

A Conversation with Dr. Rita Dunn

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Abstract

Dr. Rita Dunn was interviewed about the field of learning styles. The focus was on aspects not previously reported. This interview addressed how the Center of the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles at St John's University was involved in matching its freshmen students' learning styles with professors' teaching styles. Dr. Dunn provided suggestions on how college and university teaching may be improved when professors introduce various aspects of learning styles into their teaching approach. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provides a basis for Dr. Dunn's comments on student achievement. Dr. Dunn discussed the impact of learning styles around the world. Looking to the future, Dr. Dunn has plans to assist both parents and children in how they can learn about their own unique learning styles and how to apply them. Also, Rita Dunn envisions the learning style movement entering the corporate world where extensive training occurs

Introduction

Rita Dunn was a keynote speaker at The Institute for Learning Styles Research, (ILSR), 2004 Summer Conference, July 22-24, 2004, (Learning Styles and Human Performance, 2004) at Ball State University (BSU) in Muncie, IN, hosted jointly by the ILSR (<http://www.learningstyles.org/>), Indiana Department of Education's Division of Exceptional Learners, and BSU's Department of Special Education. As an outgrowth of that, Dr. Kortland R. Koch (1998, 2004) of the Special Education Department at BSU conducted an interview with Dr. Rita Dunn, Professor in the Division of Administrative Instructional Leadership, Director of the Center of the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles at St. John's University, Jamaica, New York. The setting was at St. John University's summer conference, "The 27th Annual Leadership Certification Institute: Teaching Students Through Their Individual Learning Styles", in New York City, July 29, 2004. Questions had been formulated to ask Rita Dunn to respond to her interest and concern about the field of learning styles that had not been previously reported.

The interview was conducted in person, although Dr. Dunn was aware of the nature of the questions ahead of time. The discussion was audio taped and an assistant took notes. In the late 1990's, Rita Dunn responded to questions from interviewers which covered aspects of the Dunn and Dunn conceptual model,

motivation in learning, children and adult's differing learning styles, intelligence concepts, and her concept of analytic versus global approaches to learning style (Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1996/97; Shaughnessy, 1998).

The formats for those interviews varied; in some cases, the questions were submitted in writing and Dr. Dunn responded in writing and in other instances she gave an oral interview. Rita Dunn views herself as a change agent responsible for promoting and enhancing school effectiveness. For over 40 years, Rita Dunn has been trying to make people aware that students learn in different ways, and therefore teachers and professors must provide multiple strategies to meet the learning styles of all learners so that they can apply learning styles to address the diverse needs of differing individuals. Rita and Kenneth Dunn have together been in the forefront of the field of education, publishing more than three hundred journal articles, chapters and books. Among their books are *Practical Approaches to Individualizing Instruction: Contracts and Other Effective Teaching Strategies* (1972); *Situational Leadership for Principals: The School Administrator* (1983); *The Complete Guide to the Learning Styles In-service System* (1999); and *Teaching Young Adults to Teach Themselves* (2001).

Rita Dunn's belief is that teachers need to learn how to maximize teaching instruction so that students become more efficient learners. The impact of her concepts and their influence on teaching and learning has meant a lot to her. Rita's years of dedication and commitment to instruction is based upon her belief that it is morally wrong to let kids suffer due to a mismatch of teaching and learning styles. Currently the intent of the Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles founded in 1979 at St. John's University is to expand the application of learning styles to other domains and fields. Rita Dunn never dreamed when she first started teaching that she would have made such an impact. She has been dedicated to school change using learning styles and her research to assist teachers. Early in her career, administrators were saying, "I brought you my teachers. Don't talk research; just tell them the practical applications" (Dunn, 2004). Dunn defines learning style as "the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information. That interaction occurs differently for each individual" (Dunn, Dunn, & Perrin, 1994, p.2),

To sit and observe Rita Dunn for the interview was exciting. Her responses presented below do not reflect her dynamic and animated persona. Her physical appearance, gorgeous clothes and beautifully coiffed hair offered a stunning appearance. Adding to that, her expressive eyes, hand gestures and animated voice are aspects of her vibrant personality.

Teaching and Research Practices

1. *How can learning styles help college professors or (school teachers) evaluate their learning and teaching?*

Every year we identify the learning styles of our freshman students coming to St. John's University. Now, for the first year we are going to identify the learning styles of the professors and the teaching styles. We're going to compare and show every professor the learning styles of the students in his/her class as compared with his/her teaching style and learning style. We're hoping it will develop awareness of the fact that they are teaching such diverse kids. You've got to do different things to reach them because one style cannot reach everybody. It doesn't matter how good it is. It's not good for all. So in that sense we're hoping that self-evaluation based on research will cause people to say ... What can I do? Look at all the diverse students. Who can handle all of this? What am I supposed to do? Then we're going to give the professors some easy beginning strategies for responding to different learning styles, not everything, you know, because they would be overwhelmed. You've got 80% low auditory learning people and you're lecturing.

