



Professor Frank Coffield

## Making teaching and learning our first priority

Frank Coffield has long been a champion of teaching and learning, producing in his time, many seminal and influential texts. Last year's 'Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority', for example, written primarily for managers with responsibility for planning CPD courses and initial training caused quite a stir in the post-16 sector. In it, Coffield called for teaching and learning to be restored as the common focus for all of us who work in post-16 education and training and highlighted the need to question our current practices and assumptions. Just in case you missed it, here's a reminder of some of the things he wrote in this landmark pamphlet...

Coffield started by suggesting that for many of us, learning means nothing more than the transmission and assimilation of knowledge and skills, such as when a learner is taught and learns that 'hablaba' in Spanish means 'I was speaking'. He argues that this implicit understanding is inadequate, preferring to see learning as 'significant changes in capability, understanding, knowledge, practices, attitudes or values by individuals, groups, organisation or society'. He also prefers not to view learning in isolation from teaching. He argues that they're not separate activities, but intertwined elements of a double sided, interactive process, which transforms both tutor and learner.

In fact interaction is key. Later in the pamphlet, Coffield argues that tutors need to engage in dialogue with their learners and goes on to suggest that dialogue with learners is likely to lead on to discussion among tutors about different approaches to teaching. He provides some helpful starting points, such as the suggestion to draw up ten questions to ask learners about their learning (for example 'What do/don't you enjoy learning?' and 'What helps/prevents you learn?') or jotting down a definition of the learning we like and/or use in our work.

An area of teaching and learning that is likely to produce a lively discussion amongst learners and colleagues alike, is learning styles. But Coffield warns that we need to be careful to move away from a narrow preoccupation with learning styles to conceptions of learning, learning strategies and the purposes of learning. Coffield is well known for co-authoring a damning report of learning styles in 2004 (which we featured in the first issue of *Inside Evidence*).

Yet five years on, he says many of us 'have fallen prey to a non-scientific movement (I almost wrote 'disease') which goes by the acronym of VAKT' (Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic or Tactile learners). He says again, 'put simply, it doesn't work ... there is **no** scientific justification for teaching and learning strategies based on VAKT and tutors should **stop** using learning style instruments based on them. There is **no** theory of VAKT from which to draw **any** implications for practice. [In the words of Monty Python] It should be a dead parrot. It should have ceased to function'. (Emphases as in original).



### Take action

In order to stimulate discussion about effective teaching and learning and make it a first priority, could you:

- get together with colleagues and learners to define the teaching and learning approaches you like and use in your institution
- draw up with your colleagues questions to ask learners about their learning and/or think about the implications of your questions for your teaching
- ask yourself how you learn and then consider how you would arrange things if you were a learner where you work, or
- investigate and discuss Coffield's findings about learning styles in more detail, by reading his 2004 and/or 2008 publications available on the LSN website – see evidence source.

#### Evidence source

Coffield, F. (2008) *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority*. Learning and Skills Network [www.LSNeducation.org.uk](http://www.LSNeducation.org.uk)

*Coffield's suggestions and arguments were based not only on his own 42 years experience in education as a teacher and researcher, but were rooted in 'the most appropriate, the most up-to-date and the best conducted research in this country and abroad'.*