Adult learning styles: implications for practice teaching in social work

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Abstract *This paper focuses on the current aspiration to further the process of continuing professional development in social work. It contends that knowledge from the field of adult learning theory may be helpful in sign-posting some tangible ways forward here. The particular emphasis is on critically assessing the usefulness of identifying learning styles as indicators of preferred ways of learning. Knowledge of learning styles is explored as one way of promoting students' learning on practice placements. A small-scale qualitative research study with a group of practice teachers and their students is presented as a vehicle for exploring this new terrain in social work.*

The findings of this research build on key themes identified by the current literature in this area. The author's findings suggest that information about learning styles has direct practical application in the social work practice teaching arena. The data points to the potential value of using such information to guide students' learning on practice placements and has relevance to considerations of their continuing professional development. Suggestions are put forward to highlight how practice teaching and Diploma in Social Work programmes could facilitate this process. The paper stresses the over-riding need to view students as actors in a broader social context, however, and highlights how information regarding learning styles needs to be utilised in this context.

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Lord Dearing, was appointed in May 1996 to advise on the long-term development of higher education in the United Kingdom over the next 20 years. The committee submitted its report in July 1997. One key aspect of this report was its focus on the need to promote developing lifelong learning by adults. Such a focus is clearly congruent with recent developments in the field of social work education where the emphasis is on developing a continuum of learning for professional social workers, particularly in the post-qualifying arena (CCETSW, 1992, 1993). This is also timely because of the new initiatives proposed by TOPSS and the renewed interest in 'continuing professional development' in the social care arena. For such lifelong learning to become a reality, however, the Dearing report noted that a number of key changes need to be made in relation to how adults are encouraged to learn. One key recommendation of the Dearing report (1997, p. 42) was that, '… with immediate effect all institutions of higher education give high priority to developing and implementing learning and teaching strategies which focus on the promotion of students' learning'.

Social work education has its base in institutions of higher education and it is from this premise that such learning and teaching strategies need to be encouraged. Effective collabo-

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rative arrangements between institutions of higher education and practice agencies responsible for providing practice placements appears to be a particularly fertile arena for such developments to take place. In this context it is interesting to note Dearing's (1997, p. 15) finding that, 'The strongest single message which we received from employers was the value of work experience'.

In relation to social work education, students studying for their Diploma in Social Work are clearly at a crucial juncture in their continuum of professional learning and this experience clearly has implications both for the type of opportunities subsequently afforded to them as lifelong learners within the post-qualifying framework and their response to these opportunities. For this reason, and because of the importance attached to work-based learning, it appears particularly pertinent to focus on ways in which DipSW practice placements may be encouraged to adopt teaching and learning strategies where the focus is on promoting students' learning. CCETSW's revised requirements for practice teaching (CCETSW, 1998, p. 13) do signal the need to, 'Promote and value student self-determination within an adult learning process'. This is identified as a key element of competence in practice teaching.

It is a key argument of this paper that social work education should look to the theory and practice of adult learning to provide a way forward for our professional development in this area. If aspirations for such development, called upon by *Assuring Quality* (CCETSW, 1998) and the White Paper, *Modernising Social Services* (Department of Health, 1998), are to be achieved, we need to address how this will be taken forward. The research undertaken by Taylor (1997) and Taylor and Burgess (1995), into the use of enquiry and action learning on the social work programme at Bristol University provides some useful pointers here. This work explores how concepts from adult learning theory can illuminate the propositional, process and personal constituents of professional knowledge. As a profession, however, we appear to be at the early stages of engaging with this process. In the CCETSW Paper, *Learning for Advanced Practice* (CCETSW, 1993) a single page was devoted to considering teaching styles and adult learning. CCETSW commented here that more needs to be known about the relationship between teaching styles and adult learning styles on social work programmes. As Doel and Shardlow (1996, p. 27) point out, '… there is much research and writing in the higher and adult education arena that is ripe for testing in social work contexts'.

From practice supervision to practice teaching

Practice placements are a cornerstone of professional training for social workers. Throughout the 1990s changes in the Diploma in Social Work, giving greater emphasis to competence in practice and the related field of practice teaching, have moved practice teaching to the centre of social work education. Such changes involved redefining the previously limited role of student supervisor to the more comprehensive one of practice teacher (CCETSW, 1998). The supervisory role of practice teachers still remains but the expectation is that practice teachers will now also incorporate broader active teaching responsibilities within their extended remit (Davies & Kinoch, 1991; Doel & Shardlow, 1996). The Practice Teaching Award assesses practice teachers on their ability to *teach* about social work, rather than simply supervise a student's practice (CCETSW, 1998).

This shift in focus raises several questions relating to the potential complexity of the relationship between social work practice and how practitioners teach it. Is it assumed, for example that skilled social work practitioners automatically develop into skilled practice teachers? Might it be the case that different skills and knowledge are required for such a transition to take place? As a result of her analysis of practice teachers' training in Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China, Shuk-fong Ng-Wan (1996) argues that in Hong Kong

social work educators fully realise that experienced practitioners do not necessarily become competent practice teachers. She utilises Paulo Freire's (1970) terminology when she argues that:

> The integration of social work knowledge, skills and values and their application to life situations is an art to be acquired by students: this process cannot be achieved merely by taking the 'savings' from an experienced social worker's 'bank of knowledge' ... Social workers, as practice teachers, are not just 'depositors' transferring knowledge to students ... On the contrary, practice teachers have to understand the learning style and learning needs of students ... (Shuk-fong Ng-Wan, 1996, p. 159).

