styles show in class. For example, after students finish a task, we might discuss the various ways in which they approached it and the successes and frustrations they experienced. When we begin a task, especially an unfamiliar one, I talk about the kinds of thinking that the task requires; and we brainstorm ways to confront it. Frequently we see that very different approaches can produce equally successful results, thus reinforcing my constant refrain that there is seldom only "one right way."

Besides helping students become more aware of their own styles, these informal sessions have an added benefit: by hearing how other students attack particular problems or assignments, students can add many new strategies to their repertoires. This means that they are better equipped to deal with assignments that do not match their strengths; style is a tool, never an excuse.

This style debriefing has been especially useful when students work cooperatively. We can use style to understand why it's easier to work with some people than with others. Style also helps us understand many of the conflicts that arise in groups; seeing behaviors as "different" rather than as "good" or "bad" helps the group concentrate on finding productive solutions. Debriefing cooperative activities also allows me to reinforce students whose styles make them good at facilitating the group, or keeping it on task, or seeing new ways to solve problems that arise. Taking these few minutes during the school day to look at style issues keeps style in the front of everyone's mind and gives me repeated opportunities to reinforce the values that I find in style diversity.

Much of my formal teaching about style happens in our work on study skills. Using Ulrich and Guild's student workbook *No Sweat! How to Use Your Learning Style to Be a Better Student*,[1] we explore the impact of style on skills

Copyright © 1990 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.