

# Learning Styles Don't Actually Exist, Studies Show

Are you a visual, auditory, reading/writing, or kinesthetic learner? For millions of students, this question has become so familiar that they already have an answer ready to go. Some identify as visual learners, which means that, in theory, they learn best by seeing concepts in pictures and diagrams, perhaps on a blackboard or in a video. Others identify as auditory learners, which means they learn best by hearing, or reading/writing learners, which means they learn best by reading books and taking notes. Still others identify as kinesthetic learners, which means they learn best when they can physically engage with things, such as in a chemistry lab.

For most of us, the idea that different people have different learning styles is so obvious that it is simply common knowledge. But there's a problem here, a big problem. No matter how hard scientists have looked, they haven't been able to find any good evidence for the learning styles theory. Indeed, many academics who study this for a living consider learning styles to be one of the biggest myths in education.

"There is no credible evidence that learning styles exist," write psychologists Cedar Riener and Daniel Willingham in a 2010 paper titled [The Myth of Learning Styles](#). "Students may have preferences about how to learn, but no evidence suggests that catering to those preferences will lead to better learning."

If that sounds far-fetched, well, there's plenty more where that came from.

In a 2009 review paper entitled [Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence](#), researchers investigated the "meshing hypothesis," which is the idea that students learn better when instruction

is provided in a format that matches their learning style. Their conclusion is a hard pill to swallow. "The contrast between the enormous popularity of the learning-styles approach within education and the lack of credible evidence for its utility is, in our opinion, striking and disturbing," researchers wrote. "If classification of students' learning styles has practical utility, it remains to be demonstrated."

A [2006 study](#) looking at multimedia instruction came to a similar conclusion. "There was not strong support for the hypothesis that verbal learners and visual learners should be given different kinds of multimedia instruction," the authors concluded.

But perhaps this is just a few fringe studies? Perhaps there is still some debate on this within academia? Not so, says the American Psychological Association. "Many people, including educators, believe learning styles are set at birth and predict both academic and career success even though there is no scientific evidence to support this common myth," the APA wrote in a 2019 [press release](#) titled "Belief in Learning Styles Myth May Be Detrimental." The release goes on to say that "numerous studies have debunked the concept of learning styles," and that there is a "lack of scientific evidence supporting them."

This lack of evidence stands in stark contrast to popular opinion. Indeed, [surveys show](#) that 80-95 percent of people in the U.S. and other industrialized countries believe in learning styles.

Having said all that, it's important to be clear about what exactly researchers are criticizing when they talk about the myth of learning styles. They aren't saying there are no differences between students, or that tailored teaching approaches can never be helpful. There are plenty of individual differences between students, such as talent, background knowledge, and interest in the field, and

researchers agree that teaching with these differences in mind can have a positive impact.

There is also evidence that using multiple teaching approaches together (such as words and pictures) tends to improve learning across the board, a phenomenon known as [the multimedia effect](#). Again, researchers don't take issue with this. What they dispute is the idea that each student has a particular learning style, and that teaching to a student's preferred learning style will improve their educational outcomes.

## Questioning the Unquestionable

For many people, the idea that learning styles don't have scientific support is likely a bit of a shock. How could we be so wrong about something so fundamental? And how could so many people believe this if it wasn't true? These are good questions, and they're worth exploring. But a more unsettling question also comes to mind.

*If we could be wrong about this, what else might we be getting wrong about education?*

What if there are other things we're doing in the school system that are also seriously flawed, even though we don't realize it? What if there are other widely-believed assumptions that would also prove untrue upon closer inspection? We fall so easily into habits and routines that we become slaves to the status quo. Is it really a stretch, then, to suggest that we might have missed something else as well? Is it a stretch to wonder whether we're even getting this whole education thing right?

What if there are better ways to learn than typical schooling, ways we haven't even thought of? What if we've been duped into thinking that what we have now is the best possible approach,

but really the only reason we think that is because it's all most of us have ever known? What if most of the stuff we think is "common knowledge" about education is actually straight-up wrong? These are questions worth seriously considering.

We're told that sitting in a classroom six hours a day is what kids need. But is it really? We're told that everyone should learn the same thing at the same age, but is that really best? We're told that everyone needs at least 12 years of formal schooling, and that this schooling should take place between the ages of six and 18, but is that really true? Once you start questioning the fundamental tenets of schooling we all take for granted, you realize there's a lot we might be getting wrong.

Fortunately, we live in the 21st century, with technology and insights that previous generations simply didn't have. As such, now is a better time than ever to go back to the drawing board and question the fundamental assumptions that form the bedrock of the education system as we know it.

Change is hard, of course. When we start asking questions that no one has asked for decades, it can be uncomfortable. But in the end, not changing is harder. When we allow myths about education to fester, like the myth of learning styles, we only do a disservice to the next generation. So rather than seeking out validation for our pre-existing views, let's be courageous and have an open mind about these things. Let's put our theories about education to the test and see whether they stand up to scrutiny.

The education system has been stagnant for far too long, and the persistence of bad ideas like the learning styles theory is a testament to this fact. So rather than sticking with the status quo, perhaps it's time to put our old education assumptions aside and seek out a better approach.

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