In this context it appears pertinent to question the process through which practice teachers are expected to learn how to teach. How do people move from social work practitioners to *practice teachers*? How might practice teachers be encouraged to utilise learning and teaching strategies that focus on the promotion of student's learning? What part, if any, could knowledge drawn from adult learning theory play in this process? How might understanding learning styles aid the teaching and learning process and promote students' learning? These are clearly very broad questions but ones that need to be addressed by the social work profession if the opportunities to promote students' learning and to foster a climate of continuing professional development are to be grasped appropriately.

Focusing on learning styles

Whilst focusing on the area of learning styles clearly touches on the broader issues relating to the complexity of the relationship between social work and practice teaching, it also allows for a more limited analysis of one particular aspect of the teaching process. Many commentators have noted the importance of understanding learning styles in the supervisor–student relationship. Fox and Guild (1987) discuss the relevance of learning styles to clinical supervision. They argue that stylistic differences in cognition, conceptualisation, affect and behaviour are all interrelated and that the ability to recognise workers' learning styles makes it possible for the supervisor to ' "start where the worker is" in designing the most individualized instructive methods'. These conclusions are supported in the work of Kadushin (1992), Papell (1978) and Shuk-fong Ng-Wan (1996).

Less research has been conducted specifically in the context of social work practice teaching. The literature available does raise several important issues. Gardiner (1989) refers to the issue that social work students enter practice placements with learning styles that may or may not be compatible with the learning style of the practice teacher. The implications of such similarities and differences, however, are not explored in any depth. This whole question about 'matching' and 'mismatching' is important in relation to professional education and training. Social work students today need to develop a range of approaches to learning which are adaptable in different contexts. Whether the matching or mismatching of styles facilitates or hampers such development does need to be addressed.

Studies by Tsang (1993) in Hong Kong and Kruzich *et al.* (1986), both focused on social work students' learning styles. Interestingly, they explored not only the relationship between the learning style of students and their practice teachers but also the influence of the predominant style of teachers within the academic institutions too, encouraging the student to capitalise on learning opportunities available to them within the placement setting. Tsang's study in particular noted shifts over time in students' learning styles depending upon context, i.e. whether they were in the academic institution or on a practice placement. Such a finding hints here at a potential problem for learning style theorists and the implications of this have

not been fully addressed in the literature. If styles vary depending on context, for example, they may not be relatively stable characteristics of an individual but more fluid concepts that are changeable in different situations. Pratt and associates (1998, p. 125) argue that, 'Both the institutional context … and the personal context … play an important role in determining the approach taken by a learner'. Such a critique needs to be considered when assessing the relevance of using learning styles as a teaching tool.

Several learning styles questionnaires have been designed. In the United States, for example, Campbell (1991) documented 32 commercially published instruments used to assess different dimensions of learning styles. Such an extensive range of instruments may be regarded as 'an embarrassment of riches' and result in a bewildering range of definitions concerning learning styles and their conceptualisation (Curry, 1990).

This paper focuses on the use of Honey and Mumford's (1986) 'Learning Styles Question-naire', for several reasons. Firstly, from a pragmatic perspective, this is the questionnaire that is most frequently used on practice teacher programmes (Shardlow & Doel, 1996). Further-more, this questionnaire builds on the earlier work of Kolb (1976) who identified key differences in preferred ways of learning among adults. Four preferred learning styles are identified by Honey and Mumford (1986).

- *Activists*: who operate in the 'here and now'. They enjoy the challenge of new experiences but become bored with implementation and consolidation. They are quick to move into action and enjoy activity centred around themselves. A student with this preferred learning style is likely to benefit from 'hands on' practical experience at an early stage of a practice placement.
- *Reflectors*: who observe and evaluate situations from a range of different perspectives before reaching a definitive conclusion. They draw upon a wide perspective and look at the past as well as the present. They are cautious and seek the observations of others as well as their own before they act. A student with this preferred learning style is likely to benefit from learning experiences being introduced at a slower pace. Observing others conducting interviews, appearing in court etc. could offer appropriate opportunities for learning.
- *Theorists*: who integrate observations into complex but logically sound theories. They think through problems in a vertical, systematic manner and assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories. A student with this preferred style of learning is likely to benefit from a logically coherent learning package where connections between the differing learning opportunities are clearly established.
- *Pragmatists*: who enjoy trying out new ideas and theories and testing out how they can be applied in practice. They like to act quickly and adopt a practical, problem-solving approach to situations. A student with this preferred learning style is likely to benefit from learning experiences where theoretical understandings are linked directly to the process and outcome of the work undertaken.

Honey and Mumford (1986) developed a self-administered questionnaire of 80 statements which respondents either agree or disagree with. The majority of statements are behavioural as they describe actions which people may or may not undertake. The 'Learning Styles Questionnaire' is aimed at highlighting an individual's preferred style of learning. The identified learning styles are intended to demonstrate how people have learnt in the past and to predict from this how they will learn best in the future.

