



changing lives
reducing crime

Learning styles and youth justice practice

Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Learning styles in a youth justice context | 2 |
| Understanding learning styles | 3 |
| Use of learning styles assessments by youth offending teams | 4 |
| Implications for practice | 6 |



Nacro
Park Place, 10-12 Lawn Lane
London SW8 1UD

www.nacro.org.uk

Registered charity no. 226171

March 2012

Introduction

The basic theory of learning styles is that everyone has a preferred style of learning which can be tested and identified, and that matching teaching styles to an individual's strengths, weaknesses, skills and interests enables learning to be delivered in the most appropriate style, with the potential for learners to learn more efficiently and for educational outcomes to be improved.

The learning styles movement gained popularity towards the end of the 1970s and learning style theory has become well established in educational settings. Yet while there is a wealth of literature on the nature of learning styles, how they can be measured and a wide variety of approaches,¹ there is currently no single definition of the term. In addition, the research conducted to date largely relates to education and learning environments which are different from those in which youth justice interventions are identified and delivered.

There has been very little exploration and discussion of the use and application of learning styles within the youth justice context, namely: whether learning styles are assessed, how they are assessed, how this information is used to inform and develop interventions and whether this produces better engagement (with educational and other provision) and has any impact on offending behaviour. Moreover there is a lack of knowledge as to the extent to which matching interventions with the young person's style of learning is relevant to reducing their reoffending, and therefore whether programmes which seek to improve reoffending outcomes should include investment in learning style assessments.

This briefing explores these issues further.

Learning styles in a youth justice context

The aim of the youth justice system is to prevent offending by children and young people. The current youth justice system draws on the work of James McGuire who identified a set of seven principles which he argued were the most likely to produce effective results in the prevention of offending and should form the basis of responses to children and young people in trouble.² Responsivity, the third of these principles, states that in order to increase the likelihood of interventions being successful and for offending to be reduced, the learning style of the young person should be taken into account³ and that adopting the responsivity principle will help the young person to engage in the process of behavioural change. The principle is as follows:

- Everyone has a preferred learning style which should be identified and integrated into working methods.
- Learning styles should take into account an individual's ability, strengths, style, personality, culture and preferred method of learning.
- The methods by which programmes and interventions are delivered should be matched with the ability and learning style of the young person in order to increase the likelihood of responsiveness to change.

However, not everyone is convinced about the use of learning styles in the justice setting. Unpublished research commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) concludes there is insufficient evidence 'to justify claims of the existence of a discrete, stable learning styles construct. Indeed it could be constrictive and unhelpful to rely heavily on such a simplistic approach'.⁴ However, Annison who has examined the use of learning styles in probation practice concludes that whilst there may be flaws in the theory of responsivity and the application of learning styles assessments, they can be a means of 'fostering engagement' and of starting discussions about learning and how it can be enhanced.⁵

This places the learning styles approach in line with approaches that motivate and engage, are participatory and seek to determine how best to deliver interventions and programmes in a way that an individual can best respond to, and for this reason the link between learning styles and reducing reoffending should be explored further. In selecting appropriate programmes and interventions, youth justice practitioners should be informed by an assessment process which takes into account factors such as age, maturity, gender, cultural needs, personal capabilities and communication skills, as well as addressing areas which contribute to an individual's offending behaviour.⁶ Taken together, assessment of these factors should inform the type of intervention, its level of intensity and the context in which the intervention should take place in order to ensure it achieves the maximum impact on reoffending, and taking learning styles into account is another way of developing appropriate individual responses and fine tuning interventions.

Understanding learning styles

Research commissioned by the YJB in 2007 advises there is limited evidence about the learning styles and preferences of those that come into contact with the youth justice system and there is no evidence of a dominant learning style amongst young people.⁷ However, in 2011 the YJB produced a guide on programme development and evaluation which sets out a number of effective programme principles stating that they 'accommodate different learning styles'. It mentions the VARK (visual, auditory, read/write and kinaesthetic) learning model as a suggested approach⁸ which uses questionnaires that provide users with a profile of learning preferences.⁹ The model proposes that there are four types of learner:

- Visual – those who prefer to receive information through diagrams or pictures.
- Auditory – those who learn best by listening and having information and instructions explained.
- Read/write – those who prefer to take in information through books/lecture notes.
- Kinaesthetic or tactile – those who prefer to learn by doing and through actions.

Other approaches which have been linked with the criminal justice sector are Kolb's theory of experiential learning based on the presumption that people learn through discovery and experience,¹⁰ and from this model Honey and Mumford developed a learning styles questionnaire.¹¹

Kolb's model is based on a four-stage process or learning cycle that involves the following:

- Undertaking an activity or task.
- Reviewing what has been done and experienced.
- Absorbing the experience.
- Considering how what has been learned could be put into practice and then doing so.

Honey and Mumford connected each stage of Kolb's model to a preferred learning style:

- Activists learn best by doing something actively.
- Theorists need models, concepts and facts in order to engage in the learning process.
- Pragmatists like to try out and experiment with ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice.
- Reflectors learn by observing and thinking before taking action.

