Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Learning styles are a pernicious myth, but learner preferences are a reality, and learning businesses disregard learner preferences at their own risk.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:13] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:15] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:23] The scientific basis for learning styles is slim to none, and yet the idea of learning styles persists. So in this episode, number 383, we want to explore why the myth of learning styles remains popular and what learning businesses can and should do with this fiction.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:42] Learning styles have come up in a couple of recent interviews—I'm thinking of my conversation with Jane Bozarth and yours with Will Thalheimer, Jeff—and so this concept of learning styles is top of mind for us again.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:54] And there have been other interviews further back when we've talked about learning styles and how they're not aligned with effective learning. I'm thinking about my conversations with Megan Sumeracki and Clark Quinn, for example. But then, back to more recent things that have made learning styles top of mind for us, I recently came across a post, an article that talked about them, and this was on a site called Teach.com that's actually hosted by edX, which is one of the biggest, massive open online course providers, and that's owned by 2U, which is one of the biggest commercial learning companies in general right now out there in the university, more academic-type world. And this was an article specifically about learning styles, basically in support of learning styles and teachers tuning in to learning styles to be better teachers.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:47] And, in fact, I'll quote from it because I quoted from it in this LinkedIn post that I did about the article. It says, "By understanding what kind of learner you and/or your

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students are, you can now gain a better perspective on how to implement these learning styles into your lesson plans and study techniques." So this article is basically supporting the idea that learning styles exist and telling teachers that they need to teach to learning styles, which is really what's been disproven. Teaching to learning styles does not make any difference, is not effective, but ends up consuming a lot of resources. I ended up getting so far close to 7,500 views of that post on LinkedIn, which anybody familiar with LinkedIn knows that's quite a few views. Lots of comments, lots of reposts. So it's obviously a hot-button issue, and so we felt like we needed to give some airtime to it.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:43] That's right. So we want to dig into learning styles and their perniciousness. And, as we often do, we're going to define our key term just to make sure that we're all on the same page. We feel like, upfront, we should define what we mean by "learning styles." The idea of learning styles refers to different ways that individuals learn and acquire new information or skills. And so the idea is that people have distinct and preferred ways of processing information. Common learning styles include visual learners, and these are folks who learn through visual aids. Think photos, illustrations, charts, graphs, and diagrams. These folks benefit from seeing information presented visually—or at least that's the idea.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:29] Yes, I hear so many people say that they are visual learners. I think that's the one that tends to get the most airtime. But then there are auditory learners that learn best through listening. That might be our listeners out there for the podcast, and these are people that tend to remember information presented verbally—or at least this is how they think that they learn. Think about lectures, discussions, or, of course, podcasts.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:56] Kinesthetic learners, this is another learning style that gets brought up often, and the idea here is that these kinesthetic learners learn through physical experiences and hands-on activities, and they prefer to engage with the material in an interactive way. So think about experiments and projects that require the learners to do something. One very specific example could be practicing CPR on a mannequin, for example.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:22] So those three are the classical learning styles. But you'll sometimes hear about reading/writing learners who learn via written text, and this is how you get the VARK model (V-A-R-K) that a lot of people might be familiar with. You'll hear about social learners who learn best in groups and collaborative situations or solitary learners who learn best by working independently, often in a quiet setting.

