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ACADEMIC

How 'learning styles' undermine education

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This week is 'Brain Awareness Week', an event aimed at dispelling so-called neuromyths. A letter published in the *Guardian* on the eve of Brain Awareness Week, signed by 30 neuroscientists, psychologists and educationalists, criticised what the signatories claim is one of the biggest neuromyths – that children have distinct 'learning styles'. The letter argues that there is 'no evidence, or very weak evidence' to back up this idea. The message is clear: 'Teachers must ditch... learning styles.'

Learning styles refer to the different ways in which people learn, or so the theory goes. There are 'abstract learners', 'concrete learners', 'active learners' and 'kinaesthetic learners' (those who learn through physical activity). The terminology varies across the more than 70 tests and evaluations used to find out what type of learner you are.

One of the letter's signatories is Frank Coffield, who, back in 2004, led [two reports on learning styles](#). The reports showed that the concept of learning styles is not based on valid or reliable research and could create rigid ideas about how individuals learn. Coffield and his colleagues were right to be concerned. At the same time that those reports were published, the Merseyside borough of Knowsley's local education authority tested its primary pupils and discovered a majority of them were 'kinaesthetic learners'. It subsequently rebuilt all its secondary schools as temples of 'kinaesthetic learning', based on physical activity. The pupils dubbed the schools '[wacky warehouses](#)' and the new designs caused behavioural chaos, ruining the education of hundreds of children.

Even though Coffield's reports proved learning styles to be ineffectual, there seems to be a willing blindness to the truth. A quick Google search shows that the use of learning styles is being adopted almost everywhere. It is particularly popular in the 'inclusion' and 'dyslexia' industries, where learning styles are promoted with almost religious passion. As a result, large numbers of students come to university convinced that they have one dominant learning style. One of my colleagues, who discussed Coffield's reports with her students, was met with the response: 'I don't care what the research says. I believe in learning styles.'

How you learn is determined primarily by the subject you are studying and its content. When I was a further-education teacher-trainer, I looked at learning styles to make a point about subjects. My classes were a mixture of teachers of philosophy, psychology, art, building and other subjects. And guess what? The philosophers came out as 'abstract learners', the artists as 'kinaesthetic learners' and the builders as 'concrete learners'. The way individuals learn is determined by the subject matter.

The continuing obsession with learning styles is denying children access to a broad range of subject learning. This reliance on gimmicks and theories is a sign that subject-based education has been abandoned. Those who push for the use of learning styles in the classroom clearly have a limited view of children's potential. Debunking learning styles requires more than challenging 'neuromyths', it requires a proper defence of subject-based education for all children.

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