

Learning Styles — Not!

Attempts to match teaching methods with supposed learning styles have been unsuccessful.

By Sara G. Tarver

In 1994, Keith Stanovich of OISE wrote: “That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well-established conclusions in all of behavioural science.”

Stanovich’s conclusion regarding the benefits of phonics instruction is not limited to students with a particular “learning style”. Empirical research has shown that attempts to match teaching methods with learning styles have been unsuccessful.

Despite this evidence, educators continue to tout learning styles as the solution to the reading achievement crisis. A brief look at the historical underpinnings of the learning styles approach might help to dispel the learning style myth.

Today’s learning styles approach was known in earlier years (60’s, 70’s and early 80’s) as a *modality preference* approach. Advocates of the modality matching approach hypothesized that learners could be classified as having either a “visual modality preference” or an “auditory modality preference”; that instructional methods could be classified as either “auditory” or “visual”; and that modality preferences could be matched with instructional methods to the benefit of all students.

Whole word/look-say methods were classified as “visual”; code-emphasis/phonics methods were classified as “auditory”. Students with a visual style were to be taught with a visual method, and those with an auditory style were to be taught with an auditory method.

In 1978, I reviewed 15 studies in which the modality matching approach was evaluated, concluding that there was no evidence to support the approach. Other reviewers came to the same conclusion.

As often happens when an instructional approach is shown not to work, the modality matching approach went underground for a while, only to

re-emerge in a few short years with a new name. “Learning styles” replaced “modality matching”.

In the new learning styles approach, students are classified as either global or analytic learners and matched to either a global or an analytic method of teaching reading.

But the global learners and methods of today are strikingly similar to the visual learners and methods of yesteryear, and the analytic learners and methods of today are strikingly similar to the auditory learners and methods of yesteryear. Furthermore, reviews of empirical studies of the new learning styles approach have revealed a dearth of evidence to support the approach.

It is important to know that the current learning styles movement is part and parcel of the current whole language/balanced literacy movement.

Increasing recognition that these approaches have been a dismal failure in California and elsewhere has led to backpedaling on the part of whole language/balanced literacy advocates. Such backpedaling is reflected in claims that teachers do teach phonics when it is needed or that they do teach phonics to those students whose styles are compatible with phonics.

The unfortunate truth is that the phonics instruction provided by most whole language/balanced literacy teachers is simply too little, too late. All students, regardless of hypothesized “style”, benefit from intensive, systematic phonics in beginning reading instruction.

This is not to say that phonics instruction is the only kind of instruction involved in effective reading instruction. Effective reading programs provide fluency and comprehension instruction as well as phonics instruction.

For example, the *Reading Mastery* program by Engelmann and colleagues emphasizes systematic, intensive phonics in the initial stages of

instruction. Gradually, the emphasis shifts to fluency instruction, which entails practice through repeated readings of increasingly difficult word lists and passages.

By grade 3, the emphasis is on comprehension instruction, which entails a variety of meaning-getting and meaning-constructing strategies, as well as vocabulary expansion and enrichment.

In contrast, whole language/ balanced literacy instruction begins with a focus on the construction of meaning, and it is assumed that children will discover phonetic principles as they read for meaning.

Research, experience, and common sense tell us that phonics-first is the way to go in beginning reading instruction. That is no less true for students with strong visual and/or global abilities than it is for students who happen to have strong auditory and/or analytic abilities.

That does not mean that children’s individual differences are to be ignored — good teaching always entails attention to individual differences. But it does mean that we need not attempt to individualize on the basis of “learning styles”. Instead, we must individualize on the basis of each child’s needs in terms of the reading skills that he/she has not acquired.

Our knowledge of how to teach reading to all of our students, with all of their diverse and unique learning characteristics, exceeds by far our implementation of that knowledge.

It’s time to insist that the educational establishment’s fascination with philosophical, theoretical, and political debates be replaced by a commitment to instructional practices that work. Make no mistake about it, direct instruction in phonics is a good place to start.

(Dr. Tarver is professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.)