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Celisa Steele: [00:04:50] So that's what we have in mind when we're thinking about learning styles—this idea of visual learners, auditory learners, kinesthetic learners, different kinds of learners, and that they have one way that's really the most effective way for them to learn across the board, in all situations. I think that one reason we continue to hear about learning styles is that, like any good myth, they try to explain something. And I think that learning styles offer a potential answer to why sometimes we learn better than at other times, or why sometimes certain people seem to learn more than others from a specific experience or offering. So, if I learn really well from a lecture, and you don't, then saying, "Hey, I'm an auditory learner," that offers a plausible explanation for that difference in learning outcomes there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:40] Right. And, if I don't learn well, then I can blame the delivery method. It's not my fault that I can't play piano or that I can't recall the dates of major events of World War II. No, it's the fault of how that instruction was designed and delivered.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:56] And then I think another reason that learning styles persist is probably just the difficulty of keeping people up to speed on what's theory and hypothesis, what's initial testing and results, and then evolving theories and their evidence. So I think, again, people probably came up with learning styles to explain some of those differences that we were just talking about there. And, yes, those might be plausible hypotheses, but then you actually test them, and you see how learners actually learn, and you see that there really is no support to these different learning styles leading to better learning outcomes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:35] Yes. And they just haven't held up to that testing. Over time, we found out that what does seem intuitive and plausible in the end isn't really what works. And you can think of analogies out there. Think of what happened with COVID when, way back in the beginning, we were told pretty emphatically at first not to wear a mask. Nobody should be wearing masks. That's not the thing to do with this. And then, of course, I don't know, it was a month later, two months later—I can't remember when it was—a complete about-face because we were getting evidence that, yes, wearing a mask does have some positive impact, so it is something that we should be doing. But, of course, a lot of people heard that original message and were never able to get on board with the change in message after that.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:20] Right. So this happens all the time in science. There's a theory, and then that theory is either supported by testing results, or it is overturned by testing results. I think we have to keep in mind that, if we are truly going to subscribe to following learning science in our learning businesses—which we think we should—then you have to remember that it is a science

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and that you have to keep up with the latest discoveries, the latest findings, and what is actually evidence-based.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:50] And the reality is the evidence just isn't there to support learning styles. A lot of work has been done on this. There's a lot of research that's been reported out on this. Instead, what we see in the real world is that individuals use a variety of strategies to learn, no matter what they may think their learning style is. And the best strategies depend on context, subject matter, and the learner's goals, among other important factors.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:17] Right. I mentioned CPR and a mannequin. That's a place where that kinesthetic learning really makes a ton of sense. If you need to be able to understand how to do compressions, then using that literal, hands-on approach to learning, it fits that subject matter. It fits that context. And so, if the goal of the learner there is to learn how to do CPR, then you're going to want to take that kinesthetic approach, at least for part of the instruction.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:44] And now you may be listening and saying, "Wait a minute here. Wait a minute. I know that I like to be able to watch a video to learn." Or, of course, in this case, "I like to listen to a podcast to learn." Or "I have to have my hands on stuff to learn." And it's true that if you ask people how they like to learn, many, probably even most, will express some preference. And there is evidence of preference.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:16] Sure, I've always hated group projects. So, if I were asked, I'd say, "Yes, I'm a solitary learner. Please do not make me work with anyone else."

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:23] Absolutely, people have their preferences, and we'll come back to that because it is important. But the fact that people have preferences does not mean that those preferences actually align with how they do in fact best learn or support this idea that there are specific learning styles that we need to be teaching to.

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Celisa Steele: [00:10:22] I think we can summarize where we are at this point with learning styles, that falls under the heading of myth; learner preferences, that falls under the heading of reality. So we do believe that learning styles, in terms of actually promoting more effective learning, no, we're going to put that in the myth category. But this idea that learners do have preferences, we absolutely buy into that. We do believe that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:48] We do, and there are some implications of that. But to talk about learning styles first, learning businesses need to reject the idea of learning styles in teaching to learning styles because they really need to focus on what we know is most effective.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:05] Right. And so, for example, there's been a lot of research around dual-coding theory, and this is the idea that audio plus visuals is really one of the most effective ways to convey information and help learners. Richard Mayer and Ruth Colvin Clark talk about this in *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction*. That's a book we've recommended before and we believe is very good because of its evidence-based approach. Again, as you hear in the title, the focus is in particular on e-learning, but it has relevant application in physical classroom settings as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:42] And, of course, this is true regardless of whether somebody says, "I am a kinesthetic learner or a read/write learner." That dual encoding with the audio/visual approach, giving those different pathways into cognition, is going to be effective regardless, and you want to go with what does the science say about what is effective? That's one very good reason for dismissing this idea of learning styles and going with things like dual-coding theory instead. The other is that learning businesses need to be good stewards of their resources. And we know a lot of our audience members are feeling resource-challenged in their learning businesses. There never seems to be enough budget, never enough people to do what you need to do.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:27] And, if you're trying to create learning experiences that teach according to learning styles—so you've got a visual approach, you've got an audio approach, you've got a read/write approach, you've got a kinesthetic approach, you've got a social approach—and you're trying to factor all of that into your learning design, well, it is good to use multimedia. We just talked about audio and visual, but to try to do all of those things and engineering all of your learning experiences, that's very resource-intensive. That's why I brought up the article at the beginning that I posted about on LinkedIn because there's an article telling teachers—and, in this case, mostly in K-12 and higher education situations—that they need to be teaching to all of these different learning styles. And that, again, is a resource-challenged environment. And

