LEARNING S
FACT OR

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I like to read. When presented with an opportunity to acquire knowledge about something new, my first choice will pretty well always be to learn by reading rather than, say, listening to a podcast or watching a video. So I guess you could say I'm a verbal learner, right?

Well … maybe not.

The concept of learning styles was initially borrowed from Howard Gardner's theory of 'multiple intelligences' introduced in the early 1980s, suggesting that individuals prefer to learn in certain ways and that they learn better when presented with information in a way that matches those specific preferences.

While it's a trend that first gained traction with educators, it quickly entered the lexicon of corporate and institutional training programs as well. And, once that learning styles ball got rolling, there was no slowing it down. In fact, it's now been claimed that there are more than 70 separate and distinct styles of learning!

The belief is so widespread, especially in the education field, that a 2012 survey indicated that 93-97% of teachers in the UK, Netherlands, Greece, Turkey, and China believed in the value of matching students to individualized learning methods. The Wellcome Trust, a biomedical charity based in London and one of the largest providers of non-governmental funding for scientific research in the world, made the same discovery in their own 2013 study. When it surveyed both parents and teachers about various learning strategies and asked whether they thought the techniques were based on scientific principles, over 75% of them said they believed that learning style approaches were supported by research.

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STYLES: FICTION?

methods, perhaps it's not surprising that parents and educators (and professional trainers, as well) are looking to neuroscience to enhance the way they teach, train and coach. And because so much information about learning styles has been quite heavily promoted for many years now, it's certainly understandable that the idea has influenced their current thinking in a big way. But here's the thing …

IT'S A MYTH. A NEUROMYTH, IF YOU WILL.

Notably, Dr. Gardner wrote just last year in the Washington Post that "one unanticipated consequence has driven me to distraction – and that's the tendency of many people … to credit me with the notion of 'learning styles' or to collapse 'multiple intelligences' with 'learning styles.' It's high time to relieve my pain and to set the record straight."

Perhaps Dr. William R. Klemm was trying to do just that when he wrote recently in *Fables and Facts in Educational Neuroscience* that "some neuroscientists and educators have believed that children have differing learning styles and that teachers need to adjust teaching to accommodate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. But controlled laboratory studies fail to confirm such biological differences among children." And there's plenty of related research suggesting there has never been any scientific evidence whatsoever that matching instruction methods to a particular style improves the learning process – in young people or in adults. For instance, Daniel Willingham, a University of Virginia psychology professor who has studied the learning styles phenomenon for well over two decades, says that "no evidence suggests that catering to those preferences will lead to better learning."

What *is* true, of course, is that many of us prefer to learn in certain ways. But just because I like to read (and even consider myself pretty good at it) doesn't mean it's the only way I can grasp new information. Some research even proposes that we may even learn *better* by doing things a bit outside our comfort zones, because that compels us to focus more intently on the material at hand.

And then there's this: The more senses we use, the better our brains function. So if we resolve to really stretch our brains and combine two or more different activities to learn something new. … Well, that would be just plain neurosensible, wouldn't it?

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