Let them bring tape recorders in and tape record the lecture. Tell them at the very beginning of the semester, I will video tape every lesson. There is no excuse for you not to learn everything. I will have the tapes available. If you are absent, if you're ill, if you can't focus that day, if you can't concentrate, if you get home and there is something you didn't understand, listen to it again. Look at my face, look at what I emphasize, look at what I draw, look at what I illustrate. Make that available to students.

Let them listen to it at their best time of the day. [Let students] listen to it when they can't remember what you said, when they don't remember whether their notes are correct. Tell global students ... that in addition to the notes, draw a picture of what it means. So illustrate it - they somehow remember the pictures that mean something to them. Let them draw pictures of what this is about. Focus them a little bit. Encourage them to bring colored pens in. Use the colors because the colors attract the global consciousness with attention. If the professors start to like it, as some of the professors who are teaching through learning styles, then we'll show them more. See, I think frankly that if a professor is allowed to teach in her style or his style, [they] should have tape recordings of every lesson available in the library, should have ... activity packages in the library, should have a program learning sequence about the [course] content so their kids don't have to learn in the lecture. Every institution puts a great deal of money in the [university] budget for resources but they don't make the right things available to students. You know there isn't a library that doesn't have audio and video tapes, that doesn't have books. But they don't have tapes of the

professors' lessons. Why not have videotapes of professors' lessons? Some [students] have to see the professor's face. That's why they sit in the front. They have to see you [professor], they have to get your meaning, your expression, your actions if you've got actions. So videotape every lesson. Why can't the videotape be available? A kid that misses a lesson or is sick or is delayed by traffic - he never catches up. If professors feel that they are receiving benefits by teaching through learning styles, they're going to want more to help to reinforce their effectiveness as a teacher or instructor.

2. How do learning styles influence course development and the design of lesson plans?

Learning styles influence course development because those of us that are teaching through learning styles are teaching any course through learning styles. So when I am teaching, I've got multisensory materials. I start globally. I tell them what my style is. I am collegial versus authoritative with different students. I never ask just for term papers, I mean that's ridiculous. I make students develop materials. Portfolios, well that's one way. I have them make training materials for different learning styles for anything that they have to learn. So, then they can teach someone else. I let students who are so disposed write articles for publication. They have to write an article for publication persuading people with the research, with practical application, with documentation. Statistics, they're afraid of it. I get my students involved in a real project that I am doing, a real research paper. I teach them the statistics they need to know. That's not my educational specialty. They still have stringent requirements; they still have a final test. I had a doctoral student who went hysterical when she had to take statistics. She said I'm not going to pass. So I said remember your style. Your global. I reminded her of what globals should do. And she passed. You just have to remind them what their strengths are.

3. What are some possible implications for the future of teacher education related to learning styles?

You know we've got to train professors to make potential teachers alert to the fact that good ideas, interesting ideas, should be worked with on small pilot bases, not adopted wholesale. But what happens is that everyone wants to go to conferences. So they go to the major organizations who constantly promote new things. Because they are commercial [materials, companies] make money from selling all these new things. And administrators who are not research alert adopt everything. There's an aura about "We're doing this. This is new." Why are you doing it? Show me the research on it. Why are you not just doing a pilot study with two classes to see if it really has impact? We don't train people like that.

Learning Style's Influence on Professional Standards

4. *What was your involvement in the formulation of P.L. 94-142?*

We started working with children that at the time we called handicapped, hearing impaired, sight impaired, back in the late 60's and early 70's. We began to take methods that we were developing and adapting them with those children. They were really segregated and we tried to adapt. I contributed to the first special ed bill, you know [P.L.] 94-142. I was one that kept talking learning styles. ... The senators laughed because they didn't know what I meant by learning styles. So, the first bill, 94-142, has learning styles requirements in it but many professionals are not doing it the way it should be done.

[States] don't know what they are mandating but they mandate. There are so many laws now, 94 - 142 plus the other laws of special education. They require learning styles diagnosis and educators don't know what they are diagnosing. They are not necessarily using valid and reliable instruments but the laws are requiring them. You can't differentiate instruction anyway other than through learning styles. I see that there is much more awareness, both federal, statewide, and among teachers, but I don't see tremendous depth of understanding. ... How many special ed teachers really understand learning styles? Special education funding requires differentiated teaching and instruction based upon each person's learning style. You can not appropriately implement learning style strategies unless you have a thorough understanding. ... Reading one journal article does not ensure understanding of learning style strategies. ... People need to be trained.

