

# RECONSIDERING LEARNING STYLES: HOW MUCH DO THEY MATTER?

By Karin Kirk

**L**isten in on any training clinic or exam, and you are likely to hear about learning styles. We use demos for visual learners, explain things to auditory learners, and say “follow me!” to kinesthetic learners. It’s become common practice

to try to match our instructional style to our students’ preferred ways to learn.

I have news for you. There is little to no evidence that this actually works.

But wait, you may be thinking, it feels like this works! I’ve seen it work! I *know* it works. That’s what I thought, too. I wasn’t keen on giving up the idea of tailoring my teaching to individual learning styles, because it seems like a good one. But I’m motivated by evidence. If we spend time and energy on a particular educational practice, then we ought to have data that show its benefit. A review of the education literature to date shows scant evidence of the effectiveness of matching teaching styles to students’ learning styles.

## LITTLE RESEARCH ON LEARNING STYLES IN SPORTS

Surprisingly, the effectiveness of matching learning styles hasn’t really been tested with teaching or coaching sports. The published studies that have tested learning styles have all been classroom based. A 2012 paper that did examine learning styles in sports concluded, “While coaches and instructors commonly adopt learning styles to maximize training outcomes...there has been little or no empirical support for the efficacy of the practice to date.”

The closest tool we have for using learning styles in sports is called VARK for Athletes, which intends to measure the learning styles (visual, auditory, reading, and kinesthetic) of athletes. The problem is this assessment does not focus on how athletes learn their sport. The majority (75%) of the questions on the questionnaire are only tangentially related to sports performance, like selecting music for a playlist or learning how to spell “tendonitis.”

So, despite the frequent conversation about learning styles in sports, we simply don’t

have published examples to show that giving instruction in a student’s particular learning style helps them learn more effectively.

If any readers out there are graduate students or researchers in physical education, this would make an exciting research topic and one that would greatly benefit the sports-instruction community.

But all is not lost. Here’s what we do know.

## PEOPLE LEARN DIFFERENTLY...

There are many different definitions and classifications of learning styles. Perhaps the most familiar to ski and snowboard instruction is VAK (visual, auditory, kinesthetic). The basic idea starts like this:

- Not everybody learns in the same way.
- Some people have preferred ways to learn; for example, some people express

a preference for learning by doing rather than learning by reading.

The above ideas are well grounded in research.

## ... BUT WE DON’T NECESSARILY NEED TO TEACH PEOPLE DIFFERENTLY

It seems logical that teachers should match their instructional style to the preferred learning style of their students. This idea is perfectly sensible, and yet it’s not borne out by education research. Combing through the results of all sorts of experiments yields essentially no evidence that students with a particular learning style learn better when taught in that same mode.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of learning styles, we’d need evidence that shows that the teaching method that works best for one group (say, visual learners) is different from the teaching method that works best for another group (say, kinesthetic learners). In other words, if you were teaching hop turns, you’d separate your class by learning style



Teach people, not styles. Good instruction always begins with getting to know your students and creating an engaging, fun, and productive learning experience.

and then teach each group of students with a method that matches their preferred learning style. At the end of the day, you'd need to see that the visual learners learned best with visual instruction and the kinesthetic learners learned best with kinesthetic instruction.

But that's not what happens. A common outcome in classroom experiments is that the most beneficial teaching style turns out to be the same for *all* students, regardless of their learning style. In the previous example, an analogy would be that both the visual learners and the kinesthetic learners did best when taught hop turns in a visual style. That's actually good news for us. It shows that we don't need to teach different types of students completely differently. For a given topic, there is likely an approach that best fits that subject and that circumstance.

**ANECDOTAL EXPERIENCES MAKE IT HARD TO LET GO OF THIS IDEA**

One study that looked at learning styles of athletes noted, "There is a strong intuitive appeal in the idea that athlete educators

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should pay closer attention to athletes' learning styles..." Note the phrase "intuitive appeal." The idea seems right and feels right, but there is little evidence to support it.

Even so, it's hard to give up on the idea, right? You can probably recall anecdotes where learning styles seemed to make sense. For example, we've all had that one student who was unmoved by all your usual descriptions of how to use flexion to absorb a bump. But it suddenly clicked when another student described it in a different way. Anecdotes like that speak to the variations in how we learn. There are many factors that determine how people learn; that is not in dispute. If anything, we should remain open to all the variations in people's abilities, rather than trying to fit them into a simplified model of learning style.

