Do yogis have “Learning Styles”? (A somatic solution)

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ABSTRACT

Background: “Learning styles” has captivated a great deal of attention in yoga teacher training. The triad of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles has been particularly popular; yet as Sharp et al. asserted, such an approach trivializes the complexity of learning and compromises scholarship at all levels of the education community.

Aims: This paper addresses that although there is great merit in recognizing yoga students’ differences and preferences, many uses of learning styles in yoga teacher training are superficial and promote self-handicapping.

Conclusion: A somatic perspective (from soma, the body in its wholeness) offers a framework to reconsider the depth of effective learning.

Key words: Learning styles; somatics; teaching yoga.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to travel very far through yoga teacher training without encountering the idea of “learning styles.” With over 5 million hits on Google, it seems more than reasonable to assert that this is a popular concept. It is likely that you have seen something like the following: “There are three learning styles. They are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (VAK). When we learn, we depend on our senses to process information. Most people tend to use one of their senses more than the others.” It is possible that you have seen other models with 4–7 learning styles (perhaps, with a basis in multiple intelligences, such as noted by Stephens in Teaching Yoga). The sheer volume of its use is a tribute to the appeal of “learning styles.” As attractive as it might be, perhaps it is time to ask if this concept is serving us to more effective yoga instruction.

Much of the world suffers from oversimplification of complex ideas. Many people like bite-sized information. Sound bites prevail over well-reasoned, cogent, thoroughly articulated treatises about important issues. Twitter may allow enough keystrokes for Kardashian to inform you about her activities, but it is insufficient to capture important intricacies to declare, “I’m a visual learner. You have to show me the asana so I can understand it. I am handicapped and limited and I would never understand if you simply told me how to do it.” (134 characters)

BACKGROUND

Learning styles theory has, as Rienner and Willingham argued, succeeded in becoming “common knowledge.” They described how its pervasive acceptance serves as a regrettably compelling reason to believe it. This misfortune accompanies a familiar cognitive phenomenon called the confirmation bias. When we evaluate our own beliefs, we tend to seek out information that confirms our assumptions and we often miss contrary information, even when we encounter it repeatedly. When we see someone who asserts to be a visual learner shine at geography or auditory learners excel at music, we do not search for information that would disprove our

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interpretation of these events (can auditory learners learn geography through hearing it? can visual learners become better at music by seeing it?). Perhaps, a central problem in the parlance of learning styles is the confusion or conflation of styles and abilities. Sternberg, who posited his own set of thinking styles, made the important distinction that styles are preferences in the use of abilities, not abilities themselves.

A review of concepts and evidence associated with learning styles found “virtually no evidence … for validating the education applications of learning styles” and “there is no adequate evidence base to justify incorporating learning-styles assessments into general educational practice.” Hence, why would we think they are important in yoga? To put it succinctly, second, you accept the simple notion of “learning styles,” you are operating in a faulty paradigm. When someone attempts to truncate learning to one preferred modality, it is simple to demonstrate the lunacy of such a limiting belief. If I give you verbal instructions to move from Tadasana to Uttanasana and you can follow my directions, it demonstrates that you have at least some capacity as an auditory learner as well. However, such an argument reflects some acceptance of the idea that there are learning styles in the first place. “There is no credible evidence that learning styles exists,”

One of the biggest myths known to teacherdom is learning styles. Time and time again, the belief that students can be placed into specific categories such as activist or theorist or that they are predominantly inclined toward one model category of learning (e.g., VAK) is inserted into professional conversations as if the theories are fact. Moreover, time and time again, such beliefs are the justification for placing students into a specific style of learning so that a class can be “managed” more effectively. Such categorization of students is an absolute nonsense and the practice of doing so should be challenged strongly. It is lazy pedagogy, and the only reason I see that such beliefs persist is that it is a convenient untruth which allows some teachers to stay within their comfort zones (Wheeler, 2011).

