Learning Styles

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What are learning styles?

The concept of learning styles is the idea that people differ in the way that they learn best, and instructors should determine each trainee's optimal style and then use training methods that match the trainee's style (Pashler, 2009). There are dozens of different learning style classifications, including such styles or dimensions as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modality preferences (Dunn & Greggs, 2003, cited in Coffield et al., 2004); concrete vs. abstract and sequential vs. random (Gregorc, 1982a, cited in Coffield et al., 2004); holistic vs. analytic and verbalizer vs. imager (Riding & Raynor, 1998, cited in Coffield et al., 2004); initiator, analyst, reasoner, and implementer (Jackson, 2002, cited in Coffield et al., 2004); and active, reflective, abstract, and concrete (Kolb, 1999, cited in Coffield et al., 2004), among many others. Styles are assessed through various self-report instruments that measures preferences, habits, or tendencies and through performance tests that measure tendencies or abilities (Coffield et al., 2004).

Are learning styles important?

Because of the large number of learning styles and the complexity of implementing and testing the effects of matched instructional strategies, rigorous research on learning styles is limited. Thus, the findings here focus only on learning styles that involve self-reported preferences for different types of instructional modalities (e.g., visual, verbal, auditory, kinesthetic). Despite the significant popularity of this model of learning styles (Newton, 2015), the evidence shows that there is no improvement in learning outcomes when the type of instruction is matched to the type of learning style (Aslaksen & Loras, 2018). Training practitioners can therefore forgo concerns about using a variety of modalities for the sake of accommodating different learning styles. Instead, training modalities should be determined based on the learning objectives and in accordance with other evidence on how all people learn best.

QIC-WD Takeaways

▶ There is no improvement in learning outcomes when the type of instruction is matched with self-reported preferences for different types of instructional modalities (e.g., visual, verbal, auditory, kinesthetic).

▶ Training practitioners should select training modalities based on the learning objectives and in accordance with other evidence on how all people learn best.

References

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