

## Focus on Learning; what keeps students motivated in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

I worked in the classrooms for many years, after struggling my way through school as a student who was labeled as incapable (to state it positively). As I attempted to support many students, all of whom had different experiences, I struggled to understand why our education system seemed to be such a mess and so demotivating. After many years of doing my own research into how we learn and eventually finding my way through graduate school, I understand a whole lot more about the process. What follows is a simplified explanation (which I could have used many years ago) of the education systems' strengths and weaknesses depending, of course, on the individual. I hope that you find this information helpful as you try to make informed decisions about your own, or those in your care's, education.

### The school system and learning approaches

It is likely that we all agree our school system is outdated. In the twenty years that I spent working in the classroom, I realized that there are two types of people who go into education; those who come from an experience that was easy for them, meaning the system worked for them; and those for whom it was very difficult, but who came away with a passion for helping others so that others don't have to go through what they did. In both cases, most of today's educators lack the specialized training in addressing motivation and keeping students from experiencing mental crises as they try to learn in today's world.

As society shifts in an attempt to keep up with rapid changes, our world feels more and more unstable - and for some it feels scary. This is especially true for children who don't have the mental capacity or lived experience to understand just how impactful these changes are. Yet, we expect them to go on learning and wonder what is wrong when they are not achieving at the top of the scale. The need for additional support, individualized attention and a strength-based approach are not easily supported in the system that students are currently trying to survive in.

The history of primary and secondary education systems varies across different countries, but in general, the modern education system has its roots in the 19th century. Can you believe that? Our system is less than 200 years old and yet, we have grown way beyond it. Before the 19th century, education was primarily the responsibility of families, religious institutions, or private tutors. However, with the rise of industrialization and the need for a skilled workforce, governments began to take a more active role in providing education to the population. In the United States, the first public school system was established in Massachusetts in 1837. This system was based on the Prussian model, which emphasized the importance of universal education and the use of standardized curricula and examinations.

In the United Kingdom, the Education Act of 1870 established a system of publicly-funded primary schools, which aimed to provide education to all children between the ages of 5 and 12.

This system was based on the principle of compulsory education, which required children to attend school until a certain age. The current education system is criticized for its emphasis on standardized testing and "one size fits all" approach to education, that originate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century models. Some argue that this approach fails to take into account individual differences in learning styles and abilities, and that it can lead to a lack of creativity and critical thinking skills. Although, it should be noted that some students do well in this approach, learning to apply critical thinking skills and self-motivation can be challenging for many. The unfortunate consequence of relying on standardized testing is that once a student leaves the education system, there is very little chance they will ever use this skill again. They will however need to rely on critical thinking, project development, communication and collaboration, ownership and accountability, and presentation skills.

### New approaches to learning: PBL and the Socratic Method

Despite these criticisms, the modern education system continues to play a vital role in preparing young people for success in the 21st century. Many countries are exploring new approaches to education that incorporate more individualized learning and a greater emphasis on skills like creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration. One such model is Project Base Learning (PBL).

PBL differs from the standardized model of learning in its emphasis on real-world problem-solving, personalized learning experiences, collaboration and communication, student-centeredness, and alternative forms of assessment. It offers a more engaging and relevant approach to learning that can help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills that are essential for success in the 21st century. PBL is a teaching method that differs from the standardized model of learning in several ways:

1. **Emphasis on Real-World Problem Solving:** PBL emphasizes real-world problem-solving, which means that students engage in hands-on, experiential learning that is directly applicable to their lives and communities. This approach is in contrast to the standardized model of learning, which often focuses on abstract concepts and memorization of information that may not have immediate relevance or practical application.
2. **Personalized Learning:** PBL allows for more personalized learning experiences, as students can choose projects that align with their interests, passions, and learning styles. This approach differs from the standardized model of learning, which often has a "one size fits all" approach to teaching.
3. **Collaboration and Communication:** PBL encourages collaboration and communication among students, as they work together to solve problems, share ideas, and complete projects. This approach differs from the standardized model of learning, which often prioritizes individual performance and competition.
4. **Student-Centered:** PBL is a student-centered approach to learning, which means that students take ownership of their learning and have a greater say in the direction and outcomes of their education. This approach differs from the standardized model of

learning, which often has a teacher-centered approach to education, where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge and instruction. This approach leans into the student's strengths and interests, which can increase motivation exponentially.

5. **Assessment:** PBL often uses alternative forms of assessment, such as portfolios, presentations, and exhibitions, to evaluate student learning. This approach differs from the standardized model of learning, which often relies heavily on standardized tests and exams to assess student knowledge and skills. Many individuals end up being eliminated from further learning opportunities, as was my experience, due to an inability to show their strengths through standardized tests. Another teaching technique that has gained popularity is the Socratic Method, which can be easily integrated into any model to enhance deeper thinking and collaboration. The Socratic method is a type of teaching that involves asking students questions to encourage critical thinking and problem-solving. This approach can be used in project-based learning to guide students through the process of discovering and developing their own solutions to real-world problems.

