Should Instructors Adjust Teaching to Address Students’ Different Learning Styles?

Consciously or not, we tend to teach according to our beliefs about how people learn. One of the more prevalent beliefs still around today, although it was soundly refuted by learning scientists decades ago, is the belief in learning styles. What are “learning styles,” and why are we better off ignoring them?

Consider the thesis behind learning styles. Learning style theories posit that individuals have worse and better “styles” (or modes) for learning, including the most common preferences of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. The idea is that learners can take in new information in a variety of ways, but that each learner has a preferred mode for maximizing learning. For example, visual learners will outperform auditory and kinesthetic learners when information is presented visually, and so forth. So, if Anne is a visual learner and Paulo is an auditory learner, then Paulo will learn vocabulary terms best while listening to a recording of the words and definitions, while Anne will learn the vocabulary terms better by viewing a slide show of pictures depicting the terms. Dozens of studies have tested variations on this theory, and there is little indication that it is valid.

Why are learning styles so appealing to teachers and undergraduate students alike? One possibility is that there is some truth associated with an aspect of the theory. Visual, spatial, auditory and other ways of remembering do indeed differ from person to person. There is no doubt that Dr. Benita Wolters-Fredlund (music faculty) has a better auditory memory than I do. If she and I put on headphones and listen to a new recording, she will better recall the musical sounds we both heard. Similarly, if Craig Hanson (art history faculty) and I both view a recently discovered piece of pottery, he will later be able to create a more vivid picture of what we both saw. In fact, some people do store and retrieve visual or auditory memories better or worse than do others, but this truth does not really help us much when designing effective instruction. Why? When instructors want to teach something that is, indeed, auditory in nature, such as a correct French accent, then it is best for all students, and not just the auditory learners, to hear content presented in an audible way, and of course, visual content is best taught using a visual modality, etc. Unfortunately, however, most of what instructors teach is not visual or auditory in nature. It is meaning-based. When it comes to teaching meaning, learning styles fails as a reliable theory.

Are there other common beliefs about learning which may not be entirely valid? Yes, stay tuned for my next installment on active learning.

Crystal Bruxvoort, Teaching and Learning Network

From the Faculty Activity Reports


Be sure to fill out your Faculty Activity Reports regularly. If you have questions, see the FAQ page.

Are you First-Gen?

Calvin staff and faculty: Were you among the first generation in your family to earn a college degree? About 14% of Calvin students are first-generation college students (neither parent has a bachelor’s degree). Calvin offers many resources and supports for students navigating a new institutional setting, but we are continuing to look for ways to let this population know and experience that they belong here on campus and in higher education. In recognition
of the 2019 First-Generation College Celebration day, the Center for Student Success is beginning to gather a list of Calvin staff/faculty who are themselves first-gen—in hopes that we will be able to continue to share with students that they may be first, but they are not alone.

If you are first-gen, please respond to this brief survey (note: your response does not commit you to participating in anything!): [https://forms.gle/5uYAFqohnUSXiES6x6](https://forms.gle/5uYAFqohnUSXiES6x6). If you have any questions, email Julia VanderMolen.

**Coming Up on Campus** (Check the campus calendar for a full list of events)

**Monday, November 18**
- Chapel. Sounds of Latino worship with Carlos Lemagne. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- [Let’s do Lunch](#). 11:00 a.m.—1:00 p.m., Commons Knollcrest Room (CM 302)
- Nursing department seminar. Student Presentations. 5:00 p.m., SB 110

**Tuesday, November 19**
- Chapel. Worship in Dutch. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- Faculty Senate meeting. 4:30 p.m., Hoogenboom 280

**Wednesday, November 20**
- Chapel. The Greatest of These: 1 Corinthians 13:6 with Michelle Loyd-Paige. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- Special Event CALL lecture. Karin Maag, “The Experience of Exile.” 3:15 p.m., Chapel
- History Colloquium. Dale Van Kley, “Conspiracy in the International Suppression of the Jesuits in Enlightenment Europe, 1755—1773.” 3:30 p.m., Meeter Center Lecture Hall (MCLH)
- Calvin’s Second Story Table. “Withering, Weathering, or Witnessing: Race and Racism.” 7:00 p.m., MCLH

**Thursday, November 21**
- Chapel. Breathe, Be Still and Create with Shayne McNichols. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- [Let’s do Lunch](#). 11:00 a.m.—1:00 p.m., Commons Knollcrest Room (CM 302)
- Chemistry department seminar. Mark Muyskens, “Biomolecules as Gas-Phase Ions: A Sabbatical Report from Switzerland.” 11:30 a.m., SB 010
- CALL lecture series. Panel discussion. “Dwelling: A Conversation with Plaster Creek Stewards.” 3:00 p.m., CFAC Recital Hall
- Sociology and Social Work department lecture. Peter Schuurman (Redeemer U. and Tyndale U. Colleges), “The Subversive Evangelical: The Ironic Charisma.” 7:00 p.m., Meeter Center Lecture Hall (MCLH)

**Friday, November 22**
- Chapel. Student worship team with Nate Glasper, Jr. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- Henry Institute lecture. Michelle Van Dyke (President and CEO of Heart of West Michigan United Way), “My Professional Journey.” 10:30 a.m., DeVos 170