

# Learning: A Matter of Style

Rita Dunn

## The Emergence of Widespread Support

The concept of teaching students through their individual learning styles has taken hold in less than a decade. Such rapid national awareness is a phenomenon in itself, but is magnified by the advocacy of our leading professional journals and associations and selected universities and schools that have nothing to gain—other than the improvement of instruction.

- *U. S. News & World Report* featured a pilot program being conducted at Worthington High School in Ohio with the title, "Matching education and individuals can raise grades. . . ." It described that "radical departure in American classrooms" as "the key to educational achievement in the . . . '80s." Later in the article, Scott D. Thomson, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, theorized: "The ability to map learning styles is the most promising development in curriculum and instruction in a generation. It is the most scientific way we know to individualize classroom education."<sup>1</sup>

- A Phi Delta Kappan editorial implored that we ". . . listen to the answers dictated by careful research . . ." and begin to honor the differences in learners, specifically referring to learning styles studies.<sup>2</sup>

- The president of the International Reading Association released a statement verifying that "differences in the learning styles and abilities of children emphasize the need for a variety of approaches. . . . No single method or approach nor any one set of instructional materials has been proven to be effective for all children."<sup>3</sup>

- The National Association of Secondary School Principals and St. John's University, New York, announced the cosponsorship of the National Network on Learning Styles. The Network's purpose is to establish

and support a group of knowledgeable instructional leaders who, with their schools, can identify and match learning and teaching styles.

Services to subscribers include: three newsletters annually summarizing the latest research, practical applications, and experimental programs; information about conferences, institutes, and inservice workshops for teachers and administrators; descriptions of publications and dissertations in the field; identification of resource personnel and exemplary school sites; updated bibliography of publications and films; and responses to requests for information.<sup>4</sup> In the first four weeks, subscribers represent faculty at every level in the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

- The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development published the first videotape and discussion guide on learning styles available for inservice training.<sup>5</sup>

- St. John's University established a Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles. Its components include research, inservice, and publications. Its services are available to any district concerned with diagnostic-prescriptive education.

## What Research Tells Us About Learning Styles

My last column described several studies that verified that when we identify and match individual students' learning styles with instructional methods and resources, statistically significant differences occur in achievement and attitudes. Let's continue examining additional research findings.

## Reading Achievement

In 1977 Kaley documented that: (1) reading achievement is a statistically stronger and more efficient predictor of learning style than IQ is; (2) the higher a student's reading level,

the more independent is the learning style; and (3) lower levels of reading correlate well with a need for increased dependence and teacher-directed instruction.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, Peterson provided another strong, research based, argument for matching the learning styles of individual students with complementary instructional approaches.<sup>7</sup> Citing studies conducted by Wright and DuCette,<sup>8</sup> Janicki,<sup>9</sup> and Ebmeier

<sup>1</sup>"Students Learn How to Study—And Like It," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 31, 1979/January 7, 1979, pp. 75-76.

<sup>2</sup>Robert W. Cole, Jr., "Minimum Competency Tests for Teachers: Confusion Compounded," *Kappan*, 61, 4 (December, 1979): 233.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Farr, "From the President" (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, November 3, 1979).

<sup>4</sup>The cost of an annual subscription is \$8.00. Send check or purchase order to: Learning Styles Network, c/o Professor Rita Dunn, St. John's University, Grand Central Parkway, Jamaica, New York 11439.

<sup>5</sup>"Learning: A Matter of Style," Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1979.

<sup>6</sup>Stefanie Beth Kaley, "Field Dependence/Independence and Learning Styles in Sixth Graders" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hofstra University, New York, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>Penelope L. Peterson, "Direct Instruction: Effective for What and for Whom?" *Educational Leadership* 37, 1 (October, 1979): 46-48.

<sup>8</sup>R. J. Wright and J. P. DuCette, "Locus of Control and Academic Achievement in Traditional and Nontraditional Educational Settings," Unpublished manuscript (Beaver College: ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 123 203, 1976).