Care needs to be taken, however, when using this questionnaire with social workers and their students. The empirical studies on which Honey and Mumford's (1986) findings are based consisted of predominantly male managers and no indication is given about the number of respondents who were black or from other ethnic minority groups (Shardlow &

Doel, 1996). Perceptions on the usefulness of this specific questionnaire are explored in this paper.

There have been a number of critiques offered in the literature relating to Kolb's *Learning Style Inventory*, which Honey and Mumford drew upon heavily when compiling their questionnaire (Jenkins, 1981; Kruzich *et al.*, 1986; Mark & Menson, 1982). Kolb's *Learning Styles Inventory* developed as a practical application of Kolb's 'experiential learning model'. Tennant (1988) sees this as an important factor when comparing Kolb's inventory with other questionnaires in this area. He argues, however, that Kolb's model cannot be generalised to all learning environments and claims that the resulting inventory has no capacity, therefore, to adequately measure the degree of integration of learning styles. He states that, 'Indeed it really only measures the relative preference of one set of words over another in describing learning styles' (Tennant, 1988, p. 105). An alternative perspective is offered here by Pigg *et al.* (1980) who explored the effectiveness of Kolb's *Learning Styles Inventory* in identifying learning styles when designing educational programmes in Kentucky. On the basis of their study they concluded that the inventory was able to capture tendencies in personal learning behaviours and that it had a high degree of face validity.

The basic orientation of Kolb's theory has also been questioned from a social work perspective. Taylor and Burgess (1995) acknowledge that Kolb's work has been influential in the field of adult education but they express concern that his learning styles theory tends to imply that different approaches to learning depend on individual learners. They argue that, 'Kolb does not develop a notion of how the environment might actively function for or against the interest of the learner, or how it might be adapted to enable self-directed learning' (Taylor & Burgess, 1995, p. 88).

As a profession where social context is considered crucial in relation to practice, social workers clearly need to address the influence of environment on the ability of students to learn. Jarvis (1995) argued that Kolb's theory was over-simplistic in relation to describing the complexity of the learning process. He stressed that learners are also experiencing their lives within a socio-cultural context and that this cannot be excluded from any theoretical analysis of learning. 'While experiential theorists are right to emphasise the individual, it must always be the person-in-social-context that is the subject of discussion' (Jarvis, 1995, p. 79).

Such critiques are particularly pertinent in relation to social work education. Any serious attempt to utilise adult learning theories in social work to encourage professional development needs to ensure that the person-in-social-context is maintained as a prime focus. The utilisation of learning styles theories are, therefore, not suggested here as a replacement for this but simply as offering the potential for some insight into how students learn in some situations. Such insights cannot, by their nature, encompass all aspects of a student's learning but, utilised effectively, they may form one part of the larger picture around how adult learning can be facilitated.

Key themes in the literature

- Within the current educational and clinical literature there appears to be a general level of agreement about the existence of individual styles of learning. Fox and Guild (1987) acknowledge, however, that despite this general level of agreement, researchers vary in the way they examine and conceptualise style. For example, Kolb (1981, 1984) sees learning style developing as a result of the interplay between heredity factors, prior learning experiences and the current demands of the environment. Witkin *et al.* (1977) focus more on the primacy of cognitive processes and identify cognitive style as a way of processing information contained in both the internal and external world. Coop and Sigal (1971) and

Oen (1973) highlight the importance of an individual's behaviour patterns when confronted with problem solving as a way of conceptualising learning style. It is pertinent to note here, however, that some learning theorists, for example, Boud (1998), have moved away from the concept of style as a stable characteristic and draw upon the notion of approaches to learning as a characteristic of the interaction between the individual and a learning task.

- A number of key differences can be noted in the literature related to the interplay of learning styles and personality. Some of these differences are inferred from the differences in attention given to personality theories. Some researchers draw explicitly upon knowledge from personality theory to inform their work (Berengarten, 1957; Heath, 1978; Myers, 1976). Myers (1976), for example, argues that she applied Jung's (1933) work on personality types when constructing the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator. Recent work here, for example Garden (1991) and Bayne (1995), suggests that Myers did not strictly adhere to the application of Jung's work and undervalued her own development of these ideas in her work.

- The interplay between cognitive and learning style traits is a particular area that varies in the literature (Curry, 1990). Learning styles can be viewed as comprising one aspect of a person's broader cognitive style (Lachman *et al.*, 1979) or alternatively, cognitive style can be classified itself as a type of learning style (Claxton & Ralston, 1978). The questionnaire devised by Honey and Mumford (1986) did not draw explicitly upon any personality theories, nor did it directly address the relationship between cognitive styles and learning processes.

- Various studies have sought to establish the validity of instrumentation used to measure learning styles (Candy, 1991; Cawley *et al.*, 1976; Delahaye & Smith, 1995; Field, 1989). Curry's (1990) critique of the research on learning styles raised questions relating to both the reliability and validity of measurements used in some of the learning styles literature. Some of the shortcomings related to the use of Honey and Mumford's questionnaire have been referred to earlier in this paper.

