

Learning: A Matter of Style

Rita Dunn

One of the first schoolwide attempts at the high school level to teach students through their individual learning styles is going on at Worthington High School, Worthington, Ohio.¹ Principal David Cavanaugh attended a 1½ day institute on learning styles in Kansas City in the spring of 1978. Impressed with the concept and research, he returned to his school and shared the information with the faculty. He read extensively and distributed copies of short sections of books and articles to his teachers and administrators.

Next, Cavanaugh asked staff members to complete two instruments to help them analyze their own learning styles. He discussed with teachers the implications of their individual printouts for their learning efforts and invited teachers to explore the idea of testing for and teaching through student learning style characteristics. Forty-two staff members volunteered to meet with him during the summer and fall to learn more about the concept and to begin experimenting with it during the 1978-79 school year. It was understood that anyone could withdraw from the group if he/she wished.

In fall 1978, the volunteer teachers used an inventory with their students. Each youngster received a computer printout describing elements of learning style that were either factors or preferences.² Students were made aware of their individual differences and were given suggestions for accommodating them. The student population began to discuss learning styles among themselves and verbalized increased tolerance and understanding of one another.

In October of that year, Cavanaugh and three teachers attended a three-day advanced institute on learning styles. They were exposed to some of the specific skills needed for interpreting the computer printouts and

for prescribing on the basis of that data. They learned which learning style characteristics would respond favorably to which instructional techniques, and were able to share the information with colleagues at monthly workshops for the involved faculty.

In April 1979, I visited Worthington High School. Teachers in the foreign language, English, math, and science departments were beginning to develop contract activity packages. Some were using "circles of knowledge," "team learning," or other small-group techniques. A few were developing task cards, learning circles, or electroboards to teach important concepts or skills.³ No one was doing everything, but a substantial number were experimenting, testing, trying, and gradually developing skills. Later, I received a five-page letter from one teacher, Karen Frank, which described her seniors' involvement and achievement as "a smash hit!"

Only part of the Worthington staff is involved in this effort. They tend to be intelligent, concerned, hard-working professionals who undoubtedly were fine teachers long before they began to examine learning styles. They appear to be enthusiastic about their progress and committed to "reaching" their students.

We know from experience that it often takes three years of individualizing instruction before increased academic achievement is evidenced on standardized reading or mathematics tests,⁴ but that is not the only concern of the high school faculty. In addition, these teachers are searching for ways to gain increased student participation, interest, and enthusiasm for learning. They are trying to help their young people acquire insights into themselves and their peers, and develop feelings of self and human worth while *simultaneously* learning more than previously. Many are beginning to see small gains already.

Some of the staff have not been involved to date by choice, but indicate that they are watching what has been happening with an eye toward possibly participating sometime in the future.

I, too, am watching Worthington High School. We all should be watching, for this small pioneering group may demonstrate that even on the high school level it is more effective to teach students as they prefer to learn than as we prefer to teach.

ASCD institutes concerned with developing skills for teaching students through their individual learning styles will be conducted on January 16 in Phoenix, Arizona, and on January 21 in Miami Beach, Florida. For information, write to: Ruth Long, Associate Director, ASCD, 225 North Washington Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314.

¹ Inquiries may be mailed to David Cavanaugh, Worthington High School, 300 West Granville Road, Worthington, Ohio 43085.

² A characteristic that is a factor (revealed by extremely high ratios) does not appear to change over time. A characteristic that is a preference (revealed by fairly high ratios) can be modified by interest or motivation.

³ Explanations and samples of contract activity packages, programmed learning sequences, multisensory instructional packages, small-group techniques, and the tactual-kinesthetic resources mentioned in this column can be found in: Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn. *Teaching Students Through Their Individual Learning Styles: A Practical Approach*. Reston, Virginia: Reston Publishing Company Division of Prentice-Hall Publishers, Inc., 1978.

⁴ Rita Dunn, "Another Look at Individualizing Instruction." *Phi Delta Kappan* 59, 400-02; February 1978.

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