<sup>9</sup>T. C. Janicki, "Aptitude-Treatment Interaction Effects of Variations in Direct Instruction" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979).

and Good,<sup>10</sup> she supported the concept that whether or not direct instruction proves to be effective is determined by the type of student who is being taught. Her conclusions coincided exactly with the findings of Trautman,<sup>11</sup> Martin,<sup>12</sup> Domino,<sup>13</sup> Farr,<sup>14</sup> Marcus,<sup>15</sup> and Treffinger who reveals similar relationships between gifted youngsters and their ability to be involved successfully in self-directed learning.<sup>16</sup>

### Implications for Instruction

We must stop gambling that the way in which reading is introduced to a class will, somehow, be effective for all its children. We have hard research data indicating that individuals with different learning style characteristics respond differently to identical methods. It is criminal to ignore what we know.

The following steps should be taken to ensure that each youngster has a real opportunity to learn to read:

1. Each student's learning style should be identified, preferably as early as possible. Janet Perrin, a St. John's University student, has been testing an experimental version of the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) for primary students. The instrument is only in its third year of usage, but teachers interested in testing it to identify the learning styles of young children (Grades 1-2) need only send one \$3.00 prepaid check or purchase order to cover the cost of reproducing the original. Copies may be xeroxed with the author's permission, as long as the teacher is willing to respond to a series of questions concerned with the effectiveness of the questions and illustrations. The instrument is neither research valid nor reliable; it is experimental. But unless teachers are willing to explore its effectiveness with young children, we cannot learn how to improve it further.<sup>17</sup>

2. District or regional units should

establish banks of multisensory instructional resources that may be borrowed for use by teachers with individual students or small groups with similar learning style characteristics.

3. Teachers should be taught to expand their current teaching styles to respond to several different learning styles.

4. Teachers must be taught how to identify individual students' learning style characteristics and then to prescribe complementary resources or methods.

5. New faculty evaluation instruments should be introduced to administrators for better identifying teaching effectiveness. Professionals who respond conscientiously to students' learning style differences should be rewarded and encouraged to assume leadership roles.

### Science Achievement: Another Match With Learning Styles

What Trautman revealed in social studies, Douglass verified in biology.<sup>18</sup> Using inductive and deductive instructional resources, she found that when each set was appropriately matched to students whom it complemented, academic achievement increased. Conversely, mismatches produced less achievement.

Many people of all ages, socioeconomic, and educational levels resist change because of a variety of reasons. The research, however, is adamant; achievement improves when learning styles are responded to correctly.

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<sup>10</sup>H. Ebmeier and T. L. Good, "The Effects of Instructing Teachers About Good Teaching on the Mathematics Achievement of Fourth Grade Students," *American Educational Research Journal* 16, 1 (1979): 1-16.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Trautman, "An Investigation of the Relationship Between Selected Instructional Techniques and Identified Cognitive Style" (Ed.D. Dissertation, St. John's University, 1979).

<sup>12</sup>Michael Kenneth Martin, "Effects of the Interaction Between Students' Learning Styles and High School Instructional Environment (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1977).

<sup>13</sup>George Domino, "Interactive Effects of Achievement Orientation and Teaching Style on Academic Achievement," *ACT Research Report* 39 (1970): 1-9.

<sup>14</sup>Beatrice J. Farr, "Individual Differences in Learning: Predicting One's More Effective Modality" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1971).

<sup>15</sup>Lee Marcus, "Learning Style and Ability Grouping Among Seventh Grade Students," *The Clearing House* 52, 8 (April, 1979): 377-80.

<sup>16</sup>Donald J. Treffinger, "Teaching for Self-Directed Learning: A Priority for the Gifted and Talented," *Gifted Child Quarterly* 19 (1975).

<sup>17</sup>For a copy of the LSI-Primary Version, write to Janet Perrin, Division of Administrative and Instructional Leadership, St. John's University, Grand Central Parkway, Jamaica, New York 11439.

<sup>18</sup>Claudia B. Douglass, "Making Biology Easier to Understand," *The American Biology Teacher* 41, 5 (May, 1979): 277-99.

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