In a project-based learning setting, the Socratic method can be used by teachers to facilitate discussions, encourage students to explore different perspectives, and help students develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. By asking questions and challenging assumptions, the Socratic method can help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are essential for success in the 21st century.

The Socratic method can also be used by students to guide their own learning in Standardized Learning. By asking questions, seeking out resources, and exploring different perspectives, students can take ownership of their learning and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

[How many of today's students succeed in the standardized learning model without interventions?](#)

It's difficult to give a definitive answer to this question, as success in the standardized learning model can be defined in many different ways, and can depend on a variety of factors, including the specific curriculum, the quality of teaching, and the individual needs and abilities of each student. And then there is the bell curve that is so often a part of the standardized learning model. However, it's worth noting that the standardized learning model, which often relies heavily on standardized tests and exams, has been criticized by some educators and researchers for its narrow focus and its tendency to promote rote memorization over deeper understanding and critical thinking.

Many students find the standardized model of learning to be unengaging or irrelevant to their interests and passions, which can lead to lower levels of motivation and achievement. This is especially true as students move into middle and high school, when they are beginning to develop some critical thinking and reasoning skills. There is evidence that even subjects like Maths and Language are absorbed easier with variety and when the skill use is attached to something (a project) that is intriguing to the individual. That being said, it's also true that many students do succeed in the standardized learning model without the need for interventions. For some students, the standardized model may provide clear goals and expectations, which can

help them stay motivated and focused because it is reliable and consistent. Additionally, some students may excel in areas that are tested by standardized exams, such as math or reading comprehension, which can help them perform well academically.

Ultimately, the degree to which students succeed in the standardized learning model will depend on a wide range of individual and contextual factors, not the least of which is environmental support system. Some students may thrive in this model, while others may struggle and require additional support or alternative approaches to learning.

### How does a strengths-based model influence self-esteem and can it reduce cheating?

By emphasizing student strengths and interests, a strengths-based approach can help increase student motivation, reduce cheating, and improve self-esteem and self-perception. By virtue of the fact that strength-based models align with the interests and passions of the individual, they also cater to the individual learning styles. When students are engaged in meaningful, relevant, and authentic learning experiences, they are more likely to be motivated to learn.

In PBL, students have the opportunity to choose projects that align with their interests and passions, which can help increase their motivation to learn and explore new ideas, while developing skills that are relevant to today's work force. Moreover, when students are engaged in a strengths-based approach, they are less likely to feel the need to cheat. Cheating often occurs when students feel overwhelmed, stressed, or inadequately prepared for a task (watch for a separate article on this topic). By focusing on student strengths and providing personalized learning experiences, PBL can help reduce these negative feelings and decrease the likelihood of cheating. Finally, a strengths-based approach can help improve students' self-esteem and self-perception by highlighting their unique abilities and talents. When students are recognized and valued for their strengths, they are more likely to feel confident and self-assured in their abilities, which can have a positive impact on their overall well-being and academic success.

### What are Learning Styles and why do they matter?

Learning styles refer to the different ways in which individuals prefer to process, internalize, and apply new information. There are several models of learning styles, but the most common ones are visual, reading/writing, auditory, and kinesthetic.

- **Visual learners** prefer to learn through pictures, diagrams, charts, and other visual aids. They may use colors, shapes, and spatial organization to help them understand and remember information.
- **Reading/Writing learners** may enjoy activities such as reading and taking notes, writing essays and reports, and participating in online discussions. They may also benefit from instructional materials that are presented in written form, such as handouts, textbooks, and online articles.

**4 TYPES OF LEARNERS**  
LEARNING IS NOT THE SAME

**life is great**

**VISUAL LEARNERS**  
Visual learners are individuals who prefer to take in their information visually - be that with maps, graphs, diagrams, charts, etc. However, they don't necessarily respond well to photos or videos, as they absorb their information best from visual aids comprised of patterns and shapes

**READING/WRITING LEARNERS**  
Reading/writing learners absorb information best when it's in words, whether they are writing it down or reading it. To this learner, text is more powerful than any kind of visual or auditory representation of an idea. These individuals usually perform very well on research based written assignments.

**KINESTHETIC LEARNERS**  
Kinesthetic learners are individuals who prefer to learn by doing. They enjoy a hands-on experience. They are usually more in touch with reality and more connected to it, which is why they require a tactile experience to understand something better.

**AUDITORY LEARNERS**  
Auditory learners are individuals who learn better when they can listen and engage in conversation about a topic. This student is prone to sorting their ideas after speaking, rather than thinking ideas through before. To this type of learner, saying things out loud helps them to better grasp a concept.

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- **Auditory learners** prefer to learn through listening to lectures, discussions, and recordings. They may prefer to repeat information out loud or use rhythm and melody to help them remember.
- **Kinesthetic learners** prefer to learn through hands-on activities, movement, and physical sensations. They may prefer to take breaks or use manipulatives to help them stay engaged and retain information.

