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RUNNING HEAD: Exploring Learning Styles

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Exploring Learning Styles to Teach Reading
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Abstract

Reading education needs to be taught using many different learning styles. Students that have learning styles different than those normally used in their classrooms are being undereducated. Teachers need to understand how learning styles work and how to use them in their classroom. In my work in classrooms, I found that teachers think that using learning styles is important but they are sometimes unsure as to how to use them. To assist teachers, I made a pamphlet on learning styles. In the pamphlet there is a list of different learning styles and a brief summary of how each group learns with hints on making your classroom accessible for all learners, along with links to learning style tests, books, and articles that teachers might find useful. The teachers I gave my pamphlet to found it to be a helpful tool to start from, it gave them simple ideas to use in their classes and resources to educate themselves further.

Exploring Learning Styles to Teach Reading

In Ms. Z's class, there are twenty students ages five and six. Only five of her students are in the highest reading group, six are in the "at grade level" group, three are in the basic reading group, and the last six are in the lowest level group. The lowest level is composed of students that are still having a hard time telling the letters apart and cannot match sounds to letters most of the time. Ms. Z has two hours a day to teach reading, her difficulty is in that she has so many groups of readers that it is hard to teach the whole class any one lesson. Ms. Z needs to know how each of her students learns best. This will allow her to maximize her lessons, so that the students in her high level group continue to learn and her low level group can move up without negatively impacting learners in higher groups.

In a class of 20 students, what are the chances that everyone is going to learn the same way? Is everyone going to like reading alone at their desk, or maybe learning jump rope rhymes to remember the states and capitols? Some people enjoy moving around while they learn and others need to sit in one place. This is one way learning styles come out in our education. In California, we have to follow certain rules and standards in public education. These standards are making it harder for teachers to make sure that all students are learning in the best way. The main thing these standards cut back on is flexible time for teachers to teach at the different speeds and the different ways their students are learning. Teachers have to find ways that teach most students, because there is not enough time to help each student.

The Problem

When I was in school everyone learned to read from the same books and my teachers did not use multiple methods of teaching. During first grade I was tested to see if I had any learning disabilities. I was diagnosed as dyslexic. Traditional teaching methods did nothing for me. I loved books and everything about them, but I simply could not read. I loved listening to poems. I had a CD of poems that I would listen to over and over, like most kids watch their favorite movie. I loved when my parents read to me, which they did every night. They read me long books like The Little House on the Prairie and The Chronicles of Narnia. I would look through books I could not read and have other people read them to me until I memorized all the words. I had to leave class once or twice a week to go to the Reading Resource Room and all the other kids in my class knew I could not read. My teachers did not put much effort into making sure I learned to read. One teacher even told my mom that we needed to get a TV and that would help me learn to read. My parents did what they could and tried every way they knew how to get me to read, but they were not teachers. They did not know about learning styles and different methods of teaching; they only had what they had been taught when they were in school.

In fifth grade I still could not read, but by the end of that year I was up to a fourth grade reading level because of my wonderful fifth grade teacher who used different styles of teaching. Ms. X was the first teacher to go back to the beginning and figure out where I needed to start from. She used many different methods, like reading out loud, reading beginning level books, reading to me, and having me read to someone else. I cannot say which one of those methods is the one that worked, but after that school year my reading improved a hundredfold. I have been in the situation that many students face

in education, when they just are not learning from the way that they are being taught.

Statewide test scores (School Fact Sheet 2005-2006) show us just how poorly our schools are doing. Seventy percent of California's students are scoring above a basic reading level. This might seem like a high percentile, but this also means that thirty percent of our young people read at a basic level or lower. In Marina, only six of the eleven elementary schools have scores that show that more than fifty percent of their students can read above a basic level. This leaves five of Marina's elementary schools with scores in reading below fifty percent, furthermore, two schools that have reported the lowest scores show that only nineteen percent of the school can read above a basic level. Nineteen percent is well below the California average of forty-four percent. What does it say about our state if our state average test score in reading is only forty-four percent?