**LEARNING PREFERENCES MAY NOT MATCH LEARNING APTITUDE**

There's plenty of evidence that people do express a preference for how they receive information. Many quizzes and assessment tools exist to diagnose our learning styles. It's practically irresistible to discover our own "type," and self-inquiry is eternally popular. But one's *preference* may or may not match up with one's actual *aptitude* or ability to learn. In other words, someone may think of themselves as a visual learner, but this doesn't necessarily mean they are particularly good at learning visually.

In fact, one's preferred learning style can change, depending on the situation or topic. So, someone's learning style is neither set in stone nor is it necessarily relevant to how they learn best.



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## TEACH PEOPLE, NOT STYLES

Good instruction begins with getting to know your students and creating an engaging, fun, and productive learning experience. That remains our top priority, regardless of learning styles. Digging in further, we know that students arrive at our lessons with diverse sets of needs, aptitudes, motivations, moods, and prior experiences. You can and should treat each person as an individual. Developing a personal connection with students is always an essential part of teaching. Debunking the learning styles idea does not mean we should treat everybody exactly the same. We still need to search out what makes our students tick, what energizes them, and what types of feedback make the most sense in each situation.

Two big variables – much more relevant than learning styles – can guide you in tailoring your coaching to each student in your lesson.

- What is their prior experience? New learning builds on top of existing

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knowledge and experience. Each person in your group will have a different foundation for you to build upon. Because of this, people will learn at different rates.

- What is their athletic ability? Research in physical education has established that physical abilities such as balance and timing are key factors in developing skilled performance. Again, each student brings his or her own unique set of abilities to the mix.

There are other variables, too, of course. But by and large, the better you are at understanding people, the more successful you'll be in connecting with them and giving them the right instruction in the right circumstance.

## LET THE TOPIC GUIDE THE INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD

Research shows that students of all stripes learn when the instructional style is well matched to the topic. Thankfully, each student does not need to be taught differently. You don't need to teach Samantha and Connor with a visual approach, and then start all over again and give Georgia and Peter a verbal explanation.

The research also shows that a varied approach is often the best recipe. That's great news because every good instructor loves to mix it up and teach different topics with different approaches. Here are some examples of common topics and possible teaching styles.

- Pole timing is all about rhythm.

**Auditory** cues, like counting, can help students integrate pole movements into their existing movements.

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- Picking a line in bumps can be taught **visually**. Help students look for the best places to begin and end each turn.
- The difference between carving and skidding can be subtle visually, but carving feels much different than skidding. Hence, this concept is often taught **kinesthetically**.
- In steep and technical terrain, a useful tactic is to carve less, flatten the edge angle, and emphasize rotational movements through the turn finish. This is a complex topic for advanced riders, and it's probably best explained **verbally**.
- Committing to scary (or scary-looking) terrain is usually not skill-based. It's an **emotional** response. My favorite coaching strategies offer ways to work past self-doubt and to learn to trust oneself to make the right moves at the right times.
- Riding with flow is something that can be taught **experientially** and is easily done by having the student follow your line while you deliberately shape your turns to match the terrain and your student's ability.

### PEOPLE LEARN BY DOING

No matter what type of information you're sharing and how you're presenting it, remember that, in sports, people learn by doing. Offer short bits of information interspersed with lots of practice time. No matter what type of student, and what topic, the very best way to get better at something is to do it! **32°**

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Surprisingly, despite all the emphasis that is placed on coaching people in their preferred learning style, there is no evidence that this actually makes a difference.

### TAKEAWAYS

#### DON'T

- Over-emphasize learning styles. There's no need to try to teach a given topic repeatedly to suit every learning style.
- Take learning styles so literally that it becomes impractical.
- Take a student's self-professed learning style as being set in stone. Someone's preference for learning a certain way may not match his or her actual ability to learn that way.
- Refrain from using the best way to teach a particular topic just because it doesn't align with a student's learning preference.
- Limit your appraisal of a student's learning preferences to just their learning style. There are other – and perhaps more important – factors that reveal how to best teach a given person.

#### DO

- Use a teaching method that is the logical fit for the topic.
- Recognize that each student is an individual.
- Spend time and energy observing your students to find out what approaches work best for them.
- Vary the way you deliver information. Use a mixture of verbal, visual, and kinesthetic cues while also considering motivation and emotional factors.
- Learn different methods of explaining and showing the same thing. The more ways you have to teach a concept, the better you'll be at reaching students.
- Recognize that people learn by building on prior knowledge and experience, and by having successful experiences. Set up your lessons to maximize those opportunities.
- Spend most of the lesson moving and practicing, rather than standing and talking.
- Coach students by letting them try something and then giving individual and specific feedback.