5. *Do learning styles relate to the current initiative of "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001"?*

No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 Executive Summary, Pub. L. 107-110, retrieved August 17, 2004) is atrocious. I don't know where all my colleagues and educators are. No Child Left Behind Act is great icon or theory, just like multiple intelligence, a worthwhile construct, a worthwhile theory. It imposes periodic testing on every school. Show me a single study that shows that increased school testing increases achievement. It doesn't. In some cases, teachers spend more time on the subject, so maybe kids do better. It will make some teachers teach to the test. You know I believe in testing. But you've got to change the instruction if you want increased achievement. [No Child Left Behind Act] has no strategies benefiting teachers. It doesn't tell them what to do. It makes teachers responsible for increased achievement. It doesn't tell the teachers how to do it - no prescription. George Bush could call Rita Dunn and say we have limited funds. Tell me what to do. And I would tell him exactly what to do. Learning styles. Make learning style testing part of every curriculum. It costs two dollars to test for learning styles. It comes with a prescription. Let

teachers see how you do it. Let them see classrooms. There are so many positive things that can be done to improve the system.

Technological Aspects

6. Are there scientific advances that influence learning style research and how does the nature/nurture controversy relate to learning style?

I can only talk about our learning style model. I brought Richard Restak to this conference who wrote *The Brain the Last Frontier* (1979) [(Restak, 2001)]. He says that almost four-fifths of learning style is biological. Whether you need quiet or sound, light or dim light, temperature, how you sit when you learn, your need for mobility, the time of day [you study, he] says is biological. ... This book does show how learning style changes with age, gender. I knew perceptual strength changes dramatically from kindergarten to grade one, to grade two, to grade three, to grade four. But is it biological? ... Whether we learn alone or with peers, that seems to be developmental. Even that changes by age, by achievement level, by gender and the strange thing is by nation. I don't understand all of this yet. It appears you get a higher percentage of auditory learners among Asians. Think about the Asian languages. Do you have to be auditory to really be very verbal?

7. Are specific courses available for students at both the graduate and undergraduate level world wide through the Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles?

At St. John's we have distance learning courses that anyone can take. They can get graduate credit or undergraduate, or they can take it without credit. We make them available to everyone. On campus we have an administration supervision doctorate and the instructional leadership doctorate which focuses on learning styles. The administrative supervision doctorate has 12 to 15 credits of learning styles. I've been showing them you can't send administrators out without the knowledge of these [learning styles]. ... It's knowing how to work differently with different people based on who they are and their styles. Students could come to St. John's and take courses. They don't have to be in a program. At St. John's, we have a Master's that has a lot of learning styles. Through St. John's they can take a course in distance learning which is on-line. It took us more than \$10,000 to develop the first distance learning course. I wanted to do it with learning styles. So we test for learning styles; we analyze students' strengths; we tell them how to study. Everything we teach in five, six, seven different ways so that they can learn in their own style. That is expensive. You've got all kinds of videotapes, interviews, observations.

We did a correlational study when everybody started to go into distance learning. Who does well with distance learning? You've got to look at everybody who signs up for distance learning courses to identify their learning styles. Then

you need experimental studies. What kind of distance learning did they do well with? Who completes it? Who likes it after they have done it? Who really retains it?

The Impact of Learning Styles Around the World

8. What is the state of the learning style field as it is being implemented in schools around the world today?

I think we have established a kind of leadership [at St. John's. People] may not know everything we do but they're aware of it. They know we do learning styles research. For example, we have been able to establish twenty-five centers similar to ours in different parts of the world, certainly many of them in the United States. They're all helping children learn. They're all conducting research. They're all publishing research. In the Philippines three schools are using learning styles. The forty-two schools in Norway were trained by the people who came here to learn but who later became their trainers. So I think the spheres of influence are expanding. We require them to have two certified trainers before they can establish a center. So, if they're coming to us, they still have to get certified and they can only get certified through us. And the reason for that is a lot of people do things differently. I don't want them to train people differently because if they don't understand the method or the strategy, they can teach it incorrectly. We had a speaker today who is the director of a center in Norway. They have forty-two schools that are implementing learning styles. If they are accommodating learning styles anywhere in the world they're doing it the way I taught them to. There can be some slight variations in how they put something together but basically it's the same. We have people here from all over the world today. We've done room redesign, we've done contracts and programs and tactile kinesthetic materials.

The Future of Learning Styles

9. What are the possible implications for the future of teacher education programs in relationship to learning styles training?