Low reading achievement scores reflect problems with the way that schools are teaching children. Standardized testing is becoming more and more important in our classrooms. In 1994 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act required all public schools to use standardized tests. The No Child Left Behind Act, which started in 2001, based the funding that public schools receive on standardized test scores. As a result, there is a decrease in creative learning, because standardized test scores have become more important. Now teachers have less time to teach art and music. A decrease in physical activity is also hurting education. Only 21.3 percent of all adolescents participated in one or more days per week of PE in their schools (Gordon-Larsen, 2000). Educators are saying that, "We minimize (financial) impact on areas required and tested by the state or federal government. We'll target things like business classes, music and

modified sports" (CNN, 2003). So as educators teach more to the test, everything that is not on the test and cannot be tested in a standardized fashion is lost.

Every student learns differently, and standardized tests do not assess everything students learn. According to therapist, researcher, author and the founder of The Gurian Institute, Michael Gurian:

The whole brain system is different. Boys tend to be more kinesthetic, more hands-on, and more spatial-mechanical. They don't tend to sit still to learn as well as girls do. Of course, this is an average; there are some who can. They don't tend to use as many words, they don't produce as many, and they don't think in words as much. Boys have about half the verbal centers girls have, so they don't rely as much on the words. They don't utilize their fine motor skills as much, and they don't develop in the brain as quickly or as much, and that goes well into adulthood, too. They rely more on gross motor skills, so that means more physical movement. (as cited in Delisio, 2006, http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/chat/chat170.shtml)

Dr. William Pollack (2006) a Harvard medical school psychologist and author, also says, "Boys have a unique learning style that is different from that of girls. Research suggests that, whereas many girls may prefer to learn by watching or listening, boys generally prefer to learn by doing, by engaging in some action-oriented task" (PBS, 2006). Michael Gurian (2006) says that boys' minds go in to a "rest state" often during the day so it may seem as if they have checked out. In this rest state, girls still have half-

active brains so they can take notes and other mindless things. Girls also do not zone out as often as boys, so they pay attention for longer periods of time.

Dr. William Pollack (2006) says, "Teaching styles and disciplinary habits are simply not suited for the average boy, and often lock him into a terrible cycle of punishment and bad behavior" (http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/chat/chat170.shtml). Schools are becoming less productive environments for boys and girls with different learning styles, we need to change them to fit more learning styles. Pollack (2006) also says that "First, teachers simply do not appear to be doing a good job noticing the problems many boys have in certain academic subjects, namely reading and writing" (http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/chat/chat170.shtml). If we change the way reading and writing is being taught, then teachers may be better able to notice where each student is getting off track or where he/she starts to misunderstand the information he/she is being taught. If classrooms teach to their strengths, students will do better. Dr. William Pollack thinks that the educational environment is not set up to accommodate students strengths, therefore students get frustrated and start acting out to get attention.

Standardized tests also do not take into account the fact that different children have different types of intelligence or learning styles. According to Howard Gardener's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, there are at least seven distinct types of intelligence. Mainstream schools with little or no art in their curriculum cater primarily to students with logical or linguistic intelligence. Consequently, students stronger in spatial, social, and the other intelligence domains get left out. The students that are most negatively impacted by this are the ones with learning styles that are not often practiced in their school, such as kinesthetic learners. These students are being let down by the

public school system because their learning style is not as easily taught to.

Research Literature

If we change our teaching methods to include all learning styles then everyone benefits. There are no drawbacks to making sure our students are better educated except that it means more work for teachers, because they have to develop lessons that accommodate all learning styles.