- No resolution appears to have been reached with regard to the effect of matching or mismatching learning styles. There are suggestions that the mismatching of styles might be useful for the learner in allowing the development of alternative learning strategies (Shipman & Shipman, 1985). The predominant theme of the literature, however, suggests the usefulness of matching learning materials (Pask, 1976) and teaching styles to the students' learning styles (Charkins *et al.*, 1985; Dunn, 1988; Griggs, 1985; Vallerand, 1988).

- There is little research available currently on how learning styles can be incorporated into social work practice teaching. Research that has been undertaken in the field of clinical practice suggests the importance of identifying student's learning styles (Berengarten, 1957; Fox & Guild, 1987; Kadushin, 1992; Papell, 1978). Two studies, Tsang (1993) in Hong Kong and Kruzich *et al.* (1986) in the United States, did focus on social work students' learning styles. Both studies noted shifts in students' learning styles in response to the different expectations of their practice teachers and their subject teachers. Tsang (1993) administered Kolb's *Learning Styles Inventory* over a 2-year period to social work students at four different points in their social work training. Significant shifts in the students' learning styles were noted. The author explained these changes as resulting from changes in expectations depending upon the requirements of the academic curriculum and the fieldwork placement. Kruzich *et al.* (1996) found that the social work faculty and the fieldwork placements were associated with opposite learning styles. Tsang (1993, p. 73) saw such 'mismatch' of styles as an area for social work educators to capitalise upon as it offers the potential for students to experience '... more rounded learning in terms of the

relative ease and openness for students to use all the different modes of learning'. There are other examples in the literature to suggest that the mismatching of styles might be useful for the learner in enabling the development of flexible learning strategies (Shipman & Shipman, 1985). The predominant theme of the literature in this area, however, appears to support the usefulness of matching learning materials and teaching styles to the student's learning style (Charkins *et al.*, 1985; Dunn, 1988; Griggs, 1985; Matthews, 1991; Vallerand, 1988). This paper explores how similarities and differences in learning and teaching styles were perceived by one particular group of social work practice teachers and their students. The relevance of learning styles in the quest for promoting students' learning is a key consideration of this analysis. Asking practice teachers and their students to complete Honey and Mumford's 'Learning Styles Questionnaire' was used as a starting point for this exploration.

The focus of inquiry

The main focus of investigation was on exploring in depth the perceptions of one particular group of practice teachers and students with regard to the usefulness of identifying learning styles for the task of promoting students' learning whilst undertaking practice placements. Respondents were also questioned about how they experienced differences and similarities in their teaching and learning styles.

The research process

The eight practice teachers involved in this study were all studying on an outer London practice teachers' programme, working towards the CCETSW Practice Teaching Award, and they each had a social work student on placement with them. Six practice teachers were from the statutory sector and two from the voluntary sector. They were a mixed group in terms of ethnicity and age. Three respondents were of African Caribbean descent, three were white British, one was Chinese and one was Jewish. All eight were female. The original intention was to interview three male practice teachers but they were eventually unable to agree to interview times as a result of their work commitments. Only one practice teacher had previous experience as a practice teacher. Overall, however, this profile was a representative sample of this particular practice teachers' programme, where candidates are predominantly drawn from the statutory sector. The programme has historically attracted a larger proportion of female applicants and this has been reflected in the recruiting of more female than male candidates. Care needs to be taken, however, in interpreting the findings of the research on this basis. Furthermore, in such a small-scale study, it is clearly difficult to make any clear statements relating to the impact of gender and ethnicity on the findings. On this basis it is difficult to show how the person-in-social-context influenced the research process and outcome.

The process of the research involved:

- individual completion of Honey and Mumford's (1986) questionnaire on learning styles;
- individual taped semi-structured interviews with practice teachers and their respective students;
- DipSW students on placement who were asked to complete Honey and Mumford's questionnaire by their practice teachers.

The practice teachers were asked to complete Honey and Mumford's (1986) 'Learning Styles Questionnaire' as part of a group exercise. Initially they completed the questionnaire

alone to determine their own preferred learning style. They were asked to identify their own learning style in the large group and then to form into small groups consisting of people with the same identified learning styles. They joined small groups of 'reflectors', 'activists', 'theorists' or 'pragmatists'. In these groups they considered how they learnt best; what teaching methods they preferred and from this information they devised a 'learning code' for helping people with their identified learning style to utilise learning opportunities available on placement. The group of reflectors, for example, highlighted the importance of observation and shadowing in facilitating their learning as one component of their learning code. Each small group then reported back their discussions to the main group and answered questions relating to how they learnt best from others with different learning styles. The aim of this exercise was to encourage practice teachers to develop learning and teaching strategies in line with their students' way of learning, which might be different to their own.

As a result of this exercise all practice teachers completed the questionnaire. The practice teachers were then given a second copy of Honey and Mumford's (1986) questionnaire and asked to give it to their students to complete. They were encouraged to utilise information from the group training experience to promote their individual student's learning and to consider the relevance of their particular student's learning style when identifying their own teaching strategies on placement. Six students completed the questionnaire.

