

# THE TRUTH ABOUT TEACHING TO LEARNING STYLES, AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD?

## Executive Summary

Belief in the effectiveness of matching instructional approaches to “learning styles” persists despite a preponderance of evidence showing no relationship between teaching to learning styles, and learning outcomes. Well, that is not entirely accurate: Some studies have shown a negative effect, in which attempts to cater to some defined learning style actually harm learning. In addition to offering ideas for why many find the idea of learning styles so appealing, this report reviews the research literature on learning styles, offering recaps of several often-cited studies. In the aggregate, researchers have recommended that time and energy would be better spent matching instructional approach to content and type of material being taught rather than to any perceived individual preference or “style.” This report concludes with recommendations for alternative approaches.

## What Is at Issue?

In many conversations, the idea of whether learning styles exist gets conflated with the usefulness of tailoring instruction to those styles. It is not the intent of this report to explore the validity of styles themselves: Most researchers agree that everyone has preferences in how they want information presented and how they study. Coffield, Moseley, Hall, and Ecclestone (2004) discovered 71 different models for “learning styles,” quite a few of them tied to a commercial instrument, workshop, or other product. In most cases, identification of one’s style is self-selected; even when based on instrumentation, the questions tend toward “I prefer...” or “I learn best by...” It’s no secret to those in the industry, though, that many learners don’t know how they learn (Knoll, Otani, Skeel, and Van Horn, 2017; Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, and Bjork, 2009).

So: This literature review does not seek to explore whether “learning styles” exist. Researchers largely agree that everyone is different, everyone has preferences, and everyone has likes and dislikes (Cuevas, 2015; Pashler et al., 2009; Riener and Willingham, 2010). This report focuses on exploring the empirical research asking the question: Does tailoring instruction to individual “learning styles” have an effect on learning outcomes?

To download the full report, click here: <http://bit.ly/research-styles>