Learning Styles. Learning styles have been defined in many ways. Learning styles can take different forms, from Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences to Rita and Kenneth Dunn's (1996) Individual Preference and Stimuli Inventories. Both state that each person learns differently from each other and that we all have strengths and weaknesses as learners. In Rita Dunn's (1996) *How to Implement and Supervise a Learning Style Program*, she says, "Many people prefer to learn in ways that are different from how other people of the same class, grade, age, nationality, race, culture, or religion prefer to learn" (pg. 1). This means that even people who are seemingly the same still differ in the way they learn, and there is no way to make everyone learn the same. Howard Gardner (1993), in the new introduction of his book *Frames of Mind*, says this about learning, "One person's limitation can be another person's opportunity. Seven kinds of intelligence would allow seven ways to teach, rather than one" (pg. xix).

More specifically, Gardner's theory states that there are seven different kinds of intelligence: Linguistic, Musical, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal intelligence. People strong in Linguistic intelligence have great understanding of language and how to use it. Musical intelligence is a deep understanding of everything to do with music: the way it is put together, how to make it,

how to find pitch and tones and its patterns. Those with Logical-Mathematical intelligence know how to find ways to solve mathematical problems and how to analyze them to find their patterns. Spatial Intelligence is used to understand where things are in space. This includes understanding dimensions and where things are in relation to others. Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence is knowing how to use your body and what it can do. It is used to solve problems using one's body and how to use one's body to its fullest. Interpersonal Intelligence has to do with understanding other people and what they do and why. This understanding helps you see what others need or want. Finally, Intrapersonal Intelligence has to do with understanding yourself, and your own fears, beliefs, and how and why you do things.

Dunn's (1996) learning styles are more about the different levels of learning, which she lays out in her book *How to Implement and Supervise a Learning Style Program*. Each level has different elements that effect the student's learning at that level. There is an Environmental, Emotional, Sociological, Physical and Psychological level. In the Environmental level, the factors that effect students are sound, light, temperature and room set up. For the Emotional level, you need to take into account motivation, persistence, responsibility and structure. Whether students like to work alone, in pairs, in a group, with peers or adults all have to do with Sociological preferences. Physical Preferences are perceptual modes (whether they are an auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learner), intake (whether they like to eat, smoke, or drink when they are studying or in class), what time of day they learn best and if they like to move around when they are learning. Lastly, there is the Psychological level, which deals with whether students are right-brained or left-brained, if they are impulsive or reflective and

whether they think globally or analytically. Dunn (1996) says, "...it is important to identify students' learning styles to determine their perceptual strengths and to teach them how to capitalize on their strengths (pg. 11).

There are many learning styles tests that can tell you if you are a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learner. According to the University of San Diego's learning styles test, if you are a visual learner it means that you need to take a lot of notes, like to look at whatever it is you are learning about and it is helpful to see pictures or illustrations on the subject you are learning about. If you are a auditory learner then you tend to sit in an area that helps you hear the instructor but you don't need to be able to see him/her. You also probably like to hum, talk, sing, or read out loud to yourself. Being read to is more helpful to you and you don't need to see pictures and diagrams in lessons. Lastly, kinesthetic learners need to keep moving but need to stop regularly too. You are more likely to remember what you did, than what was said to you or what you simply looked at. Students often have a combination of more than one learning style which helps them get through lessons. If teachers can make sure that each of these learning styles is used for each lesson, more students are going feel more comfortable with what they are learning.

Some teachers have started to change the way that they teach to include multiple learning styles. Debbie J. Johnson (2006) who is a teacher in Latham, Illinois changed her lessons to include different learning styles. First she tested her students to find out what kinds of learners she had, because she wanted to fit her lessons to her students. She wanted all of her students to learn and she knew that meant teaching to different learning styles, because as Gardner said, "Human minds do not all work in the same

