Learning Styles—A once hot debate redshifts

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What is the best way for teachers to teach so students will really learn? That's an age-old question.

Since the 1970s, one theory that has been popular among schoolteachers and pervasive in education research literature in the United Kingdom and the United States is the idea of "Learning Styles," the notion that people can be categorized into one or more 'styles' of learning (e.g., Visual, Auditory, Converger) and that teachers can and should tailor their curriculum to suit individual students. The idea is that students will learn more if they are exposed to material through approaches that specifically match their Learning Style.

But in recent years, many academicians have criticized Learning Styles saying there is no evidence it improves student understanding.

Now comes a newly published study of 114 academics in higher education in the United Kingdom, led by education researchers Philip M. Newton, Ph.D., and Mahallad Miah, both of the Swansea University Medical School in Swansea, UK. Their study "Evidence-Based Higher Education - Is the Learning Styles 'Myth' Important?" was published March 27, 2017, in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

Their findings are very interesting. Newton and Miah found while 58% of the academics surveyed believe Learning Styles to be beneficial - only 33% actually used the pedagogical tool.

In other words, there is something about the idea of individualized

education that appeals, but actually administering a Learning Styles questionnaire to students and then tailoring the class curriculum to suit individual students' personal learning styles is only done by a handful of faculty.

"There is a mismatch between the empirical evidence and the belief in Learning Styles," said Newton. "Among those who participated in our study far more reported using a number of techniques that are demonstrably evidence-based."

These techniques include: assigning formative assessments (i.e., practice tests), peer teaching (i.e., having students teach each other), working problems and examples aloud, and microteaching (i.e., taking video footage of teachers in training so they can reflect on and adjust how they explain material and interact with students).

Furthermore, 90% of the faculty surveyed said that Learning Styles as an approach is fundamentally flawed.

"Learning Styles does not account for the complexity of 'understanding,'" said Newton. "It is not possible to teach complex concepts such as mathematics or languages by presenting these subjects in only one style. This would be like trying to teach medical students to recognize different heart sounds using visual methods, or teaching them how to recognize different skin rashes using auditory methods."

Newton and Miah say those faculty who use Learning Styles may in fact represent certain disciplines or subject areas and that to truly evaluate the usefulness of this teaching method would require demographic studies of faculty. But that may not be worth the investment, they say.

Part of the issue seems to lie in the fact that many respondents embrace a "looser definition" of Learning Styles, preferring to think of it as an

overarching theme or general trend rather than a pedagogical tool. In other words: they operate from the standpoint that individual students have different 'styles of learning'—lowercase—but don't formally change their teaching techniques. This philosophical leaning may also explain why some dedicated faculty continue to 'believe in' Learning Styles even when presented with the evidence that it doesn't work.

It appears Learning Styles has become more a point of awareness or point of view rather than a teaching tool. Thus, say Newton and Miah, rather than debunking Learning Styles—capital letters—a far better focus for education research would be to promote those evidence-based techniques that survey participants indicated they actually use and that are demonstrably effective.

More information: Philip M. Newton et al, Evidence-Based Higher Education – Is the Learning Styles 'Myth' Important?, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00444

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