Background

'As individuals we are all different, but as crowds we are all the same.'
Ben Elton

'There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals.'
Thomas Jefferson

Being comfortable with complexity is almost a prerequisite for considering learner difference. By its very nature we need to deal with paradoxes, generalities and ambiguities. This field of research is very messy indeed with no clear cut, fully researched models. Ideas are organic and constantly being changed and refined in the light of new learning. Consequently, there is a confusing mass of learning style models, some more practically useful than others. Various theories exist considering how we think, feel and behave differently. These differences show themselves in our learning styles (how we prefer to think and learn), in our personality preferences (our values, how we prefer to live and relate to others, in our mix of talents and abilities (multiple intelligences) and in how our bodies affect how we respond to the environment and how we think (Body types).
(Ian Smith. 2005. p4.)

In every statement we make about learner difference, we have to accept many shades of grey. In essence we are trying to understand what makes us the person we are which is a pretty tall order for any single learning styles theory. We all like to believe that we are unique and at many levels, we are. However, it is apparent also that there are similarities in the ways that we are different. Ian Smith titles his recent publication about learning styles as being "Different in similar ways."

In exploring learner difference it can be argued that we are able to develop richer descriptions of learning rather than fall into the trap of coming up with simple lists of categories of learner. It must be recognised that a single theory approach to individual learning styles will not ensure that a learner's needs will be met.

A learning style can be thought of as the way in which an individual sets about learning something. A crucial feature of learning styles is that they operate across all activities and subject areas, so a person who likes using pictures and diagrams (an 'imager') will use this preference across many subject areas. Learning skills are single actions which can be learned, such as using mnemonics to remember information. Learning strategies may consist of a number of skills used together and these may be related to specific subjects other than learning styles. In contrast to learning styles, learning strategies are thought to be teachable. What begins to emerge at one extreme of the learning strategy argument is an emphasis on personality linked styles and at the other, subject specific strategies. Somewhere in between these two extremes lie the theories on 'information processing modes', which are often referred to as learning styles. Whilst learning styles can neither be significantly changed nor, according to some, do they develop with age, there is an increasing amount of evidence that specific skills can be taught and learned. An important factor is that different learners prefer different learning styles and use different strategies to learn successfully. Learning styles are part of our individual make up but we can learn the strategies and use them as we need them.

All the models we have included are merely snapshots of different ways of looking at the learner and learning. To re-emphasise, no single measurement of style ensures that a learner's needs will be met. It is perhaps more important to build an adaptable learning environment that presents the material in a variety of methods than try and determine each learner's personal style. Likewise, recognising your own style will help to ensure you do not unintentionally force one learning style upon learners. The more styles you address, the more likely it is that the learning experience will be received well by the learners. This is because you will be striving to reach their needs, not yours.
Also material presented in a variety of ways keeps the learners interested and reinforces itself.

All styles have one thing in common: they are an attempt to simplify an extremely complex phenomenon. It is only by slicing through learning behaviours one step at a time, that we will ever have a chance of understanding learning styles as a whole. The danger is in losing sight of the bigger picture and seeing the slice as a single answer. This is why learning style models do not fully explain how we learn and at the same time are both right and wrong. Learning is an extremely complex process and these models try to simplify that process; through that simplification we are able to gain a tenuous grasp of the complexity of learning. A bit like an orange, learning is constructed of slice after slice of different facets of difference. Each model tackles a different element, by taking a small slice out of the whole. That single slice cannot explain the whole; each slice is different and what about the skin it is in? We cannot, therefore, just use one model to fully explore the learning process; we have to look at a number of slices or layers. In the past at the UFA, we have focused much of our exploration on VAK, our visual, auditory and kinaesthetic preferences, but this presents only a limited picture of the learner.

VAK can only ever be one slice and just as one slice of the orange doesn't give you the whole shape, or the feel of the pith and peel, so just looking at VAK cannot give us whole picture of learner. We now feel that in addition to VAK it is important to include other theories on learner difference. In this section we only present a small selection of learning theories for you to explore; you must not feel constrained by that choice, but seek out others that hold some truth for you and test them out as well.

Models to consider:

Personality differences: One of these is one of the most widely recognised theories on Learning Style, the wholist-analyst, verbaliser-imager continuums.

- Wholists like to get an overview of what is to be learned and to reach a conclusion based on the 'big picture' rather than the detail.
- Analysts like to look at the detail of what is to be learned, to consider it bit by bit.
- Verbalisers are happy with words, written or spoken. They find it relatively easy to extract meaning from texts and from lectures.
- Imagers like to learn from pictures or diagrams. They prefer to break text up and form schematic diagrams linking the ideas.

Where a person lies on the wholist-analyst scale has no influence on where they lie on the verbal-imager scale. Most people are somewhere along the continuum and are able to learn best from a mixture of types of input.