Certainly, all yogis have preferences for different modalities or processes. Students differ from each other, and understanding such differences and adapting our teaching accordingly can enhance yoga teaching. Yet the triad of VAK approaches ridiculousness. In describing the popularity of this view, Sharp et al. asserted such an approach trivializes the complexity of learning and compromises scholarship at all levels of the education community (there are times when “learning styles” is used to mean something considerably different, such as preferences for concrete or abstract thinking.). There are myriad problems with the idea of having one learning style. To begin, tests that purport to determine your learning style have what is known as weak psychometric properties, such as poor reliability and validity. That is to say, they do not do a good job of measuring what they are supposed to measure. The “test-retest reliability” is quite low, meaning you might take the test 1 time and it will tell you that you are a “visual learner” and the next time you might show up as an “auditory learner.” Another issue is that the attempt to identify one of these styles to represent the way a person learns is just a way too simple. When yogis start to believe that they have one learning style, they begin to limit themselves. They start to believe that they cannot learn in other modalities. Coffield et al. also discussed at length the potential for the allocation of learning styles to turn into learning handicaps. It turns out preferences or abilities are malleable. Although some yogis may prefer to learn in a particular way, they can surely develop abilities to use other processes and adapt to expand their capacities. For example, for most of the new students, it is useful to provide physical demonstrations. There is simply more relevant information and a visual demonstration is helpful for learning new poses. Imagine all the ways new yogis might interpret a verbal cue such as “make your body into an upside down V” that would not match the instructors’ intentions. Yet, if the instructor demonstrated Adho Mukha Svanasana (even without verbal cues), students would have a general idea of what to do. It also seems that another issue is that people seem to misunderstand “kinesthetic” learning as being equivalent to “learning by doing.” Yet examples of “learning by doing” are often better labeled as “experiential learning,” which include various VAK, (and perhaps other) modes.

There is clear appeal and potential value to the conversation of “learning styles.” Anything that motivates yoga teachers to attend to the fact that there are a variety of ways in which people learn and students do not all learn the same way is the beginning of a positive step. Realizing the value of teaching yoga in a way that provides learners with VAK stimuli is valuable. Recognizing that students may not have the same preferences or processes as the teacher and avoiding just defaulting to one’s own preferences can enhance learning. Noticing that yogis can be taught to expand the ways in which they learn can be beneficial. It is just that all of the specifics are too simple and not well grounded.

RECONSIDERING LEARNING STYLES

What happens when yoga teachers and students proceed with an unquestioning acceptance of “learning styles?” It tends to create a form of self-handicapping. If you tell me your limitations and I cater to them, we are reifying something questionable. Instead of delving into the depths and complexities of how we learn, we simplify the issues and solutions. Instead of exploring broader possibilities, we remove alternatives and pander to the proposed weaknesses.

From students’ perspectives, knowledge of relative advantages and weaknesses of different models is more likely to enhance
self-development than assigning them a particular learning style. A central aim of metacognitive approaches is assisting learners’ selection of appropriate learning strategies from various options to fit particular tasks.\[9\]

At a deeper level, the approach of learning styles fails because it misses the wholeness of people and how we learn. In many cases outside of yoga studios, the context in which learning styles are applied is one where the system’s primary goal is information dissemination. Learning is truncated to data acquisition or accumulation and maybe even understanding. Any environment that treats learners as rational information processors with one of the three programming languages is deeply flawed. A more vital model shows us that learning is neither just a cognitive process nor just a matter of language. Rather than getting caught up in accommodating learners’ shortcomings, we would do well to include the fullness of whole human beings.

We require something else, something different, and something better. It is important for yoga teachers to incorporate a perspective that addresses the whole human being. Learning is very much an emotional and biological phenomenon because in addition to our mental apparatus we have moods and sensations.\[10\] In addition to realizing, there are differences in preferences and processes among yogis, it is crucial to be conscious of similarities among them that are frequently ignored. Whether people like auditory or visual stimuli better, they all always have a mood in which their learning occurs.

One thing that effective yoga teachers do is “manage mood”. Building trust with students and fostering a climate where people feel sufficiently safe and comfortable facilitates learning and a good yoga practice. Perceiving when frustration or irritation shifts the mood and responding accordingly is essential to good teaching. Good yoga teachers also are aware of the physical sensations and biology of learners. Basically, attending to physical comfort supports learning. Yoga can be a wonderful example of experiential learning that includes all sorts of learning preferences, processes, or “styles.” Examining how learning yoga can be full, deep, and lead to embodiment of desired objectives takes the process to a level of greater effectiveness. To put a name to learning styles is one where the system’s primary goal is information dissemination. Learning is truncated to data acquisition or accumulation and maybe even understanding. Any environment that treats learners as rational information processors with one of the three programming languages is deeply flawed. A more vital model shows us that learning is neither just a cognitive process nor just a matter of language.

When we begin to design and deliver yoga classes from somatic perspectives, we entail a broad consideration of the multidimensionality of learners and the contexts in which they learn. Our scope expands to include everything from how living, breathing, feeling, moving, thinking individuals interact with each other to how any given yoga class will provoke emotional, biological, and intellectual challenges.

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