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## Willingham: No evidence exists for learning style theories

My guest today is University of Virginia cognitive scientist [Daniel Willingham](#), author of "[Why Don't Students Like School?](#)"

By [Daniel Willingham](#)  
This month another article was published reviewing the scientific literature on learning styles. It appeared in a journal called [Psychological Science in the Public Interest](#), published by the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

This journal has an interesting premise. The editor recruits three or four top researchers to review the scientific literature on a complex topic of public import. The researchers must be knowledgeable, but not directly involved in prior research on the topic, so that they will be impartial.

The straightforward conclusion matched the one that [I have drawn in the past](#)—there is not evidence supporting any of the many learning style theories that have been proposed.

As [my previous posting](#) on this subject did, blog postings about this article attracted comments that were sometimes highly negative, and which I think constitute a good argument for the need for greater emphasis on critical thinking skills in the blogosphere.

Here are four common complaints, along with my response.

(1) Scientists are always changing their minds about everything. Just wait a few years, and they will say that learning styles do exist. Unlikely. Mainstream scientists have proposed and tested learning styles theories but there has never been a body of data that they thought reflected learning styles.

(2) No one has proven that learning styles don't exist. We just don't have data yet showing that they do. Of course. One can never prove a negative. Learning styles might exist. So might the Loch Ness monster and the Yeti.

For a researcher, one has to wonder whether it's worth the expense to keep looking for something that no one can find. For a teacher, you have to ask whether "it's not proven that it doesn't exist" is good enough to bring a practice into a classroom.

Imagine your doctor prescribing a patient medicine, and when you ask about its effectiveness your doctor shrugs and says, "No one has proven that it doesn't work."

(3) I know that there are learning styles. [Insert story here about oneself, one's child, one's students, etc.] It's so obvious! There is a reason that people use the scientific method to address complex questions: It's hard to keep track of all of the variables that might be involved, or even to keep track of all the outcomes. You have to be systematic about it. That's basically what the scientific method forces you to do.

Is that really necessary? Shouldn't it be obvious whether or not people have learning styles? For a couple thousand years it wasn't obvious to physicians that bloodletting didn't work. When there are lots of factors

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contributing to outcomes, you really need to do research.

(4) Learning styles exist, but scientists can't find evidence for them because they are too rigid about it.

It's not that every child has one style that applies to every task. Everyone uses combinations of styles, and figuring out a child's style and how it relates to their work is more of an art than a science. Scientific theories do need to be specific enough that they can generate predictions.

If you can't write down on a piece of paper. "Under conditions X with person Y, Z ought to happen," it's not a scientific theory.

That's not a problem—not every practice in a classroom needs to be based on a scientific theory--but we might as well be plain about what is scientifically supported and what is not.

The idea that we have in hand a learning styles theory that can be used to improve instruction is remarkably well ingrained. This should raise serious questions about teacher training.

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By Valerie Strauss | December 28, 2009; 11:22 AM ET

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#### Comments

The other point here is that even if researchers were to conclude that students favored certain learning styles, it's by no means clear that teachers could adapt individualized plans for all their students or that they would want to.

Posted by: [patrickmattimore1](#) | December 28, 2009 5:51 PM | [Report abuse](#)

If the research shows that learning styles is a load of crock, then I will accept that. However, my classroom is a lot more fun for all involved when I present material in a variety of ways. I teach elementary general music, and for any given concept I have a range of activities that include singing, dancing, moving, games, listening, playing instruments, and writing. My students are more engaged, and they have plenty of different chances to master the same concept. So while there might not be different learning styles, I see no reason to stop teaching as if there were. For my students and me, it works.

Posted by: [kacd](#) | December 28, 2009 7:36 PM | [Report abuse](#)

There may not be scientific evidence to prove that "Learning Styles" exist. However, treating all students as though they learn in identical ways was so ineffective that it HAD to stop. We no longer simply pass identical packets to all students. Nor do we regurgitate the same lectures and experiments year after year.

The theory of "Learning Styles" at least taught us to treat all students as unique individuals, rather than as identical automatons. By differentiating educational inputs we have been able to stir an interest in learning which may not be scientific, but is inherently human and ought to be one of our chief goals in education.

Posted by: [mdennis74](#) | December 28, 2009 10:54 PM | [Report abuse](#)

@patrickmattimore1: absolutely, I think "what to do about it" is the second question, and is the one that teachers must answer. "Is it true?" is the first

question and is the one that researchers must answer.  
@kacd: absolutely, no argument. If you know something works, why change?  
@mdennis74: I don't think learning styles theories deserve credit for that insight. Look at any textbook about children written for future teachers from the 1930's onward. . .virtually all of them describe children as different from one another, and as benefiting from individualized instruction. I think learning styles theories were more a "reaction" to people's sense that children are different, and are an attempt to characterize those differences.

Posted by: [DanieITWillingham](#) | December 29, 2009 9:57 AM | [Report abuse](#)

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Do you think that what we teachers see in the classroom as "learning styles" may actually be evidence that students are more practiced in one "intelligence" over another and therefore favor that mode of learning? If that is the case, it seems as if instruction should not only be set up to help students learn in their particular preference, but also help them practice the other intelligences for their own benefit.

Posted by: [tkraz](#) | December 29, 2009 10:24 AM | [Report abuse](#)

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My mother used to complain, "In one ear and out the other--you never listen!" She and I finally discovered that I have an excellent eidetic memory--I was school spelling bee champion simply because I pictured the words in my mind and read the letters off. I can tell you where on a newspaper's page I saw an article, but I can't remember if I heard an item on the evening news or the radio or which channel. (Of course, there isn't much difference, sometimes!) I can make a shopping list, forget the list, and still remember everything that's on it, but if you ask me as I leave the house to stop in the drugstore across the street and buy you something, I'll probably never think of it again. Many times, forgetting what I went to a room to get, I would jog my memory by going back to where I was when I thought of it and looking at what I was doing then.

Different learning style? I don't know--but I do know that I learn much more quickly from written material than from a lecture. My school assumed reading was a sign of intelligence, but my father reads awkwardly and prefers listening to the radio to reading the paper, so I had an undeserved reputation as brilliant in school but an equally undeserved reputation with my father as disorganized. It took me years to figure out which I was.

Posted by: [opinionatedreader](#) | December 29, 2009 12:00 PM | [Report abuse](#)

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tkraz: It could be. . . I think it depend on how you characterize intelligence. And there's the rub. Although most people agree that different people are good at different things, how to characterize abilities has not been easy. As to what to do about it: do you appeal to and practice what kids are good at and interested in, or do you figure that those abilities will take care of themselves, and we should work on the things that kids find difficult. That's a matter of values, I think, to which science doesn't speak.

Posted by: [DanieITWillingham](#) | December 29, 2009 3:26 PM | [Report abuse](#)

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You seem to agree that teaching with sensitivity to learning styles is a good thing, and that yes, it just might be something like those "different intelligences?" Depending?  
You suggest that science "doesn't speak" to the question of how our strengths and weaknesses (whatever terminology you use to describe them). Is that the issue you're dancing around? Is the "bunk" part the idea that we shouldn't develop all of our... whatever you want to call them but should only teach to the strengths?

Posted by: [geonz](#) | December 30, 2009 12:22 PM | [Report abuse](#)

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