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**Subject:** Teaching Toolbox: The "Learning Styles" Myth  
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## Teaching Toolbox: The “Learning Styles” Myth by Emily O. Gravett

[Eric Stauffer](#), the new Director of Instruction and Instructional Design in Innovation Services, recently recommended a book to me entitled [Urban Myths about Learning and Education \(De Bruyckere, Kirschner, and Hulshof, 2015\)](#)—a fun look at many of the pernicious misconceptions in higher education. The first myth debunked is that of learning styles. Indeed, [Riener and Willingham, in “The Myth of Learning Styles” \(2010\)](#), are unequivocal: “There is no credible evidence that learning styles exist” (33). Other scholars, like [Kirschner \(2017\)](#), have pled, “Stop propagating the learning styles myth”!

According to Riener and Willingham, the myth under dispute is this: that “different students have different modes of learning, and their learning could be improved by matching one’s teaching with that preferred learning mode.... The most popular current conception of learning styles equates style with the preferred bodily sense through which one receives information, whether it be visual, auditory, or kinesthetic” (33). This is frequently called the “meshing hypothesis.” For instance, “students might be divided into visual learners and verbal learners (on the basis of a learning style test given to each student) and then provided with instruction that emphasizes pictures or words, respectively” ([Rohrer & Pashler, 2012, 34](#)).

In a recent investigation, however, [Pashler et al. \(2009\)](#) surveyed a large body of literature to discover what, if any, empirical evidence existed to support learning styles and instruction to accommodate them. While they did discover ample evidence that learners have *preferences* about how information should be presented to them, they found no published studies that supported the conclusion that *instruction* is best provided in a format matching the preferences of the learners. Pashler et al. concluded that “there is no adequate evidence base to justify incorporating learning-styles assessments into general education practices” (105).

So does this mean that learning styles should have no consideration in our teaching? [Felder \(2010\)](#) thinks not. He suggests that “the point is not to match teaching style to learning style but rather to achieve balance, making sure that each style preference is addressed to a reasonable extent during instruction.” (3). Indeed, [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) is premised upon such assumptions—that instructors “can plan for expected variability across learners and provide curriculum that has corresponding flexibility” ([Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, 2014, 10](#)). That might mean, for instance, giving students access to important content not only through assigned readings, but also through video clips, or offering students the option of demonstrating their learning through a podcast, rather than just a paper. Liz Thompson (in LET) has offered workshops in the past on “Accessible Instructional Design for Diverse Learners” and would be happy to speak further with anyone about UDL. She can be reached at [thomp3ea@jmu.edu](mailto:thomp3ea@jmu.edu). And, as always, you can request a [CFI teaching consultation](#) to learn more about applying UDL principles in your courses.

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