It is important to note that while learning styles can be helpful in understanding one's preferences, they are not absolute and do not determine one's abilities or potential. Furthermore, there is limited scientific evidence to support the efficacy of teaching to specific learning styles, but there is research that implicates increased motivation levels. Understanding one's preferred learning style can help individuals tailor their studying habits and seek out learning opportunities that align with their strengths. It can also help educators design instruction and activities that engage a variety of learning preferences and maximize learning outcomes for all students, by increasing or maintaining motivation levels of several individuals in a class setting.

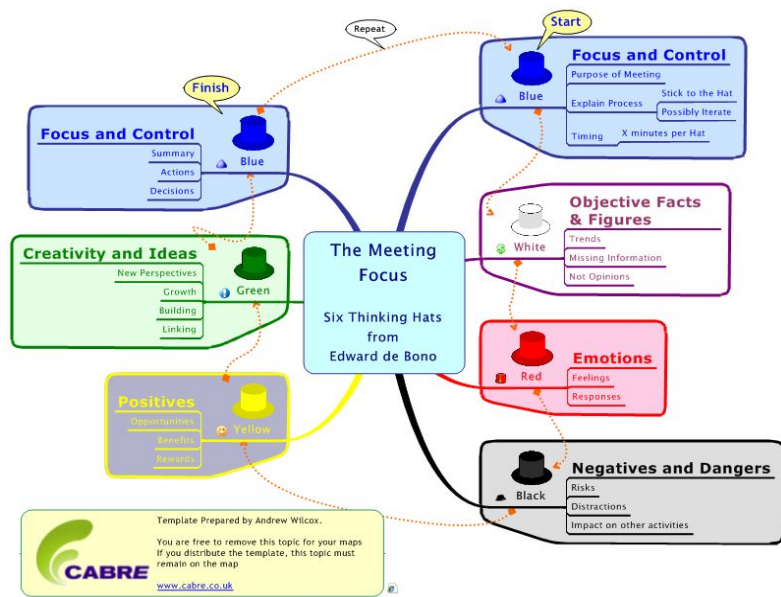
### Learning styles versus de Bono's 6 thinking hats

Learning styles and de Bono's 6 thinking hats are two different frameworks for understanding how individuals process and approach information, and they can be used together or separately depending on the learning or problem-solving context. Learning styles are generally focused on understanding how individuals prefer to process and learn information. This can include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, reading/writing, and other learning styles. Understanding one's learning style can help individuals tailor their studying habits and seek out learning opportunities that align with their strengths. On the other hand, de Bono's 6 thinking hats is a problem-solving tool that encourages individuals to think about a situation or problem from multiple perspectives.

The six thinking hats are:

1. White Hat (facts and information)
2. Red Hat (emotions and feelings)
3. Black Hat (logical and critical thinking)
4. Yellow Hat (positive thinking)
5. Green Hat (creative thinking)
6. Blue Hat (big picture thinking and planning)

Each thinking hat represents a different way of thinking and approaching a problem, and



by using all six hats, individuals can explore a problem from multiple angles and come up with creative solutions. Using the theory in this way not only relies on individual strengths, but also encourages thinking in areas that are underdeveloped. This approach works very well in task groups as well.

While learning styles and de Bono's 6 thinking hats are different frameworks, they can complement each other. For example, individuals who are strong reading/writing learners may benefit from using the "White Hat" thinking hat to gather and analyze information in a structured way. Similarly, individuals who are strong visual learners may benefit from using the "Green Hat" thinking hat to generate creative ideas and solutions.

Working with a system that was designed nearly 200 years ago, for an era of industrialization and skilled labor in a society that has evolved to a technologically diverse and dependent one puts undue strain on everyone (teachers, learners and caregivers). Add to the burden of teachers and caregivers the rapidly developing, technologically savvy brain, that does not yet have the ability to reason and make sound judgments or control impulsive thinking (developing frontal cortex takes 20-25 years). We now have an easily distracted, overly stressed system that is failing everyone involved. This has led to low motivation, increased behavior concerns, and an increase in diagnoses of attention deficits or executive function deficits in students. It has also caused a teacher shortage, which in my opinion is due to lack of support for training and implementation in new teaching models and approaches to support the mental wellbeing of our evolving children, as well as lack of wages that compete with the current cost of living, to include (modern) continuing education mandates.

Where does this leave the caregiver, who is often trying to juggle parenting, career and their own life goals? It leaves them with a lot of unanswered questions and confusion. I hope that this information gives you some ideas to look for in your quest for supporting the children in your care. All of the ideas shared are out there. They may not be recognized yet at the level of the system, but there are many well informed educators who do recognize the needs and do their best to implement teaching strategies that meet the needs of each individual. As an advocate for individualized education plans, I will always encourage you to listen to your gut, as you likely know when your children are struggling. If they do not seem happy and do not seem to be progressing at the pace that their classmates are, it is time to do some investigation into how they learn and what will motivate or stimulate interest.

You can also talk to schools (and other parents) to find the teachers who are using diverse teaching strategies. If this is not enough, you may consider their mental health. Are they overburdened, angry and unable to calm themselves? Are they experiencing insomnia, nightmares, bed wetting, digestive issues, or headaches? These are signs that they need additional support. There are a variety of reasons for these symptoms and I am happy to help you sort these out.

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