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BACKGROUND

Why should we teach students about stylistic differences?

The more students know and understand about themselves—including their individual learning styles—the more opportunities they have to act in self-directed ways, to make wise choices, and to stretch their own styles rather than simply defend their own styles. Because effective educational practice has begun to reflect our more complex understanding of learning styles, it is especially important that students have the skills to participate in the dialogue about differences. As teachers orchestrate a variety of ways for students to learn how to demonstrate their understandings, students need the skills to be able to discuss what affects them. Through strategies that range from cooperative learning to assessment practices such as portfolio assessment, educators have sought ways to facilitate students' active and reflective learning, and to provide multiple avenues to content destinations. We can help students go the distance in these areas by teaching them about differences, choices, options, high-quality work, and assessment standards.

The current thrust toward site-based management reinforces the importance of

each school's mission to serve its client—the student—as personally and effectively as possible, and to help the student become an educated citizen with confidence in all the aspects of self that lead toward self-actualization. The more students understand their own strengths, the more they can guide their own work. The more they understand their own limitations, the more clear-headed they can be about learning how to flex and stretch.

How would students' knowledge of stylistic differences relate to assessment practices?

The movement toward recognition of differences has brought a simultaneous need to assess students in ways that allow them to show us what they know. Through self-knowledge, students are in a better position to know how to illustrate their content knowledge most effectively. Further, through self-knowledge, students have the potential to engage in richer metacognitive practices, to experience deeper insight into their own motivations and needs, and to use reflective opportunities in more meaningful ways.

In the decade since learning styles have come into prominence, teachers have consistently raised questions about assessment. Specifically, how do we assess in ways that are fair to all styles but also maintain a high quality of performance? We must have high expectations of all students, but those expectations must not imply that meeting our standards requires the ability to use one particular style. Student achievement can be the outcome of any style. When we set the conditions to help all students achieve these standards through their strengths, they will be able to meet both academic as well as personal needs.

In her work on performance assessment, my colleague Bobby Prewitt has developed six key standards for students.

- To develop content mastery.
- To become self-directed learners.
- To be facile at group cooperation.
- To grow in critical and creative thinking.
- To gain ability in presentation of one's work and one's self.
- To relate self to the community.

The explanation of these standards and the process of using them can found in her book, *Learning Style and Performance Assessment*,¹ and in her exceptional

Performance Assessment Chart.² Both the process and product assessment materials used within the lessons in this guide have been created using these resources.

Why is students' knowledge of style important for assessments that use standards and criteria?

To achieve *distinguished* recognition in each of the important assessment areas listed above, students **must** understand their ways of learning, thinking, and being in the world. That is, they need to

1. understand their own natural abilities and qualities and be able to value the different abilities and qualities of others.
2. know how to learn most effectively.
3. realize their strengths and limits, as well as the ways to use their strengths and overcome limitations.
4. appreciate how others work and how to work generously with others.
5. think critically in extensive and expansive ways, as well as have significant opportunities to explore creativity in their own styles and through their own intelligences.
6. present their work—whether through performance, product, project, exhibit, or portfolio—through their strengths and for their audiences.
7. have sufficient belief in their own worth that they can be free to appreciate the inherent work and worth of others.

Learning Styles: Personal Exploration and Practical Applications encourages students to explore the issues and aspects of learning and thinking styles in a reflective and deep-thinking way. Faced with the developmental task of forming a healthy, true identity, youngsters need much freedom but also a loving framework that helps value and validate their own gifts of mind and spirit in a positive way.

A STUDY OF STYLE: EFFECTS ON STUDENTS

The Personal Level

On a personal level, students have said that knowledge of style helped them value differences. Teachers have found that many students increasingly thought of themselves in a better light and, at least, had a way to understand some of their difficulties. We could see that some students experienced great relief from the burden of being different from others. Intervention counselors found that knowledge helped some students to participate more actively in the problem-solving process in their own counseling situations. Guidance counselors were able to help students apply their knowledge to examine their own strengths more systematically before they wrote their personal essays for college admission.

Underachievers

Interviews with counselors about under-achieving students, and with underachievers and their parents, brought out considerable evidence that many of these students had very strong learning style qualities and preferences, and a lifelong history of stylistic mismatch in the classroom.

Underachievers typically revealed a stylistic profile that was highly personal, interactive, process-oriented, and emotional, with a strong leaning toward a hands-on modality. They also tended to be highly auditory in interpersonal ways, not in hierarchical ways. Therefore, they liked to talk (cooperative learning) rather than listen to lectures.

Working with learning style differences helped many underachievers to understand why they turned off school or had difficulty in school. Most of them showed such strong learning style needs that they truly could not bridge on their own to a teacher's style. As a consequence, many just managed to learn and others gave up. Some students told me of their frustration because they did study but they never quite provided what the teacher wanted. Other students felt the results were the same

whether they studied or not, so why bother. The shame of it lies in the system-induced waste of these students: preventable casualties.

Resources like this book may help such students to regain some belief in themselves. But teachers need to help them access content in more than linear ways and show their knowledge of content through more methods than just quantifiable tests. Unless teachers decide to take this kind of approach, students who underachieve because of stylistic mismatch will not develop their academic potential.

Academically Successful but Emotionally Troubled Students

Conversations with counselors also led me to question whether learning style plays a role in the problems of the academically and socially successful student who experiences emotional problems, who lacks positive self-esteem and a healthy self-concept, and who may even attempt suicide. Although the issues are extremely intricate, I wonder if some of these adolescents were able to achieve in the sequential mode of school but felt no validation of their own selves and saw approval only for their ability to achieve on

others' terms. We need to ask ourselves how our understanding of stylistic differences can assist us with these students.

Issues of Dysfunctional Families

Recent work on dysfunctional families leaves little doubt of the damage done to students when their physical and developmental needs are sacrificed to the ugly payoff delivered by alcohol, drugs, abuse, and violence. Extensive work with teachers has brought to light the enormous impact dysfunctional behavior has on students in different ways, mostly negative. From children who demonstrate the violence modeled on them to children who withdraw all trust from everyone, neglect and abuse take a toll on the cognitive development of children as well as on their emotional and psychological growth.³

Teachers recognize that children without love, support, consistency, trust, and freedom to be a child experience tremendous stress and have little ability to learn except through their strongest learning channels, modality preferences, and natural intelligence. However ample their insight into the necessity for help, teachers seldom have sufficient support to