At a later stage in the students' placement the eight practice teachers and their respective students were interviewed. Each person was interviewed separately to provide opportunities for individual perceptions to be expressed within a confidential interview. Data from these interviews was collected via the use of semi-structured interviews. Separate interview schedules were used for practice teachers and students who had completed the questionnaire and those where the student had not completed the questionnaire. The first group was asked questions about whether the information about respective learning styles had been useful to them or not. The second group was asked questions relating to why they had not used the questionnaire, whether in retrospect they considered this might have been useful and any other ways they had sought to find out how their student learnt best. Both groups of practice teachers and students were asked questions relating to the ways in which their student's learning style was similar and different to their own and how this influenced their teaching style. All respondents were encouraged to be discursive in their responses.

The research findings

Four key themes emerged from an analysis of the interview data collected. These were:

- assessment of the usefulness of identifying learning styles via the questionnaire;
- analysis of the impact of learning styles on teaching styles;
- perceptions on the effect of similarities and differences in learning styles; and
- exploration of the transition from practitioner to practice teacher.

Data presentation here includes direct quotes from the respondents involved in order to retain the essentially qualitative nature of this research, and to understand the meaning individuals attach to their specific situations and actions.

Theme 1: assessment of the usefulness of identifying learning styles via the questionnaire

All respondents identified the idea of trying to find out about learning styles as a useful one. Practice teachers frequently made explicit connections to its usefulness for teaching and

facilitating another person's learning. One representative example of such comments here was

> I think it enables you to pitch things in a way that helps people learn … To make sure that you are not doing things that just suit yourself. If you are passing on information it's got to be in the way the other person can understand (*Practice Teacher*).

The students interviewed also spoke positively about the potential usefulness of identifying learning styles as a way of aiding their learning on placement. One representative comment here was

> It needs to inform … almost permeate the whole process … So there should be some sort of an exercise, some time set aside about how people learn … how people operate, how people teach …(*Student*).

Some practice teachers highlighted how they had consciously sought to utilise information about their students' learning style gained, from completion of the questionnaire, in their teaching. Some incorporated the information in the foundation of the practice teaching relationship:

> We spent a lot of time talking about it in supervision … We incorporated it into how we worked together. It is like a seed that you plant and as you water it, it grows and then you know what to do and that you need to look after it (*Practice Teacher*).

> We used it in supervision a lot … It raised my awareness of how he learnt best and helped him to realise the style he used. It ran through the placement as a theme (*Practice Teacher*).

Others used the information on learning styles when they found their teaching strategies were not promoting their students' learning. One interesting example here is:

> I used it because I was at a loss, I couldn't understand why she didn't understand and why I couldn't get a message across … The only thing I had to work it out with was the questionnaire … It was a last ditch attempt really. … it took a lot of pressure off. 'Look, it's nobody's fault, we're just coming from different perspectives' (*Practice Teacher*).

On the whole, however, students appeared to be disappointed that their practice teachers had not sought to use the information about their learning styles in a more pro-active way. The students identified information about their learning styles as an important part of recognising the practice placement as a learning arena. One comment here clearly signifies the sense of lost opportunity expressed by most of the students interviewed:

> I was very interested in the idea … this might be a way of moving things forward … but we didn't go very deep into it … Just did the questionnaire, it didn't go anywhere … not used as a technique for moving things on. … You've got to have a different perspective on why you're *there* … and that was a bit lacking … *This* (pointing to the questionnaire) would have really helped to have made it more of the unique experience that it is (*Student*).

Where students felt their practice teacher had used information about their learning styles their comments were positive:

> If we hadn't done the questionnaire and talked about learning styles, it probably

wouldn't have come up. … The questionnaire showed we were quite different. If we didn't have this awareness there could have been friction (*Student*).

The interviews with the practice teachers highlighted differences in how information about learning styles had been used. Alongside the earlier comments about how such information had been incorporated throughout the placement, other practice teachers acknowledged that they found the information about learning style interesting but had not utilised the information to inform their student's learning process. Comments from the students placed with these practice teachers highlighted the sense of a missed opportunity to enhance their learning on placement. This points perhaps to the need for practice teachers to be given more explicit information about the use of the questionnaire and how its results can inform the content and process of practice teaching. It also links with issues raised in Theme 4, connected to the transition from practitioner to practice teacher.

Theme 2: analysis of the impact of learning styles on teaching styles

All the practice teachers made a connection between how their own learning styles influenced the way they taught their students. The main theme identified was that practice teachers often taught their students in the way *they* learnt best rather than focusing on promoting their student's mode of learning. Some apposite comments here were:

What I was doing was trying to teach … but what I did was probably tried to teach the way I learn (*Practice Teacher*).

I apply my own learning style into my teaching style to my student as well … My learning style has a great influence on my teaching style (*Practice Teacher*).

One example here was a practice teacher with a predominantly reflective learning style, who identified that she had arranged the teaching programme for her student around how she learnt best. Opportunities for observation were key to the induction process and supervision was a reflective space where the student was encouraged to consider alternative perspectives to inform any action.

Most students found it difficult to articulate how their practice teachers' learning style had influenced their teaching strategies. Some students did give examples of where they were aware that their practice teacher had actively changed their teaching style to accommodate their student's learning style:

I like didactic teaching … she preferred to do a brainstorm and to dredge things up from herself, she did actually appreciate that *I* didn't operate that way (*Student*).

One student, however, was clear that their practice teacher had not sought to accommodate their learning style:

She taught the way she learned … which is fine if you're teaching yourself! I never felt she was trying to change her teaching to meet my learning (*Student*).

