Rico Eberle · LEARNING NUGGETS

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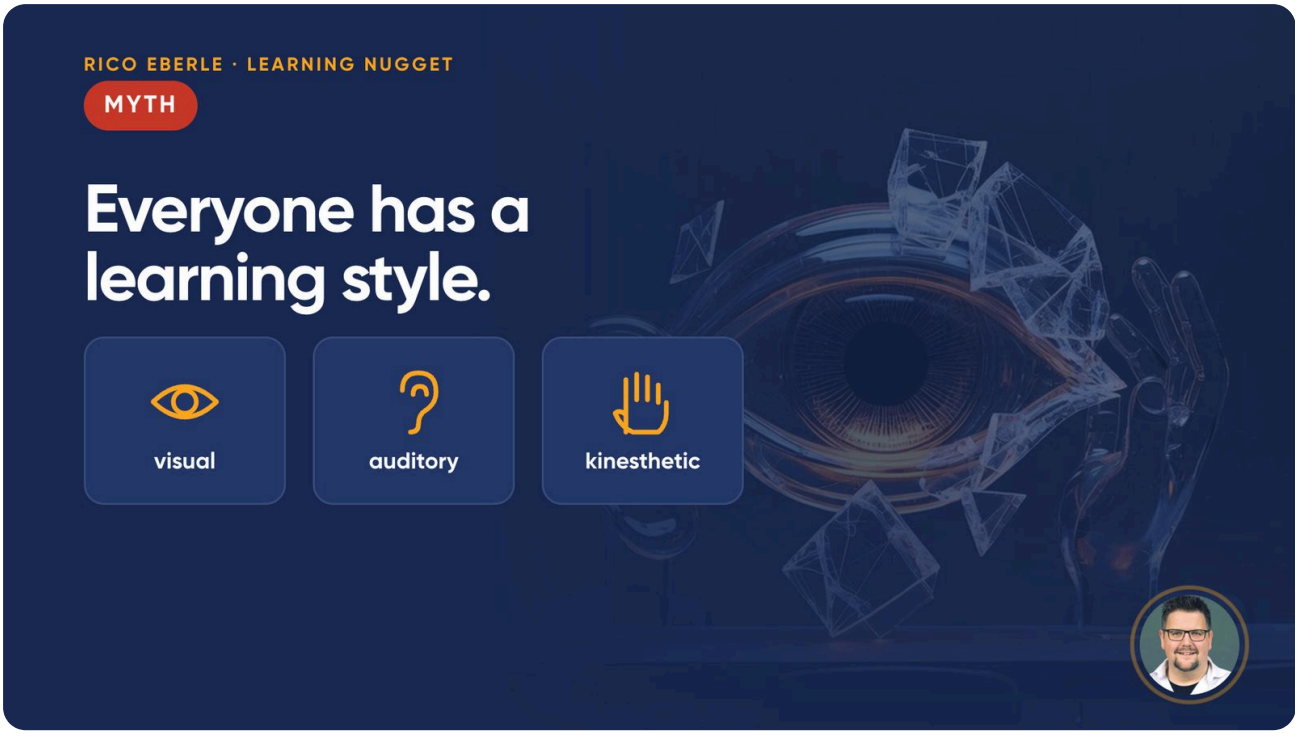
Learning styles are a myth. Here's what works.

There is no solid evidence for learning styles, yet nine in ten educators believe in them; matching the format to the content works better.

By Rico Eberle, e-learning expert for continuing education and municipal councillor in Dübendorf



Video for this post

This learning nugget is also available as a video with transcript (1:09 min). Scan the QR code or open the link:

ricoeberle.ch/en/blog/learning-styles-are-a-myth/

Around 89 percent of educators believe in learning styles. Visual, auditory or kinaesthetic, and if you're taught in your style, you learn better. The idea is intuitive and well meant. It just isn't supported by evidence.

Proper tests didn't find the effect

In 2008, Harold Pashler, Mark McDaniel, Doug Rohrer and Robert Bjork reviewed the evidence for the Association for Psychological Science. Their question: do people learn better when teaching matches their preferred learning style?

Testing this properly requires a specific design. Learners with different styles are randomly assigned to different teaching methods. Then everyone takes the same test.

The researchers found only a few such studies. Those studies didn't show the expected effect, and several flatly contradicted it. Their conclusion: there is no adequate evidence for tailoring teaching to learning styles.

A more recent meta-analysis from 2024 with 21 studies finds a small benefit overall. But only about a quarter of the measures show the pattern the learning styles idea requires, and study quality is low. The authors consider the benefit too small and too infrequent to justify widespread use. The effort spent on learning style tests and tailored materials is out of proportion to any possible benefit.

Why the myth holds

In 2020, Philip Newton and Atharva Salvi analysed 37 studies covering more than 15,000 teachers and trainers in 18 countries. Weighted, around 89 percent said they believe in matching instruction to learning styles, roughly nine out of ten.

No evidence, yet widespread

89 % of teachers and trainers believe in teaching to learning styles

Proper tests did not find the effect, some found the opposite (Pashler et al., 2008).

The idea has a grain of truth. We all have preferences. Some people prefer reading, others prefer listening. But a preference doesn't mean we learn better that way. Rogowsky and colleagues tested exactly this in 2015: adults who described themselves as readers or listeners did not learn better with their matching format.

Preference ≠ learning better

The format matches the content, not the person

A process needs a diagram, pronunciation needs sound, a hands-on skill needs practice. That choice is the same for every participant.

What works instead

Process	Pronunciation	Hands-on skill
diagram	sound	practice

For everyone, there is also active recall and spaced repetition. Both are among the best-supported learning techniques there are. More on this in the post on the forgetting curve.

Drop the learning style test

For trainers, that means: drop the learning style tests and use the time for methods that fit the material.

At the start of a course, a short quiz on prior knowledge does more. It tells you more about the group than any typology, and it doubles as the first recall exercise.

When planning materials, the question is then no longer “What do participants like?” but “What does this content need?”

Frequently asked questions

Are learning styles real?

There is no adequate evidence that people learn better when teaching matches their learning style. That was the conclusion of Pashler and colleagues after reviewing the evidence in 2008. We all have preferences, but a preference doesn't mean we learn better that way.

How many teachers believe in learning styles?

In 2020, Newton and Salvi analysed 37 studies covering more than 15,000 teachers and trainers in 18 countries. Weighted, around 89 percent said they believe in matching instruction to learning styles, roughly nine out of ten.

What works better than teaching to learning styles?

Match the format to the content, not the person: a process needs a diagram, pronunciation needs sound, a hands-on skill needs practice. For everyone, active recall and spaced repetition help.

Sources

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2. Newton & Salvi (2020): How Common Is Belief in the Learning Styles Neuromyth?
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ABOUT ME

Rico Eberle

I work in e-learning, hold a degree in business economics (FH) and sit on the municipal council of Dübendorf, Switzerland. I also chair the foundation board of WBK Dübendorf, a continuing education foundation. I make the learning nuggets on my own: topic, research, text and video. Questions and disagreement are welcome.

Contact: ricoeberle.ch · **LinkedIn:** linkedin.com/in/rico-eberle

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