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this site is telling teachers they need to use a theory that has no basis in fact to do a lot more work, basically.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:15] Right. So don't follow learning styles when creating what you offer as a learning business. It's not effective. It's a poor use of your resources, and it really just adds to the noise that so many learners are hearing. If they land on your catalog page, and they see that you are offering something that helps them in a subject that they need help in, but then they have to further make this choice around what format to take it in, it's adding overwhelm without value. There's no value there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:47] Right. So that's the learning styles side of the equation. But, back to preferences, we feel it is very important to embrace preferences, or the knowledge that learners view themselves as having preferences, because that is going to be an important aspect of marketing and appealing to adults when they have a lot of options for going elsewhere. So, if they feel like you're speaking to their preferences and how they like to learn, that can make you much more attractive as a learning provider. That's not going so far as to say that we're developing to different learning styles, but that we recognize at different times you might prefer things in different formats.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:30] And so this means that, when appropriate, offer different options. Think about things like, "Here, do this project on your own" versus working with another member of the cohort. That could be fine for a project related to time management, that choice of "You can either do this on your own, or you can do it with a group." But it might not be an appropriate option if what you're focused on is giving and receiving useful feedback, where working with another learner is integral to that goal of learning, where you're trying to see what it's like to give and receive effective feedback. Again, you could let learners read an article, or you could let learners listen to it. But, again, if a key point of that piece is something visual, then it's going to be more effective to have them read the text with the embedded visual versus trying to explain the visual in audio form, which is going to create higher cognitive load. Just as an example, you know that describing what a person looks like is done much more efficiently with a photo than with a paragraph of text, for example. So, again, it gets back to subject matter, context, and learning goals.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:39] Right. You don't want to pander to preferences. You need to forefront what's actually effective in the particular context with the particular goals, as you're saying, Celisa. But, where it's possible to provide some meaningful choice, then provide it because that supports autonomy, which we know is also good for motivation in the context of learning.

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Bottom line is there's some nuance here, and it's easy to see, again, why this idea of learning styles and then developing all of these different ways to teach and learn is attractive, but you've got to pare it back to, "Okay, let's start with what's actually effective here," and then where it makes sense to provide some meaningful choices that make people feel like their preferences are genuinely being respected as adult learners.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:24] Right. So nuance is at the heart of this, and it's a balancing act that you have to look at the financial realities, the resource realities, just knowing that you are dealing with limits in the resource area, and then thinking about what your audience needs and wants. And so where can you provide options that are going to have a return on investment, that it's going to be worth providing those options? Or options sometimes don't necessarily add a whole lot of extra effort. Again, as long as they don't undercut your learning goals, that can be a very good thing to support the adult learners' motivation by giving them that choice.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:04] One way we've thought about this is a Venn diagram, which, even if you're listening, as an auditory person, we think you can probably visualize this, where you've got one circle that is those learning preferences—what your learners perceive as their preferences—and another, which is the effective learning techniques. And, to the extent you can, you want those to overlap. So definitely giving priority to the effective learning techniques, but then also giving the measure that you should to how people say they like to learn, their preferences for learning. If you can combine those into the learning experience in that balanced way, then you're getting the best of all worlds.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:45] Learning styles are a pernicious myth, but learner preferences are a reality, and learning businesses disregard learner preferences at their own risk. Learning businesses need to balance effective learning strategies and approaches with giving their customers, AKA their learners, what they want.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:03] At leadinglearning.com/episode383, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast, if you're not already subscribed.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:13] We'd be grateful if you'd take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

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Celisa Steele: [00:18:28] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or conversation with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode383, you'll find links to connect with us on X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:45] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](www.danosongs.com)]*

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