The Power of the Learning Styles Philosophy

In classrooms based on the framework of style, students develop respect for individual differences—their own and those of others—while learning academic skills.

Educational reforms hit the coast of Texas education in 1984 with the force of a hurricane. I was a regional special education consultant serving schools in 11 south Texas counties. I watched with growing apprehension as structures were tightened and standards raised. Along with raised standards and the adoption of a statewide curriculum, there was to be "no more social promotion" in Texas schools. All students would be "challenged" to perform on grade level. It wasn't long before exit level exams stood between students and a high school diploma.

I had been in the classroom long enough to know the kids who would be in trouble under the pressures of reform. I could close my eyes and see the faces in my Title I reading class. These troubled kids were not going to make it without some real help. Motivation was not the problem. "No pass, no play" was "no solution." They needed help, not pressure. Unless educators did something different in the classroom, clearly large numbers of students wouldn't be around for graduation. They were bailing out in record numbers. And when they left school, it wasn't to live happily ever after.

What *could* make a difference was a teacher who cared. Someone who could see symptoms for what they were—a cry for help. It was critical that I find something to bring to both teachers and students that could support learning success. Success in learning is basic to success in life.

1984 was also the first year I heard the term *learning style*. The concept excited me, and it made perfect sense. In the face of the endless variety of human beings who present themselves to the schools each year, it's amazing that educators could ever have believed that everyone learned the same way! In the research on learning style, I could see a framework to explain individual differences, a way to manipulate classroom conditions to support those differences. This was critical information for teachers of students who did not learn easily or typically—but equally important information for supporting the natural differences of all children—including the gifted. What I read, I tried; what I learned, I shared.

Since that time, I have seen dramatic successes in classrooms where teachers use the framework of learning styles to support student learning: in La Porte, Texas, where Baker Junior High School changed its failure rate from 40 percent to 9 percent in two years; at Corsicana High School, where as a result of Principal T. Y. Harp's instructional leadership in learning styles, 27 three-time losers on Texas' exit test all passed and graduated with their peers . . .

Teaching to style represents a philosophical change from tradition to a mutual embrace of accountability: *If students don't learn the way we teach them, then we will teach them the way they learn*. In short, we must teach them how they learn so that they can teach themselves. This philosophy attracts and keeps those educators who realize their students' lives depend on this gift. Such a philosophy also demonstrates a willingness to relinquish "control" for leadership, with the teacher looking, listening, thinking, then planning instruction from the "student up," instead of from the "system down." And everybody wins.

Students learn to understand and value themselves and others. They learn that they have power to contribute to their own learning success. That this wonderful world needs all kinds of people with all kinds of talents and skills.

And teachers win. They preside over classrooms disciplined by mutual respect. Classrooms that are people-shaped and fun! Classrooms in which the most unlikely can offer the most insight. Such classrooms are not permissive, and they are manageable. They are psychologically safe environments that promote active learning, mutual understanding, and respect. Places to develop healthy self-concepts and social relationships along with academic skills. Such classrooms signal the wonder of lifelong learning.

Educators must continue to watch the successes of such classrooms. When we look at the growing research on at-risk students to discover that their learning strengths are rarely accommodated in traditional instruction, when we find that those we have labeled "learning disabled" can achieve well when we discover and teach to their strengths, when we find that those who do not share similar learning patterns can be denied their own potential—then it really is time to look to style for the power that it can bring to the re-formation of education. We will continue to be in "system's failure" as long as we resist the concept of the dignity and value of each individual that such a philosophy celebrates.□

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