Chapman and Hough in identifying evidence-based practice for the probation service suggest that most adult offenders are likely to be 'activists' who think in a concrete (fixed) way rather than in an abstract (flexible) manner, indicating their ability to solve problems and learn from mistakes is under-developed.¹² However, they also propose they are inclined to be practical, intuitive and open to new experiences. On this basis it is suggested that to be effective, practitioners need to work in a participatory rather than instructive mode.

Stephenson¹³ and Kemshall¹⁴ suggest that in the context of young people, the activist theory may be linked to the belief that for those who have not succeeded in mainstream school or for whom formal education has not met their needs, learning should take place in more active and possibly vocational settings. Also, because of unsatisfactory and negative experiences in school, they may not respond well to traditional approaches, may be reluctant to try new challenges and to be exposed in front of peers, thus also making them more guarded about opening themselves to learning.¹⁵ However, others (notably Annison) have suggested that classifying offenders as activists is too sweeping a generalisation given the lack of robust research in this area. In reality, most learners are likely to have a preferred style, but this does not mean that they cannot learn in other ways and many will have a mix of styles. What this seems to suggest is the need for a range of approaches and responses that can be tailored accordingly, with practitioners also fully able to adapt their working methods.

Whilst the identification of learning styles helps establish preferences, it would be beneficial to establish the extent to which it could also be a means of identifying difficulties and barriers to engagement in order to then adopt methods of delivery which can help to overcome them. The degree of academic attainment (eg, the level of literacy and numeracy) the nature of the learning environment and the practitioner's own approach (in terms of structure, content and resources) to presenting the young person with materials are all relevant in this context.¹⁶ In addition, the preferred delivery style of individual case managers and supervising officers will vary and this, along with the quality of the relationship between the young person and their case worker and the extent of parental support, will also have a bearing on outcomes.

Use of learning styles assessments by youth offending teams

The YJB has sought to provide assistance to youth offending teams (YOTs) on the use of learning styles assessments. *Key Elements of Effective Practice: Education, training and employment* advocates that 'practitioners should ensure that any intervention brokered or delivered incorporates a range of approaches to meet the different learning styles of young people'¹⁷ and this can be achieved by an assessment of the preferred learning style.

In order to incorporate learning styles assessments into practice, YOTs need to identify an appropriate model for use. There are a variety of assessment tools in existence and deciding what to use for whom in which circumstances is not clear-cut. For example, some measure visual, auditory or kinaesthetic responses, some attempt to identify how individuals process information, some look at attitudes and behaviour, whilst others provide a more in-depth analysis of aspects of the personality such as reflection and intuition. Some learning styles assessments also take the learning environment into account (eg, the physical setting)¹⁸ and whether there is a preference for learning alone or with others. One of the key differences between the various approaches is the extent to which a learning style is considered stable or fixed (ie because it is a personality trait) or can change over time in response to different situations or because of learned experiences.

Evidence from a report by the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection suggests that learning styles assessments have not been universally adopted by YOTs.¹⁹ HM Inspectorate of Probation's inspection of YOTs made reference to the extent of their use in individual YOT inspection reports. An analysis by Nacro of the 18 core case inspections carried out between 2009 and 2010 of YOTs in Wales found that 16 of the 18 YOTs formally assessed learning styles. These figures are higher than those in a recent study conducted by Talbot for the Prison Reform Trust.²⁰ In this instance a third of respondents²¹ indicated they use learning styles assessments (notably VAK and Quicksan).²² Whilst the responsivity theory suggests that the application of learning styles is intended to apply to youth justice practice generally, the feedback from the core case inspections, the Prison Reform Trust and Nacro's research in Wales indicates a learning styles approach is not being universally applied. Usage seems to be orientated to assessments in conjunction with education, training and employment inputs.

In order to gauge the effect of learning styles assessments on responsivity and therefore on reoffending outcomes, it is important that the information they capture is put to maximum use. HM Inspectorate of Probation's inspection of YOTs examined the extent to which intervention plans incorporated information from the assessments and were appropriate to the learning style of the young person. It found that two-thirds of YOTs (66%) in Wales were considered to match interventions to learning styles or had incorporated information from the assessments into the delivery. But there was no further information on how learning styles were incorporated or what made them appropriate to the young person's particular needs. Also, very little information was provided about what tools or methods were being used. Notable exceptions included Wrexham Youth Justice Service which it was noted was using a 'very promising learning style assessment tool'²³ (called the Oracy profile²⁴) and Ceredigion Youth Offending Service which used VARK. These two examples make an interesting point: it is important not to blur the distinction between learning style assessments and communication needs. In the first of these two instances, the reference is to the application of a tool which largely aims to identify problems in communicating, and in the second the core case inspection makes reference to VARK as being an aid to 'promote effective communication' rather than to promote effective learning.²⁵

An investigation undertaken by Nacro into YOT practice in Wales revealed that while some had reservations about using learning styles assessments, on the whole there is support for assessing learning styles on the basis that there is reason to believe they improve the quality and effectiveness of work with young people, make interventions meaningful and therefore promote engagement. The majority of YOTs favour VAK or VARK²⁶ but there was also a feeling that there is a lack of guidance on what to use or what might work best. In terms of the reasons for choosing a specific tool, ease of use (eg, online rather than paper versions) and ease of comprehension were important considerations, as was using something that is nationally recognised. However, Nacro found inconsistency of application across different YOTs: in some teams assessments were universally applied to all young people, in others it was purely young people referred for an education input or to a specific project. In addition, a minority of YOTs indicated they were subsequently adapting their approach and materials on the basis of the assessed learning style, with the remainder saying they had not.

