The Role of Learning Styles in Integrating and Empowering Learners

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Key words: *learning styles, student learning, situated learning, reflection, student diversity*

Introduction

The widespread use of learning styles inventories in the UK has attracted controversy and debate. Much of this has been around the psychometric properties of instruments and the conceptualisations of learning styles. Although these issues are important, this paper reviews approaches to the use of learning style instruments [LSI] from a curriculum viewpoint and from the perspective of actual users of learning styles profiles.

Learning Styles: "matching" vs "developmental" approaches

The idea of linking students' learning styles with teaching styles is a widely proposed strategy for teaching. This is the so-called "matching" hypothesis. It suggests that we focus not only on the content of what is to be learnt but on individual learning style characteristics, which should dictate the process of learning (Dunn and Griggs, 2000). The use of the Learning style inventories and similar instruments are commonly used to match students' learning styles with learning methods (Hayes & Allinson; 1996; Dunn and Griggs, 2000; Dunn 1993). An influential school of thought in the literature and practice proposes the notion that an increase in teaching efficiency is associated with matching instructors' teaching styles with learning styles. The idea of matching is seen by these proponents as a universal panacea for learning problems (e.g. Dunn and Griggs, 2000; Dunn, 1993).

While support for matching has been reported (e.g. Dunn, 1993; Sadler-Smith, 1999) it is also acknowledged that a variety of, often critical, views exists on this issue (e.g. Reynolds, 1997; Robotham, 1995). A central criticism is that matching tends to treat learning style as a fixed characteristic of the person. There is not enough evidence to support that view and if people do change over time then the matching may no longer work. However well a group is selected there may always be a minority of students who do not match the teaching approach (Deckinger 2000). Alternative theories suggest that learning styles can develop and change, producing what Kolb refers to as a "balanced learner" (Mainemelis, Boyatzis & Kolb, 2002), in which case the "matching" solution to problems of effective teaching compounds the situation. Kolb

(in Delahoussaye, 2002, pp. 28 - 30) notes that matching is an inappropriate strategy and that we should rather begin to stretch learning capacities in other learning modes. Here the learner is able to choose and use appropriate styles of learning.

It has further been suggested (Shaw, 2002) that learning style may need to change during a person's educational or professional career, again suggesting a "developmental" rather than a "matching" approach. Alternative uses of LSIs do exist. Sadler-Smith (1999) suggests that mismatching may be useful so that students could benefit from exposure to a variety of methods/styles to increase their range of learning and to learn how to learn. He suggests that explicit acknowledgement of cognitive style and learning preferences (along with learning styles and approaches to studying), perhaps through comprehensive "profiling" of these attributes, may be an important step in developing learners. The role of identifying learning styles is to act as a catalyst for development rather than to accept an identified style.

It is also acknowledged by some associates of the matching school that matching is not the only effective use of learning styles information. For example, Dunn and Klavas (1990) explain learning styles to students, provide homework prescriptions and suggest ways to use learning styles to improve learning. Here the students are independently encouraged to match their learning approach to their learning styles. While empowering the student in the short term, this still has a disadvantage common to all matching approaches in that it restricts the development of a balanced and flexible approach to learning.

On the other hand, the context of learning may not always enable a balanced learning style to emerge. Pheiffer *et al* (2003) suggest that the "active experimentation" stage in the learning model devised by Kolb (1984) cannot be fully developed in the formal education setting, rather only in the workplace. A "developmental" approach also rests on the harder view of education, which is that education is about changing the way people think and learn. Within this approach too, we suggest that learning style input may be useful as a tool for social integration and learner empowerment.

Given the tensions between the different conceptions of learning styles (e.g. as personality traits, as learning-centred or as cognition-centred), we believe a view of learning as socially situated is a way to cut through these contradictory models. Such a view recognises the centrality of identity and context, and so moves away from the idea of a fixed set of learning skills, as proposed by the positivist paradigm of learning. A major defect of learning style models is that they ignore social context, assuming the concept of person as monadic entity - a sovereign self-acting freely and totally rationally. A contrasting notion is that of the social self who is positioned within a set of social relations and a moral order (e.g. Harre and Van Langenhove, 1999; Reynolds, 1997). A simple example may be an individual student who has her identity affirmed by the Dunn LSI, as a learner with a preference for mobility and informal settings for learning; yet this is disaffirmed in class or at home where she is told learning means to sit still (no mobility) and to study at the table (formal).

Using LSIs in practice

A possible concern about using learning style questionnaires is that students would see their learning styles as fixed characteristics and demand a matching based response from the tutor. In our earlier study of using a LSI in an introductory module in Business studies (Pheiffer *et al,* 2003) we found no student response indicating that tutors should "match" the individual's learning style, as suggested by the dominant camp in the learning styles field. The majority of students reported having

experienced benefits from gaining information about learning styles. One was a sense of self-efficacy, a factor which has been linked by other authorities to achievement and retention (Bandura, 1982, Nelson et al, 1973). The LSI was used essentially as a catalyst for reflection, and even when students, in feedback sessions, disagreed with the results of their learning styles profile, they still found that the process of examining the alternatives was instructive.

A key aspect of learning that LSIs as an educational tool have the potential to open up is the power relations in the classroom and HE teaching. Reynolds (1997, p 122) contends that very concept of "learning style" obscures the social basis of difference in the way people approach learning. We suggest the opposite may be true, that we may use LSIs to highlight this fact. From our experience in working with students it is clear that exploration of learning styles legitimates alternative ways of learning and thus creates a potential means to address power issues in the class. The social and cultural context may be foregrounded rather than ignored. What is crucial is the way in which learning styles data is used. As a tool for empowerment, it can serve to avoid the pre-judgement of learners and to focus on the need to understand the diversity of their approaches, and that they all contribute to the learning processes and class experience. It can provide a vehicle to explore the contextual issues and their implications, such as why differences may exist and whether they may be due to privilege.

Conclusion: an alternative role for LSIs

We propose an alternative role for LSIs as a dynamic resource for teaching and learning, where used as a catalyst for:

- developing refection;
- engaging students with learning;
- learning about learning;
- empowering students socially as well as intellectually;
- orienting students to HE.

Learning styles become part of a process of getting groups and individuals to see the pattern they are following and to consider what they would like to be. Our approach is to use LSIs to assist in the creation of a learner identity, by sensitising students to the act of learning and what it is to be a learner in different contexts.

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Biographical note

The authors comprise the 'Critical Learning Group' of staff who are teaching in the Business Departments in North Campus of London Metropolitan University - see entry under section below on University-based educational research.