The difficulty some of the students had in articulating their experience suggests that students too could benefit from some explicit training on learning and teaching before commencing their practice placements. Although the practice teachers interviewed experienced a connection between their learning and teaching styles, it is pertinent to note that such a connection is not clearly evidenced in the literature available in this area.

Theme 3: perceptions on the effect of similarities and differences in learning styles

Theme 2 identifies some of the ways similarities and differences in learning styles were perceived by practice teachers and students. There were other perceptions, however, which are useful to highlight separately.

Working with similarities. Where the learning styles of practice teachers and students were similar, this was generally perceived as positive. Teaching someone who learns in the way that you do was experienced as a bonus for most practice teachers:

> Our similarities made the placement a very good experience ... helps the practice teacher ... student *too*. I said to her 'The way you learn is acceptable'... I think she was saying to me 'How you teach is acceptable' ... If it was different it would be difficult ... (*Practice Teacher*).

None of the practice teachers referred to similarities in style as having any disadvantages. Overall, the students agreed with this. One student suggested, however, that similarity could have limitations:

> It worked well because we understood each other ... Maybe working with someone who did things differently would have been good for me though ... We are both reflectors and spent lots of time going round the houses ... Maybe someone like an activist would have pushed me forward more, helped me to do things in a different way, ... not just more of the same (*Student*).

This student's comments are helpful in highlighting the potential downside of matching learning styles and indicate that similarity may stifle growth at times. As noted earlier, the question about 'matching' and 'mismatching' of styles is important to establish in relation to practice teaching. Social workers today cannot simply be reflective, for example, as the realities of modern practice dictate the need to develop all four approaches to learning.

Working with differences. In themselves, differences in learning style between the practice teacher and the student did not, overall, appear to adversely affect the practice placement. Some practice teachers and students spoke about how they had worked positively with the differences between them:

> Differences were difficult at the beginning ... I had to see his way of thinking and learning. I had to learn how he learnt. There's no right or wrong style ... As long as the outcome is okay ... the style is okay ... I found working with a student with different style quite stimulating ... I learn from different ways of doing things (*Practice Teacher*).

> It never caused any real problems ... We'd gone through the questionnaire ... were aware that we were different ... then we were able to work with it ... put a positive connotation on it ... Because we were aware of it we could complement each other. We made up for each other's deficiencies (*Student*).

Where the experience of working with different learning styles was positive, comments were often made on the quality of the relationship between the practice teacher and student:

> There was a lot of mutual respect and mutual recognition of skills (Student).

> Our relationship was very convivial ... I don't think this was about learning styles though, I think this is more about personalities (Student).

Where differences in learning style were perceived as more problematic, the discussion of this often involved broader references to the importance of the relationship between the student and the practice teacher. The link between learning styles and the wider concept of personality types was also referred to. This is particularly interesting, as the literature in this area debates the connections between learning styles and personality types as referred to previously:

> She wasn't able to talk about how she was experiencing things … Very different as a personality … if that impacts on her learning … I guess it does doesn't it? (*Practice Teacher*).

> By the time we got round to the questionnaire our relationship was so poor. You need to have a reasonably good relationship … I don't know how to separate it, how it might have affected her learning (*Practice Teacher*).

> But it would always end up with both of us trying to prove our point … I'm not sure if that's about learning styles or our relationship … Our relationship took over the whole placement … (*Student*).

Such comments also highlight, however, that the impact of different learning styles may be of limited relevance when assessing the overall learning experience in these situations.

Theme 4: highlighting the transition from practitioner to practice teacher

Several respondents referred to the fact that they had no previous experience of teaching, as they were trained as social workers rather than teachers:

> I was quite scared to begin with … What do I know about teaching? … I needed to know how the student learned … How do you *teach* somebody? I don't know … The course was excellent … giving some ideas … but I wasn't sure how to teach someone else (*Practice Teacher*).

> It's a big responsibility teaching somebody … such a new role … You see I'm not a teacher and we were being asked to be teachers … (*Practice Teacher*).

Overall students did not raise this as an area of concern. One student, however, commented:

> … they are at the end of the day social workers with a social work training. I think you need a training in education to be able to do this (Student).

Comments here suggest that practice teachers are aware of their limitations as teachers and one implication of this is that practice teacher programmes should address such anxieties explicitly and focus on how practice teachers can acquire appropriate skills to facilitate learning.

Discussion of findings

An assessment of the usefulness of highlighting learning and teaching styles for practice teaching

Feedback from the group exercise with practice teachers was very positive about the potential usefulness of highlighting teaching and learning styles for practice teaching. Furthermore, all practice teachers interviewed identified the idea of trying to find out about learning styles as

helpful. The links between learning style and teaching style were also highlighted as import-
ant for practice teachers to be aware of. All practice teachers responded that they had thought
about how their learning style influenced their teaching style. Some explicit connections were
made by practice teachers about how *their* learning and teaching style impacted on their
student's ability to learn. Furthermore, comments were also made about how the student's
learning style had affected the practice teacher's ability to teach at times. Overall, this
particular group of practice teachers found the highlighting of learning and teaching styles
useful for their role as practice teachers.

