



The Learning Styles Myth

George Fell discusses the learning styles 'vampire'...

This season's coaching corner might come across as a bit of a rant. A few recent experiences on coaching courses have shown me that the Learning Styles vampire refuses to die. Hopefully this article provides another hefty stake.

What are Learning Styles?

Learning Styles are a set of theories that claim that different people will have different and relatively fixed preferences about how they like to learn. If a coach can identify and work to their learner's preferences then they should learn faster and better.

There are loads of these theories out there. As examples Dunn and Dunn talk about learners preferring to receive information in Visual, Audio and Kinaesthetic ways. Honey and Mumford suggest that some people prefer to jump right in (sometimes literally!) and learn through activity whilst others need space and time to think and process; that some people will want to understand all the intricacies of a move, whilst others will simply want to know what it's for and that it works.

So that all sounds really sensible doesn't it?

Yes it does! I'm sure we've all had experiences as coaches where a paddler just hasn't been getting it, and then we change something and it all works. I can remember years ago, spending ages trying to teach a young instructor to do a hanging draw in a general purpose kayak. I'd shown them from loads of different viewpoints, I'd explained it in as many ways as I knew how and it still didn't click.

Eventually I waded into the water, physically put them in the position they needed to be in, said "don't move" and gave the back of the boat a good shove. The boat moved sideways whilst gliding forwards, they put their head over to one side, did their thinking face and then said "Oh! Like that!", and the proceeded to do a beautiful hanging draw, and then another one on the other side.

At this point, Dunn and Dunn would say "That's easy. That paddler must be a kinaesthetic learner. Having eliminated all the other options, you eventually blundered on a kinaesthetic way of teaching the move, which worked for them because they're a kinaesthetic learner".

As coaches (indeed as people) we'll all tend to select and remember the events that fit in with our own beliefs. If we believe that some people prefer to learn kinaesthetically, we'll remember our hanging draw experience but conveniently forget all the other times that we coached the same paddler and words or pictures worked.

So is it a thing?

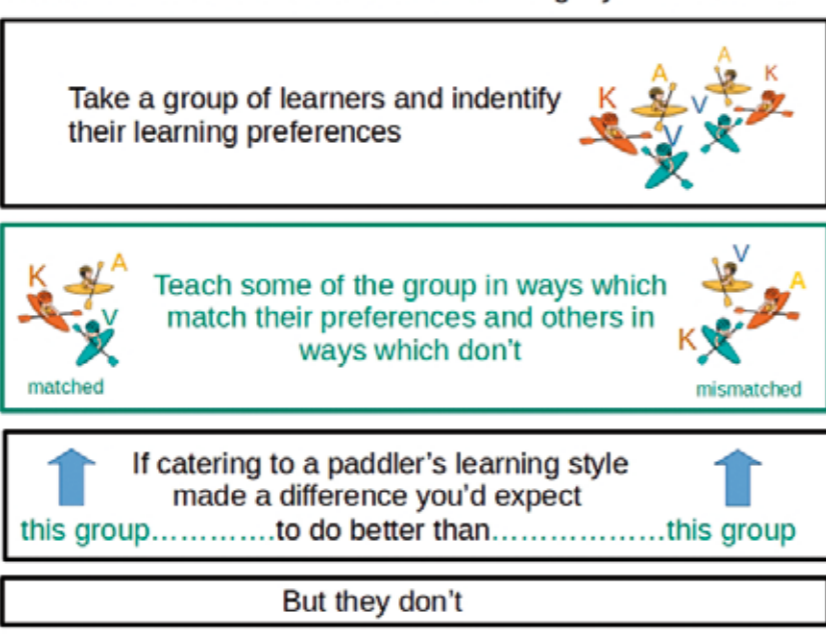
Short answer: no. Remember, learning styles theories don't just say that different people are different (which is clearly true), but also that people have relatively fixed preferences, and that if we match our coaching to their preferences they'll learn more effectively.

Researchers have done experiments where they try to determine people's learning preferences and then for some people match the teaching to their preferences and intentionally mismatch it for others (e.g. delivering in audio to a supposedly visual learner).

If learning styles worked, you'd expect the group of learners where the delivery and their preferences match, to do better than the group where they don't. In fact where this has been done, there's no significant difference in outcome between the two groups. But often there is a difference in outcome between the different methods of delivery. In other words it's less to do with matching your delivery to the learner and more to do with matching your delivery to the task.

If you think about it, that makes sense: if you wanted to explain what a skylark sounds like, you'd probably do some whistling (or play an mp3 if you're a fully paid up member of the 21st century); if you wanted to explain what shape the Isle of Skye is, you'd most likely draw it.

How researchers have shown that learning styles don't work



“... it's less to do with matching your delivery to the learner and more to do with matching your delivery to the task.”

Hold on! Don't we still talk about VAK, active versus thinking, working together versus working in teams on coaching courses?

Yes we do, and here's the subtle bit. Paddlers are all different. The thing that works for one paddler, won't work for another. The thing that worked for them today won't work for them tomorrow. Paddlers are strange and complicated beasts!

As coaches it is really important that we can adapt our delivery to work for the person in front of us, responding to the myriad different cues they give us – or even asking them “is this working!?”

Choosing whether to deliver some information in a visual, auditory or kinaesthetic way is one of the many important coaching decisions that we make; but we make it based on what feels

right for that person, in that environment, doing that task at that time. Not because we've labelled them as always that particular type of learner.

All the different learning style theories can stimulate coaches to come up with different ways to coach (i.e. how would I deliver this thing in a visual/audio/kinaesthetic or active/theoretical or social/individual way). If what we're doing doesn't seem to be working, then having lots of ways to coach gives us options to change what we're doing. But that's not the same as labelling a paddler as a particular sort of learner and always treating them that way.

Does it really matter?

If our learners are motivated and getting better, then perhaps not. But then my

brain isn't that big. Why waste my limited capacity worrying about learning styles, which probably won't make a much of a difference, when I could be thinking about what the technical content of the next task should be, how difficult should I make it, where will the feedback will come from, how should we structure the sequence of activities, all of which might well prove more important.

Ten years ago we were earnestly teaching all about learning styles on coaching courses. As evidence has been gathered that they're not really a thing, we've stopped talking about them in the same way. That has to be positive, but the myth lives on. I wonder which things we're teaching on coaching courses now, that we'll not be teaching in ten years time?

Thanks for reading and happy paddling.

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