I have been trying for twenty years to change teacher education. It changes slowly. We now have proposals in with three foundations. We are going to take school districts with problem children, minority children, in different parts of the country. We have [them] sited in Oklahoma, in Florida, and in New York. We want an elementary, a middle and a high school to volunteer to become learning style schools. We'll do the training, be the trainer. We want to take the children who start in the elementary school and keep them at feeder schools right through the high school. ... We are petitioning state education departments on an experimental basis to take four different endeavors and allow us to take the

trainer, the teachers, those who want to become teachers, and the teacher education groups to work in some schools. I think teacher education has to come out of the college. Look at the age of some of the college professors. I don't mean to be insulting, but they haven't been in (public school) classrooms for years. Kids are different today. The problems are a lot more extensive. We cannot force professors to work in the schools. They think they are doing a good thing – they go in and observe teaching, but they run from teaching methods classes. Teaching, teacher training has to occur in the schools. Students should be taught by the successful teachers who are teaching with learning styles. Now I know that there are educators who are going to be against this. Professors should get into the schools and do the teaching, not observing the teaching and the demonstrations. For twenty years at St John's, we've been demonstrating how to do learning styles in the schools. You know teachers don't change because you tell them in the [college] classroom that they have to incorporate this or that. Teachers don't change because you have had an in-service staff development and then expect them to go and translate your theory and your words of wisdom into practical applications. Teacher training today needs to take place in real life classroom settings so that student teachers can more effectively benefit from actual teaching demonstrations performed by master teachers utilizing effective learning styles instruction. All teachers can change their teaching practices when you work with them in their own classrooms because not only are they working with their own students, but they also see the immediate benefits when effectively employing the learning styles methods. Teachers change when you work with them in the classroom and you let them do it with you and they see you do it. You help them do it and it becomes part of the whole gestalt of teaching. Right now teachers teach the way they were taught, not the way they learn. ... How many teachers come out of classes ... where they really can use learning styles?

10. What role do you see the Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles at St. John's University in assisting both parents and their children?

I want to convert the world, but I'll tell you one thing we're doing next year. Up to now, we have had teachers, school administrators in, and next year for the first time we're having parents and children come. We think that if we can train parents to work with their children and if we can train children to know what their learning style is and how to use it, that will egg on some of the schools to move. I think that if a teacher gives a failing grade to a youngster and he says but look you are making me sit and listen, just give me the opportunity to use my task cards or my flip chutes to learn or do it my own way. I think teachers are going to say what are you talking about and the kids are going to tell them their learning style.

11. *What role do you see your institute in assisting business corporations?*

Look at the impact of learning styles on corporations and businesses. Everybody needs learning styles. Everybody needs to know how to be the best they can be. We now already have two corporations that are applying to be our centers. These are not school corporations. They became [interested in] centers because they are training people in business. Next year we are having a strand [at the summer institute] for business people.

They need it when they are retraining people. We have two business corporations that are going to be attending our institute next year. Due to this heightened awareness and perceived needs from business corporations, we will establish a strand for businesses. This new strand will help the institute support the expansion and application of learning styles beyond the domain of education. Today's corporate teachers realize that their students learn in different ways. Thus, they need to provide multiple strategies for learning. I am so surprised that learning styles and its applications are moving to other professions as well. I just see the whole thing expanding and I never intended it that way. I had no idea that it would go that way. It has just gotten amorphous and keeps going.

Conclusion

When Rita and Kenneth Dunn began in the field of learning styles they developed a conceptual model of learning styles that they have been fine-tuning for over 40 years. Using that model, they developed the Learning Styles Inventory (Price, Dunn, and Dunn; 1975) which has been part of their research efforts, resulting in published work in the field. Rita's steadfast dedication to the concept of learning styles and her influence on her students is worldwide today. Rita Dunn entered her career as an elementary school teacher and now primarily works with doctoral level students. Her desire to bring the very best to education is a continuing quest. This interview reflects her thinking about the state of education today and its future. She has considered teacher education and how it must change, moving from the ivory towers into classrooms around the world. She feels that the very essence of college teaching must be shaken-up so that professors look at their teaching styles as much as their professional expertise.

Rita Dunn has seen legislative mandates and tried to influence the legislative process. She has personally brought her message to legislators that learning styles are critical to raising standards. She is outspoken today about the No Child Left Behind mandate. Not one to cling to the old concepts, she eagerly seeks out brain specialists and tries to digest recent studies. Rita Dunn envisions the future of teaching and learning from a global perspective. She thinks

beyond her university world to consider corporate education and retraining of those in business. Her extensive research has had a great influence on the movement to transcend learning styles beyond national borders. Now she is concerned about parents and their impact on the learning strategies of their children.

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