

LEARNING—A MATTER OF STYLE

Rita S. Dunn

The term "slow learner" describes which of the following?

- A *poorly achieving* student.
- The *pace* at which a student learns.
- The *learning style* of certain students.
- How* certain students should be taught.

Have you selected an answer? Or do you want to think about it? Let's examine the alternatives.

a) Poorly achieving?

Slow learners are often poor achievers, but that is not necessarily always the case. Let's examine the other alternatives.

b) Pace?



Some youngsters learn most easily when permitted to work alone—particularly if resources are available that respond to individual perceptual strengths. Photo: St. John's University, New York.

Slow learners *do* achieve at a less rapid rate than their peers, but let's hold that one, too, until we've examined the remaining choices.

c) Learning style?

Observation and testing confirm that slow learners tend to differ from gifted, high achieving, and average students.

When comparing high and low achievers in reading and math, we found that many of the latter were less self-motivated, more peer and adult-motivated, less persistent, and less able to learn early in the day than their classmates.¹ Such youngsters often find it difficult to "sit," to "listen," and to "pay attention." For those reasons, they prefer tactual and kinesthetic instructional resources, an informal rather than a formal physical environment, and opportunities for mobility.

Because research has found learning style differences among students who achieve at varied levels, we need to keep "c" as another possibility.

d) How taught?

When we discovered that slow learners had similar learning style characteristics, we experimented with different instructional resources to see whether particular methods either facilitated or prevented learning among such youngsters.

During the summer of 1970, multimedia resources were combined into learning packages for primary pupils who lacked specific skills. By using visual-tactual-kinesthetic materials accompanied by taped directions, in a two-hour period many of the youngsters learned skills or facts that they had not been able to master previously,

¹Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn. *Teaching Students Through Their Individual Learning Styles: A Practical Approach*. Reston, Virginia: Reston Publishing Company, division of Prentice-Hall Publishers, 1978. pp. 397-99.



Many youngsters cannot learn simply listening to a teacher. They learn best by interacting with small groups of peers. Photo: Westorcharde Elementary School, Chappaqua, New York.

mitted structured mobility through the use of learning stations, interest centers, "magic carpet" areas, a media center, a game table, or a little theater.⁴

Answer to Quiz

All four phrases could be considered correct, but their accuracy increases as you move from "a" to "d." Slow learners tend to be peer-oriented, tactual, and kinesthetic students who require mobility and an informal environment when they are learning. They appear to be less motivated and less persistent because they find it difficult to learn through conventional methods. When they are able to succeed through appropriate resources on their level, they become more motivated, more persistent, and more able to make choices. To facilitate their progress, begin the learning process with a structured assignment

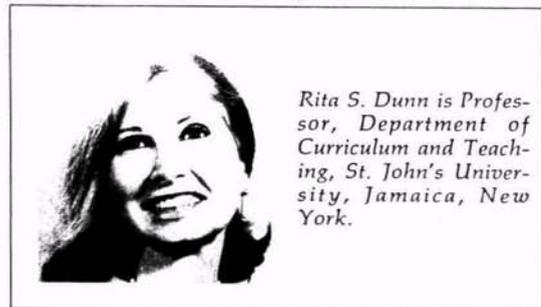
that permits some mobility when needed, small-group interactions, and tactual-kinesthetic resources. Also provide encouragement, supervision, and feedback as the youngsters are learning rather than after their tasks have been completed.

Editor's note: Because we believe ASCD members have a continuing interest in providing adequately for individual differences, we have invited Rita Dunn to write this column as a regular feature of *Educational Leadership*. The feature will appear several times each year with brief reports on school programs, research findings, training opportunities, and so on.

St. John's University has established a Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning Styles. In cooperation with other organizations, the Center will sponsor a network for exchange of information on the subject. To apply for membership in the network, or to contribute items for possible inclusion in this column, write to:

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⁴ These approaches are explained in Dunn and Dunn, *op. cit.*, chapters 2, 3, and 7.



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