An interesting issue here, however, is that although all practice teachers said that they
considered the ideas underlying learning styles to be useful, they did not all necessarily *use*
these ideas to inform their teaching practice. All the students interviewed, with one exception,
believed that their practice teacher had not used the information they had about their learning
styles to assist their learning in any significant way. The students spoke very positively overall
about the potential usefulness of understanding the impact of learning and teaching styles on
their placement experiences. The students appeared to have a sense of 'lost opportunity' and
several questioned whether their practice teacher knew what to do with the information the
students had given them about their learning styles. As noted previously, this suggests that
practice teacher programmes should focus more clearly on how to use the results of the
questionnaire in developing their teaching strategies.

The practice teachers did see the ideas as useful but lack of application of these ideas
questions whether these ideas were *useful enough* for them to use in their teaching practice. A
related factor raised by the data is also whether some of the practice teachers found the ideas
useful at a general level of abstraction but did not know *how* to work with them in their
practice teacher–student relationships. The lack of knowledge about *teaching* as opposed to
social work practice was raised on several occasions and may account for the ambivalence
about whether these ideas were *useful enough.*

The practice teachers varied in how they used the questionnaire with their students.
Overall, where the learning styles of the practice teachers and their individual students were
similar, the questionnaire was used initially and then moved away from. Where learning styles
were not identified as key areas of concern by the practice teacher they were not used to any
significant extent with their students.

The questionnaire was incorporated more fully into the practice teaching process, however,
where there was a clear difference in the learning styles of the practice teacher and their
student. On these occasions it was used by practice teachers as a tool for understanding their
student and as a way of highlighting how the practice teacher could seek to accommodate
their student's learning style. The practice teachers in this category spoke positively about
how using the questionnaire had enabled them to see their student's perspectives and to
appreciate differences in how they worked. The students involved also spoke positively about
its usefulness, as a way of helping them to accommodate differences in learning and teaching
styles.

In two instances, however, differences in learning styles were identified but the practice
teachers did not use the questionnaire as a teaching tool. Both these practice teachers
commented that using the questionnaire as a way of understanding their students' way of
learning could have been potentially helpful for their practice teaching. Neither of the
practice teachers had asked the students to complete the questionnaire. One said she had
forgotten about it and the other said their student had refused to complete the questionnaire
as she did not want to be categorised in this way. Such a comment highlights a potential
problem in the use of such questionnaires. Practice teachers were encouraged to use the
information as one indication of how they could seek to facilitate their student's learning. The

purpose of the exercise was not to 'label' practice teachers or students as belonging exclusively to fixed categorisations.

Overall, it appears that the usefulness of the Honey and Mumford questionnaire was related to the needs of the particular practice teacher–student dyad. Where learning styles did not create barriers to learning, its completion appears to have been experienced as an interesting exercise but one that was tangential to the overall practice teaching relationship. Where learning styles between the practice teacher and their student were different, however, the questionnaire does appear to have been utilised as a useful teaching tool. The findings of this research appear to support research studies in the literature that highlight the usefulness of employing such learning styles instrumentation (Keefe & Ferrell, 1990; Sims *et al.*, 1991, 1989).

How similarities and differences in learning and teaching styles were perceived by practice teachers and their students

This study took place in the context of random matching and mismatching between the learning styles of practice teachers and their students in the sample group. Perceptions of similarity and difference in the learning styles varied across the group. From analysis of the data it appears that overall, similarities in learning styles were explicitly perceived as having a positive impact on the placement. The existence of such similarities appeared to act as a background feature to the placement. The similarities were acknowledged and their positive effects noted. The issue of learning styles seems to have moved from the agenda at this point. It is interesting to note that the potential downside of matching styles did not significantly emerge as an expressed issue. The potential danger of the teaching relationship being too 'cosy' or even collusive was not significantly highlighted. The work of Shipman and Shipman (1985) and Tsang's (1993) study suggest that the mismatching of styles can result in new learning strategies being developed by students. This suggests that practice teachers should be encouraged to explore the potential disadvantages as well as the potential benefits that could result from the matching of practice teacher–student learning styles.

Where the learning styles of the practice teacher and their student were different perceptions regarding the impact of such differences appeared to be a key concern during the placement. The fact that differences were noted did not necessarily lead to negative perceptions or result in problems on the placement. An important factor appeared to be the willingness of both parties to explicitly acknowledge the existence of such differences and to respect alternative patterns of learning.

Where differences did exist, the practice teachers and some students spoke about initial difficulties in trying to understand each other's learning perspective. The willingness to allow time for this to happen and to demonstrate the ability to accommodate another's perspective was important. Co-operation of both practice teacher and student appeared to be necessary in this process. Where the working relationship between the practice teacher and their student was positive then such co-operation and accommodation appears to have been achieved.

Where the relationship was poor it appeared to be particularly difficult to accommodate differences in styles and to work with them in a positive way. Incorporating the concept of person-in-social-context in these examples may reveal the operation of other more pertinent influences on the learning environment. Influences around differences in personality, how practice teachers create environments for learning, how students respond to criticism, how the power dynamic in the practice teacher–student dyad is experienced, the impact of ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality etc. are all factors which could conceivably influence the broader learning milieu.