way and human beings do not have the same cognitive strengths” (pg. 26). She found in her research that one of the most important parts of teaching to multiple learning styles was choice. She stated that, “When teachers differentiate the curriculum and give students a choice, they are empowering the students to take responsibility for their own learning” (Johnson, 2006, pg. 29). She found that out of twenty-one students, twelve were strong audio-visual kinesthetic learners, four were strongly auditory learners, two that were mostly visual learners, two showed no major preference, although one leaned a little more to auditory and the other to visual. Lastly one student scored equally in both audio-visual kinesthetic learning styles and auditory learning styles (Johnson, 2006). She then made her lesson plans work for all the students, including each learning style she found on the test and from what she knew about them from teaching them, by giving options for each and having more than one activity for each learning style. Johnson (2006) says, “Because these students were given individual choices, they were more successful with their projects” (pg. 38). In her conclusion Johnson (2006) says:

When differentiating curriculum, it is important to remember that separate lessons for each learning style are not necessary... teachers will find that developing a differentiated curriculum will be less time-consuming if they take advantage of this technique. Many lessons easily fall into a combination of learning styles, thus saving valuable time for the teacher when preparing units of study. (pg. 38)

Methodology

Participants. I first asked four teachers if they would let me interview them on learning styles and teaching reading. In the end I was only able to interview two of them

because of time. I interviewed first grade teachers because this is the grade in which students begin reading. I choose to use two beginning teachers because I wanted to see how new teachers were being taught to teach, meaning that they were less likely to have come up with little tricks and methods to teach that more experienced teachers might have. Ms. X was a kindergarten/ first grade teacher and this was her second year teaching her own class. Her class was half kindergarten and half first grade. Ms. W was a first grade teacher and this is her first year teaching.

Interview Questions. A semi-structured interview format was used to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. The following questions were asked to two first grade teacher participants:

1. What do you think about the way reading is being taught?
2. What is currently being done to improve the way reading is being taught - by whom - and do you think this is good, bad, or indifferent? Why?
3. In what ways do you think that students' learning styles affect their learning how to read?
4. How does the way that reading is being taught meet the needs of learners with different learning styles?
5. What are some of the ways to teach reading that would incorporate different learning styles?
6. What do you think are the obstacles/drawbacks/disadvantages to incorporating learning styles in the teaching of reading?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the way reading is being taught or using learning styles to teach reading?

Classroom Observation. One hour-long classroom observation of a reading lesson was scheduled at the convenience of the teacher. I used this observation see how learning styles were being used and if the teacher used more than one learning style when she taught.

Procedure. I did my classroom observation first, so that I would have some idea what questions to ask and so that I had some background information going into the interview. I then did my interview with Ms. X, it was a 20 minute face to face interview that was tape-recorded and later typed out so that I could look through it easily for common themes. After that I did a paper and pencil interview with Ms. W, which she filled out and returned to me, after which I called her and we went over her answers and I asked a few follow-up questions.

Data Analysis. I tape recorded my face to face interview and then typed up the questions and answers from the tape. I then read through both interviews looking for common themes.

Results

After analyzing the data for emergent themes, three common themes were identified. They will be expanded on below.

Excel. This a program used at Marina Vista Elementary School. The students take a reading test at the beginning of every year and then from the results, are placed into different reading groups. Then, every morning for an hour, they are split into different classes for lessons. There is one teacher for each reading group and the same teacher works with the same students so that they have consistency. Ms. W says this about the

Excel program:

Excel program really improves the way reading is being taught at my school because it allows classes to be based on current ability level. LOW-LOW students whom have difficulty with letter sound recognition are all clustered together in the same classroom... this allows the teacher to work closely to their needs. Similarly, high students are grouped together, which allows time for enrichment. (personal communication, 2007)

Time. Both of the teachers I interviewed said that the main problem with incorporating different learning styles in to all of their lessons is that they do not have enough time. Teachers are only given a set amount of time for each subject each day and if they want to do longer lessons then they lose time for something else. It takes less time to teach something one way then it does to use different learning styles and different activities. Ms. X that time was her biggest challenge, "...the biggest thing is time and teachers get stuck because they don't have enough time, by the state we are ordered to teach certain amount of minutes for curriculum areas and the thing is we just run out of time to do it all effectively..." (Personal communication, 2007)

