THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES?

Student-centred

Cognitivism

VARK

Learning style

Constructivist

Inquiry-based

Behaviourism

Discovery learning
Teaching is awash with different, and often competing, learning theories and teaching methods. How should busy teachers and trainers ensure they don’t fall for an educational fad? Peter Rook reports...

“Some of these fashions can seem easy, seductive and to privilege students; but where is the evidence for these fads?” Hattie asks.

“I and many others have written repeatedly to show the major lack of impact of these fads, but they continue to emerge.”

PROFESSIONAL SCEPTICISM

David Didau, The Learning Spy blogger and author of the rather alarmingly titled What if Everything You Knew About Education was Wrong?, is also keen to separate fads from well-founded research.

“A lot of the evidence we’ve got about the way young people learn comes from cognitive science. For teachers to ignore that in the name of professional judgement is the height of folly. It is not reasonable to expect teachers to wade through all the research, but they should adopt a professional scepticism.”

Didau says that structural changes by government, in areas like curriculum and assessment, have clearly had an impact on approaches to teaching and learning. But he rejects any suggestion that this amounts to promoting particular approaches to teaching.

“No one in government is encouraging teachers to do gimmicks. Ofsted is not compelling anyone to adopt a certain teaching style,” Didau says.

Dylan Wiliam, professor of educational assessment at the UCL Institute of Education, believes that much of the faddism in education emanates from a focus on student-centred learning, even though “the track record of that is quite poor”. “It is not government, but teachers doing it to themselves and getting carried away with the latest fad,” he says.

However, Wiliam does think that growth in the numbers of teaching and learning managers in the FE sector has fostered a culture of ‘managers trying to manage teaching’ and ‘flip-flopping’ on best practice.

“Professional scepticism is not surprising given the exhaustive work he has put into researching and quantifying what works for students. His results cast doubt on the efficacy of some, well-established teaching and learning theories and practice.”

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