Overall, the results of this study do appear to lend support to research studies that suggest the usefulness of matching students and teachers' learning and teaching styles (Lemberger & Marshack, 1991; Matthews, 1991; Palmer, 1987; Schmeck, 1983; Vallerand, 1988; Webb, 1988). The study does not, however, identify mismatching of styles as a long-term problem for either students or practice teachers. Data from this study also supports arguments from research studies that suggest differences in learning styles can be accommodated appropriately and worked with productively (Ramsden, 1985; Shipman & Shipman, 1985). The quality of the overall relationship between the practice teacher and their student appears to have been significant in influencing whether this happened or not. The impact of learning styles and the perception of similarities and differences in styles appeared to be connected to a broader picture affecting how two individuals work together. This connects with debates in the literature related to the relationship between learning styles and personality types. Awareness of differences in learning styles at the *start* of a placement may have been influential in helping to form positive working relationships where such differences could be openly acknowledged and validated. As noted throughout this study, however, knowledge around learning styles offers *some* potential to enhance learning but is clearly not the total picture around how a student is facilitated to learn or not.

Implications for future practice

Suggestions for future practice indicated by this study are given below:

- The use of the Honey and Mumford 'Learning Styles Questionnaire' on practice teachers' programmes should be continued. Care needs to be taken here, however, to highlight the purpose of such an exercise and to avoid any rigid stereotyping of respondents. This is a simple teaching tool that can give pointers for the students' learning but would clearly be a crude tool to base rigid categorisations on. Locating the use of this questionnaire clearly within the broader context of adult learning theory appears to be helpful for new practice teachers.
- The relevance of focusing on the questionnaire as a teaching tool and highlighting how practice teachers can actively *use* information about their student's learning style in their teaching practice is also indicated. Exploring concrete links between learning and teaching styles could be productive here and could be promoted on practice teaching programmes.
- The use of the questionnaire as a teaching tool could be particularly appropriate where the practice teacher and the student have different learning styles. It may offer a way of explicitly acknowledging and working productively with these differences. The questionnaire can also be used to allow practice teachers and students to identify the effects of similarity in their styles and to work effectively with these.
- Awareness of learning styles could be an empowering experience for students on placement. This could occur by helping practice teachers to increase awareness of their student's ways of learning that may lead to a positive and accommodating working relationship. It also appears important for students to have this self-awareness about how they learn best and what they can do to maximise their learning experiences on placement. Students may benefit from exploring their learning styles before the placement commences, to enable them to fully participate in promoting their learning and to seek out appropriate learning opportunities. This preparation could be incorporated into Diploma in Social Work programmes.
- The transition from social work practitioner to practice teacher appears to be a complex process, where the practice teacher is asked to demonstrate knowledge and skills in teaching as well as social work practice. It is indicated that practice teachers could utilise

practical teaching strategies from the field of adult learning to focus on promoting student learning on placement.

• The realities of modern social work practice require the student's learning to be viewed within the context of the broader learning milieu. Learning style questionnaires have the potential to enhance student learning but are not the total picture. Attention needs to be paid to the student as a person-in-social-context and the totality of influences on their learning experience should be acknowledged.

Conclusion

This paper has explored one particular way in which practice teachers could utilise information about their own and their students' learning style as a way of promoting student learning on practice placements. The findings of the small-scale research outlined here do suggest that exploration of learning styles could be of value in this context, particularly where the practice teacher and their student have different ways of learning. The research discussed here is clearly small scale and its sample size and constitution suggest limitations in terms of generalising its findings. To the author's knowledge, however, this is the first research study in the United Kingdom to explore the impact of learning styles in a social work context and relate this specifically to current developments in the arena of continuing professional development and practice teaching.

The arguments raised here have broader implications, however, for if social workers are to engage in continuing professional development as lifelong learners within a demanding and changing profession, the ability to learn is a crucial prerequisite. Awareness about how we learn best can usefully underpin this process and may offer one tangible way in which social work can move toward achieving the goal of lifelong learning for practitioners. This would clearly be in line with the aspirations outlined by CCETSW (1992, 1993), Dearing (1997) and the White Paper, *Modernising Social Services* (Department of Health, 1998). Utilising material from the field of adult learning may provide helpful signposts for future directions in social work education and have particular relevance for the crucial area of practice teaching. Additionally, drawing upon such research may also allow practice teachers to demonstrate their ability to analyse and evaluate research in respect of practice teaching, which is now an essential element of the Practice Teaching Award (CCETSW, 1998).

The social work profession cannot draw uncritically on material from the field of adult learning, however, and a questioning attitude to its relevance needs to be maintained. Taylor (1997, p. 11) points out that, 'The adult learning literature is noteworthy for its tendency to omit discussion of the social, political, and economic context. This gives it a limited applicability to professional education'.

Such warnings should not go unheeded. If practice teachers are encouraged to utilise theories from the field of adult learning this needs to be promoted in a thoughtful and considered way. This paper suggests that information about learning styles may have relevance in the social work practice teaching arena. It is not suggested as a panacea to cure all educational ills, however; its claims are of a more limited nature. The needs of professional social work education dictate that the student is viewed as a person-in-social-context. To be fit for purpose in this context, information about learning styles needs to be viewed as *one*, potentially significant, part of the total educational experience for both students and practice teachers.

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