

# WHAT'S YOUR STYLE, SIR?

Just because a particular way of teaching comes naturally to you, that doesn't necessarily make it the best for your students, warns **Colin Foster**...

**M**s A is an extrovert, so her lessons contain lots of group work and role play, whereas Mr B is more sombre, but a great raconteur, so he does a lot of speaking from the front of the classroom. We all have different personalities and temperaments, so we need to play to our strengths and each develop our own, individual teaching styles. There is no point in Mr B trying to teach like Ms A – it just wouldn't work. Different strokes for different folks.

This is a familiar point of view, and its strength is that it sounds wise and respectful. It is quite common for student teachers, near the beginning of their initial teacher education to be told something like: "This course is not going to tell you how to teach. Teaching is a personal thing: everyone teaches in a different way, and there isn't one right way to do it. Everyone has to develop their own teaching style that is compatible with their values and beliefs about what education is and what it means to learn." What seems to matter is that we are true to our natures and our deeply-held beliefs.

## No equals

But are there perhaps some parallels between the notion of teaching styles and that of 'learning styles'? It is

now widely acknowledged that the latter is a myth (see Aslaksen & Lorås, 2018; Pashler et al., 2008; Willingham et al., 2015). Although learners may indeed have preferences about the style in which they learn (e.g., visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), attempting to teach someone according to their particular preference doesn't seem to improve their learning. There has been an abundance of articles in recent years 'debunking' learning styles and drawing attention to places where the theory is still being promulgated (e.g., see De Bruyckere, 2018). So, might 'teaching styles' be the next dogma to fall?

The assumptions behind teaching styles seem to be:

1. Everyone has (or should seek to develop) their own preferred teaching style.
2. The best learning happens when you teach in your preferred style.

The crucial question for me is whether this is likely to be true? Certainly, classrooms are complicated places, teaching is a human activity, and no two teachers are exactly alike. The alternative to 'teaching styles' is not clones of robots running the chalkface! But, is it plausible that totally different teaching styles are really all exactly equally



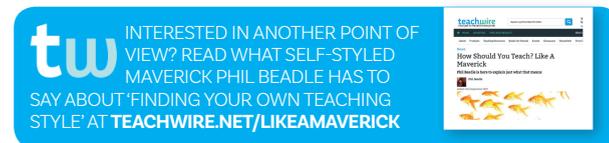
good? The word ‘style’ suggests a neutral preference, like an alternative fashion or taste – nothing that anyone should get too worked up about. But, to take two stereotypes of teaching styles, are facilitating guided discovery through group work, and lecturing content from the front, really just ‘stylistically’ different, but equally effective options? By whatever definition of ‘effective’ you wished to subscribe to – take your pick – it seems very unlikely that every teaching style would turn out to be just as good as every other teaching style at achieving it.

### Learners first

What if some teaching styles happen to be, on average, more effective than others? Shouldn’t we be trying to find out what helps the learners most, rather than focusing on what gives the teacher the least

difficulty? Effective teaching might come more naturally to some people than others; unfortunately, that just means that some people might need to work harder, perhaps ‘against type’, to be successful – not that everyone is bound to be equally effective if they just trust their instincts. This is not just about personality types but our sets of developed expertise. If we have weaker areas in our practice – and who doesn’t? – then perhaps we should be seeking to develop those teaching approaches, if there is reason to believe that those approaches will help our learners more, rather than just relying on what we happen to be already good at (i.e., playing to our strengths)?

Think of the student teacher who immediately rejects their mentor’s teaching suggestion because, “That doesn’t fit with my teaching style.” That’s a barrier to progress. Instead, student teachers



are encouraged to step outside their comfort zones, to try new things, to consider challenges to their beliefs and to adopt a critical, reflective stance. But, once a teacher has uncovered or developed ‘their teaching style’, and gained a bit of experience, this teaching style is sometimes then treated as sacrosanct. Small tweaks to this may be OK, but any wholesale change of teaching style would be an unacceptable imposition that failed to respect the teacher’s autonomy or to treat them as a professional.

I have heard mentoring described as discovering alongside the teacher what kind of teaching style they wish to develop and then helping them to develop that style. The mentor doesn’t want to anticipate what this style should be, or pass any judgment on it, and, in particular, doesn’t want to create a clone of themselves. In this situation, the preferred style becomes something that must not be interfered with, only allowed to blossom.

### A better way

For the sake of our profession, and the learners that we teach, we need to move away from seeing ‘style’ as an evidence-free zone, where anything goes and nothing should be questioned. The response, “That just happens to be my style,” is not really a professional stance to take. Maybe there is no one teaching style that is always superior to another; it could be that some styles are more suitable for some lessons or purposes. Just as

we might want to use a mixture of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic ways of working with all of our learners (rather than assume that one of those modalities is ‘best’ for each person), perhaps each teacher needs to work on developing access to a range of teaching styles, some of which will no doubt come more easily than others.

Rather than trapping each teacher in a prison of their one, fixed teaching style, that they are just stuck with, a more productive route might be for all teachers to be open to working in whatever ways will most help their learners. It can’t be optimal just to do whatever feels most natural; what feels comfortable is unlikely to be a good proxy for what is most effective. The priority should not be pandering to the teacher’s personal preferences/prejudices/comfort zones, but developing teaching approaches that are going to be as useful as possible to the learners that they teach.

Learning styles seemed like common sense to many people for quite some time; if teaching styles seems like common sense, that is no guarantee that it is right.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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