

Latent Learners

By Kerry Hempenstall

Learning styles have had a remarkable popularity in education, despite the absence of significant empirical support that such classifications are valid or reliable or that attempting to teach to a dominant modality improves the outcomes for students.

Looking into the movement from an historical perspective provides some surprising information. A search of leading electronic databases indicates that Dr. Sigmund Freud was the first champion of the learning modalities approach to education.

Freud took a slightly different tack, however, sorting learners in accordance with the degree to which they had successfully completed some early developmental stages.

Oral learners, according to Freud, are best suited to a force-feeding approach, and the best time to teach them anything is at lunchtime. There is always the danger of the regurgitation of facts, however.

Then there are the anal learners for whom learning blockages are a common problem, and the phallic learners, a category with more boys than girls.

But the biggest group, and the one with the most promise for progressive educators, is the learners who are in their latency period. The latent learner is one who is not ready for learning yet, and the appropriate teaching strategy is to do nothing.

We are indebted to the far-sighted whole language pioneers who recognized this group some time ago and have ensured that developmentally appropriate practices were applied. The new new math gurus and the outcomes-based experts should also be recognized in this regard.

Latent learners should be accepted and celebrated, rather than badgered by well-meaning (but out-of-date) instructionally-obsessed teachers. A study of brain-based learning is recommended for teachers tempted to shift latent learners into an artificial learning model such as precision teaching or direct instruction.

Howard Gardner has recently added an eighth intelligence to his Multiple Intelligences framework, and as a very progressive educator, Dr. Gardner will undoubtedly soon be adding a ninth, namely Latent Intelligence, to his scheme.

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Organization for Quality Education, December 2001