Implications for practice

A specific focus

It is important to be specific about the focus of the assessment. Learning styles assessments identify preferences in learning, but do not identify other factors which may be barriers to successful outcomes, such as communication. In some instances there appears to be a blurring of the distinctions between learning styles assessments and the identification of these other needs.

Match the intervention

It is important to match the intervention to the young person's preferred learning style. With this in mind, YOTs therefore need not only to assess but also develop their interventions so that staff are trained on the different modes of delivery and are sufficiently skilled to provide them.

Build a bank of evidence

There is a need to build a bank of evidence about what difference the identification of learning styles makes to educational attainment and other outcomes, including reoffending.

There is little evidence about the impact of a preferred learning style on the individual and whether awareness of personal style actually assists learning. This is an area which requires further investigation, in particular whether this way of working leads to improved engagement and educational outcomes, as well as having an impact on and leading to a reduction in offending behaviour for those in the justice system specifically.

References

- 1 Coffield F, Moseley D, Hall E and Ecclestone K (2004) *Learning Styles and Pedagogy in Post-16 Learning: A systematic and critical review* London: Learning and Skills Research Centre, available at <https://crm.lsnlearning.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=041543> (accessed 8 February 2011)
- 2 McGuire J (1995) *What Works: Reducing reoffending guidelines from research and practice* Chichester: J Wiley and Sons
- 3 The seven principles are: risk classification, criminogenic need, dosage, responsivity, intervention modality, programme integrity and community base.
- 4 Hayward G and James S (2004) *Diversity in Learning: Establishing the cognitive styles and learning strategies of young people in the youth justice system* Oxford: Department of Educational Studies
- 5 Annison J (2006) 'Style over substance? A review of the evidence base for the use of learning styles in probation' *Criminology and Criminal Justice* May 2006 vol 6 pp. 239-257
- 6 Youth Justice Board (2008) *Assessment, Planning, Interventions and Supervision* London: Youth Justice Board
- 7 EdComs (2008) *Education, Training and Employment: Source document* London: Youth Justice Board
- 8 Youth Justice Board (2011) *Programme Development and Evaluation Guide: Advice on developing an effective youth justice programme and preparing it for evaluation* London: Youth Justice Board
- 9 There is a similar model called VAK (without the read/write element). See www.brainboxx.co.uk/a3_aspects/pages/VAK.htm and www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=questionnaire (accessed 11 November 2011).
- 10 See www.learning-theories.com/experiential-learning-kolb.html (accessed 11 November 2011).
- 11 This resource can be found at www.peterhoney.com/ (accessed 11 November 2011).
- 12 Chapman T and Hough M (1998) *Evidence based practice: A guide to effective practice* London: Home Office
- 13 Stephenson M and Brown S (2003) *Reader: Education, Training and Employment* London: Youth Justice Board
- 14 Kemshall H (2007) 'Risk assessment and risk management: the right approach?' In Blyth M, Solomon E and Baker K (eds.) (2007) *Young People and Risk* London: Policy Press
- 15 Stephenson M, Giller H and Brown S (2007) *Effective Practice in Youth Justice* Cullompton: Willan Publishing
- 16 *ibid*
- 17 Youth Justice Board (2006) *Key Elements of Effective Practice: Education, training and employment* London: Youth Justice Board
- 18 However, some learning style assessments do. The Dunn and Dunn model, for example, considers the impact of sound, light, heat and seating in the learning environment, see www.seechangeconsulting.com.au/images/Page_file_Library_Documents/Dunn%20and%20Dunn%20Model.pdf (accessed 11 November 2011).
- 19 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2010) *Message in a Bottle: A joint inspection of youth alcohol misuse and offending* Manchester: HM Inspectorate of Probation
- 20 Talbot J (2010) *Seen and Heard: Supporting vulnerable children in the youth justice system* London: Prison Reform Trust
- 21 Of the 157 YOTs surveyed, 89 responded (57%).
- 22 An online questionnaire which identifies preferred learning styles as well as screening for dyslexia.
- 23 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2010) *Core Case Inspection of Youth Offending in England and Wales: Report on youth offending work in Wrexham* Manchester: HM Inspectorate of Probation
- 24 This can be found at www.ngfl-cymru.org.uk/irf08-27-adult-oracy-acl (accessed 11 November 2011).
- 25 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2010) *Core Case Inspection of Youth Offending in England and Wales: Report on youth offending work in Ceredigion* Manchester: HM Inspectorate of Probation
- 26 As recommended by the Youth Justice Board.