

A WEEK IN Learning

THAT'S THE WAY I HEARD IT

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As we all know, humans only use 10% of their brains. This theory was first suggested by Albert Einstein, and later confirmed by Harvard psychologists, Statler and Waldorf. What this shows us is that we have only scratched the surface of potential human intelligence, and all of us are capable of unleashing this untapped potential. At least that's the way I heard it.

Sounds encouraging, doesn't it? Unfortunately, everything you read in that first paragraph is complete nonsense. Albert Einstein said no such thing, and Statler and Waldorf are the film critics from *The Muppets*. While most of us have heard this 10% myth, it is not backed by science and has been debunked countless times. Furthermore, Neurologist Barry Gordon from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore has stated, "*We use virtually every part of the brain, and that (most of) the brain is active almost all the time.*"



"The truth is that all learners are unique."

- Jared Allen

So why is this myth so persistent? You can find examples in countless television shows and movies, and it even appears in the preface of Dale Carnegie's, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It would be awfully convenient if we could just take a pill to unlock some dormant part of our brain, rather than committing to long hours of learning and hard work. Maybe that is the reason why the myth has existed for so long: 1) repetition from the public and 2) the fact that it just *sounds* believable and convenient.

The pattern of spreading misinformation has dawned on plenty of myths around different learning concepts, especially in adult learning. Because of this, it's important that we check our long held beliefs and assertions to make sure they're not holding us back. Below I will examine three common "facts" related to adult learning. I, then, challenge you to examine and question your own closely held thoughts and beliefs.

1. To become a leading expert, it takes 10,000 hours of practice

Written by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*, the "10,000 hour rule" has become extremely popular in all areas of business. Gladwell based this rule on research performed by

Anders Ericsson with violin students at a music academy in Berlin. However, Ericsson himself has stated that this rule is “a provocative generalization”, and in many ways, an oversimplification of his research. While the 10,000 hours is catchy and easy to remember, it discounts many important factors in gaining expertise. Simply put, if you practice a technique poorly for 10,000 hours, you’ll be just as unskilled as when you started - but slightly older. Natural ability, focus, quality of instruction, dedication, and appropriate resources all contribute to mastering a skill.

2. **People remember 10% of what they hear, 20% of what they read, 30% of what they see, etc.**

There are several different versions of this rule, presented through models such as “Dale’s Cone of Experience” or the “Learning Pyramid”, but they all share the same general premise – people retain a certain percentage of what they learn based on the specific modality of the learning. In general, be wary of any statistics that end in 0 or 5. This is an indication that it is a broad estimate, or simply fabricated. Research performed by Deepak Subramony and Michael Molenda concluded that not only are these percentages false, it is also unclear where they came from. The best guess is that it came from an edited version of Edgar Dale’s Cone of Experience, which originally did not contain any percentages, and Dale himself warned against using it for learning design. The truth is that all learners are unique, and one modality is not necessarily more effective for all learners. Some people are able to retain everything they read, and others get little value from experiential learning (learning from experience).

3. **You can identify a learners’ “Learning Style” and use that to improve learning**

This rule states that learners have a preferential learning style, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. It suggests that the learner will grasp information quicker, and retain it longer, if the learning is presented in that style. However, a report published for *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, found that nearly all studies on learning styles were flawed in their approach and failed to produce solid evidence. Many cognitive psychologists, such as Daniel Willingham of the University of Virginia, state that we would do best to tailor the modality of learning to the information you are trying to teach, rather than to the specific learner. For instance, if you are trying to teach someone the shape of Arizona, it would be much more effective to display it visually, regardless of someone’s learning preference. Likewise, someone will need to hear a French accent aloud to understand it, rather than merely reading about it.

Full disclosure – I have incorporated all of these myths into my training programs at some point. I feel it’s safe to say that we are all susceptible to believing falsehoods, especially if they’re associated with a nice round number or an acronym. Now I challenge you to take a deeper look at some of your long-held catch phrases and acronyms, and ask yourself: What myths related to learning have been holding me back? How can I debunk these in my own life?