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One Of The Most Common Theories Of Effective Education May Be A Myth



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Most people believe they have a "best" way of learning, whether that's through pictures, text, hearing, or something else.

However, as science writer [Christian Jarrett](#) recently explained in [Wired](#), there is no proof that a student — or, anyone — understands information more effectively when teachers tailor material to their preferred method of learning.



Vancouver Film School/Flickr

Various tests purport to classify people by learning style. However, these tests aren't academic in nature, according to University of California, San Diego psychology professor [Hal Pashler](#).

Many of these tests ask people how they like to process information or their preferred thinking style — such as right-brained vs. left-brained or visual vs. auditory.

"It's a lot of self characterizations about preferences," Pashler told Business Insider.

These tests may be reliable in terms of categorizing how people *like* to learn, Pashler said, "but that doesn't mean that they're valid measures of anything people should care

about."

The question then becomes whether classifying people allows someone to predict the best way to teach them.

A few years ago, Pashler — along with several other academics knowledgeable on the topic — conducted a review [to see if studies on learning styles supported the claims of tailored learning advocates](#). Very simply, they found that the evidence did not exist.

As Pashler and the other academics write:

Our search of the learning-styles literature has revealed only a few fragmentary and unconvincing pieces of evidence that meet this standard, and we therefore conclude that the literature fails to provide adequate support for applying learning-style assessments in school settings ...

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. If classification of students' learning styles has practical utility, it remains to be demonstrated.

While there might not be a best learning style for each person, there does seem to be a best way to present different types of information.

"For most kinds of material there is an overwhelming better way to teach it," Pashler said.

As Jarrett writes, "although each of us is unique, usually the most effective way for us to learn is based not on our individual preferences but on the nature of the material we're being taught — just try learning French grammar pictorially, or learning geometry purely verbally."

Here's another example that Pashler told BI. If you're learning how to use a bicycle pump there's no study that says you'll learn better with just words and no diagrams.

"For scientific concepts, you want to have visual support," Pashler said. "The material will often require it."

Pashler said that teachers he speaks to are usually surprised to learn about the lack of evidence behind differentiated learning, as they're usually taught these methods in education school. However, even though they're told that their future students will have different learning styles, it may not translate into actual classroom activities.

According to Pashler, "As far as I can tell, the typical teacher doesn't use it, and feels guilty about not using it. Most schools, they like to say that we should 'differentiate instruction,' but they're not actually doing it."

It may not be such a bad thing, though, that these techniques have not made it into classrooms.

"What we're telling teachers is just relax, and don't worry about it," Pashler said. "Just worry about the best way to present your material."

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