Standards. The standards are set so there is not much wiggle room when it comes to accommodating differences in students. Standards are set with no exceptions for students with slight learning disabilities or abnormal learning styles. Teachers have a hard time making sure that no student gets left behind, because the standards determine when it is time to move on to a new subject matter. Ms. X had this to say about not knowing when to move one and follow the guide lines or to follow where her students where a:

...teachers are on a passing guild and they say what to teach and when

to the day and the problem is some of the kids are still learning 1 – 100 and they still aren't clear on what the numbers mean like the difference between 28 82 they can't see that in their head. (personal communication, 2007)

Action

Justification. I made a pamphlet for teachers with information about learning styles, how to accommodate them and helpful hints for each. It also had information on where to get learning styles tests, detailed information on each learning style, and useful resources like book titles, websites, and articles on different learning styles. After Gardner (1993) published his book *Frames of Mind*, he was asked by teachers how to use his theory in the classroom. The teachers asked him to help them move it from a theory into practice. Now other teachers can use this information to help them use his theory in their classrooms. Many teachers have trouble knowing where to start when it comes to learning styles. Both of the teachers I interviewed said that they would use multiple intelligence more if they knew more ways to use them in their lessons. This pamphlet will help with ideas to use in lessons and resources they can use to find out more about learning styles. Both teachers I talked to about my pamphlet found it to be a helpful starting place. They liked that it had ways to learn more on their own and Ms. W told me that she plans on looking in to learning styles further so that she can use them in her classroom more often.

Critical Reflection

Strengths. I think that my action was helpful but not overwhelming. It was also easy to read and did not take up a lot of time, so it was easier for teachers to read through on a break or at lunch. It was also good because you got a lot of information right there in the pamphlet, but it also had information for teachers who wanted to look

more deeply into the subject.

Weaknesses. I think that if I had known what I was doing sooner I could have gotten the pamphlet out to more teachers. The pamphlet is just a starting place for teachers and they need to know more about learning styles and how to use them in their classrooms. If I could have made something with more information that would have been more useful.

What I would do differently next time. If I was to do this again I would want to be able to get into the field with the teachers earlier so that I could build a stronger relationship with them so that I could see exactly what they needed, whether it is a workshop or maybe just a point in the right direction.

Next step. I think that all teachers need to have some kind of class or workshop on learning styles and how to use them in their classroom. I think that if teachers had even a short workshop it would change the way they teach and could help a lot of students.

On lessons learned

Myself. I have learned a lot about myself as I worked on this project, firstly because I had to take the learning styles tests because I wanted to find ones for my pamphlet that were good and had the right information, and secondly because I learned a lot about how the school system is at present. The more I found how about the school system the less I wanted to be a teacher and that was a scary thought, because that is what I have been working towards for the last four years and the thought of starting new is always scary. Lucky for me I also happened to be doing my service learning in a classroom in Santa Cruz and this helped me balance my desire not to be a teacher

because as soon as I was in a class I knew it was where I wanted to be. So I have learned that even though I may not like the system that I'm going to have to work in I still really want to be a teacher, and I am glad to know this now and not find out my first year of teaching.

Working towards change. I have learned that it is not easy to change the schools, and that nothing has a quick fix. I think that one of the hardest parts is building a relationship with the schools, because unless you already know the people who have the power to change things it is hard to go into a school and tell them what needs to change without stepping on toes.

Teaching and learning. I have learned a lot about theories of teaching and that when you get in to a real classroom these theories change to fit reality. I have found that even though teachers might want to change something in their class it is not always as easy as that, they have to get lesson plans cleared and sometimes do not know how to make the changes.

The 3 MLOs used in my project. Knowledge and Lifelong Learning, Critical Communications in English, Language, and Literature and Human Development.

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