

Do learning style models really work for the further education system?

Just how useful are models of learning styles? Do they have an impact on teaching and learning in FE? A systematic review, by Professor Frank Coffield and colleagues, which examined 13 models, concluded that they should be used with care.

The review found that many models are weak and unreliable, and have a negligible impact on teaching and learning. When evidence about learning styles was compared with evidence for other approaches, the review concluded the evidence was far stronger for both thinking skills and assessment for learning.

Why did learning styles have relatively little impact? Perhaps it's not surprising. Of the 13 models reviewed only two were identified as robust and useful in the context of post-16 education and training. In particular, the review points out that some learning styles models were never intended for education, but for the business world.

One problem highlighted by the reviewers is the contradictory advice about how to respond to learning styles. Whilst some researchers suggest matching the tutor's teaching style with students' individual learning styles, others suggest learners should develop a repertoire of styles.

The reviewers also commented on some of the dangers associated with learning styles:

- people who use the instruments may come to think in stereotypes, for example tending to think that vocational students are all 'non-reflective', 'activity-based' learners
- learning styles can lead teachers to emphasise attitudes and skills over subject knowledge
- too much is expected of relatively simple, self-report tests. (One test for example, consists of just twelve sets of four words to choose from).

The reviewers advise moving away from individual learning styles to broader notions of how learners approach and conceive learning. Approaches to group learning and thinking skills described below could be a good place to start.

Coffield, F., Moseley, D., Hall, E., & Ecclestone, K. (2004) Should we be using learning styles? What research has to say to practice. Learning and Skills Research Centre:

www.lsrc.ac.uk/publications/index.asp