It is the Holy Grail for many psychologists, lay and professional alike: Devise a simple method to categorize human beings in a way that will yield insight into the cause of their actions and, more profitably, permit predictions regarding how individuals will act in the future. Phrenologists measured the bumps on our skulls, Rorschach and his followers drew upon our perceptions of ink blots, Myers–Briggs theorists attempt to place each of us into one of 16 personality types after responding to a series of abstract and context free questions like “do you prefer to eat to live or live to eat?” In educational settings we are provided with guidance pertaining to whether we learn best visually or verbally, whether we process information superficially or deeply, how reflective we are, and how ready we are to learn new material. We have all had experiences with others and insights into ourselves that make these Linnaean classifications intuitively appealing: “I knew Tom would come through because he thrives in pressure-filled situations,” “I have to see things on paper to fully comprehend them,” “Laura is always so serious.”

Unfortunately, the pervasiveness of these ideas must be weighed against empirical data suggesting that the various labels provide little more than inaccurate (and sometimes harmful) shorthand descriptions (Paul, 2004). The internal consistency of the measures are almost always high, to be sure (except in the case of the ubiquitous Kolb learning style inventory; Loo, 1997), and a substantial number of statistically significant correlations between these variables and other self-report measures have been reported in the literature. However, these correlations, when found, are (a) almost always small, typically accounting for less than 10, 5, or even 1% of the variability and (b) often present as the few significant correlations in a mass of correlations that, while equally plausible, were not the lucky 1 in 20 that achieved the magical $p < 0.05$. Two papers within this issue focus on learning styles specifically and provide further support for this view by presenting more data that fall into these categories (Groves, 2005; Sobral, 2005).

In addition, the Reflections paper in this issue provides a comprehensively damning assessment of the construct of emotional intelligence (EI). Noting that EI is little more than a thinly veiled repackaging of personality tests, Lewis et al. (2005) raise critical questions about the measurement properties
of emotional intelligence tests and, in doing so, create a compelling argument that EI theorists fail to take into account the complexity of human nature. They argue “EI can be seen as a historically- and culturally-contingent artifact rather than an enduring personality trait.” That is, while EI can provide a useful metaphor during discussion of specific situations and while awareness of the emotions being expressed in a particular context can be important for understanding a situation, it is erroneous to apply lasting labels to the individuals involved.

In fact, this latter point nicely captures the fundamental problem with most attempts to measure learning style or personality type – our behaviours are driven to a much greater extent by external, situational factors than our intuitions would lead us to believe (Ross and Nisbett, 1991). While we may each have core traits or skills or personalities buried inside, they appear to be of limited value in determining what we actually do. In contrast, there is substantial variability in the world and minor changes in context can have dramatic influences (e.g., Darley and Batson, 1973). The danger is that these measures can lead individuals to believe something about themselves (e.g., what career to pursue or how to perceive one’s academic/romantic successes and failures) based upon constructs that are, at best, poorly correlated with reality. Potentially worse, EI and other personality measures have now found a place in the armamentarium of business’ Human Resources departments, our educational institutions, social service agencies, financial planners, and marriage counselors (Paul, 2004). Batteries of tests are now being administered and used to make career and life-altering decisions about people. Yet, as educational psychologist Robert Brown argued recently, there are no “instruments with sufficient theoretical or psychometric support to warrant use for making prescriptive statements for individuals” (2001). Decision-making based on such flimsy criteria is simply unethical (Norman, 2004).

Just as astrologists capture people’s attention and imagination with vague and commonplace, but positive descriptions of themselves (Forer, 1949), so too do personality theorists create an appealing package that increases comfort through the guise of explanation. Simultaneously, however, these explanations mask the complexities of human nature and the reality that most people’s personalities do not fall neatly into any one type. Rather, we all tend to be exceptions to the rules, our actions placing us into variable intermediate zones that make the assignment of personality types or learning styles imprecise and arbitrary (Druckman and Bjork, 1991). The final word in this matter, however, is best left to Carl Jung, himself, whose theories form the basis of (and were popularized by) the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator. He argued against typing people, stating that doing so is a “regrettable misunderstanding [that] completely ignores the fact that this kind of classification is nothing but a childish parlour game” (Druckman and Bjork, 1991).