

Keeping Current

Research-Based Ideas for Teachers from the Editors of *Better Teaching*®

Learning Styles and Teaching Strategies

Research shows that the closer the match between a student's learning style and the teacher's teaching style, the better that student will do in school. Teachers who use strategies that address the different learning styles of their students are much more likely to meet the needs of those students.

Providing opportunities for students to work in ways that address their learning style preferences, and teaching them to recognize and rely on their own personal learning strengths also helps to build self-confidence. And when students feel good about themselves and their abilities, they are more likely to work hard, take risks and learn.

Regardless of what subject you teach, there are opportunities to accommodate different learning styles in your lesson plans. You can begin by listing ideas that will fit broadly into your curriculum. Then, select a few ideas for each style that you think will work best.

Consider the three basic learning styles

When we learn, we rely on three senses—visual, auditory and kinesthetic—to process the information that we are receiving. Most people tend to rely on one of their senses more than the others, translating into a basic learning style.

The experts say that if you vary your teaching methods to meet the three basic learning styles, you will meet the needs of most students.

Visual Learners

Visual learners prefer to read instructions rather than hear them. They get information from looking at pictures, charts and illustrations. They generally take detailed notes and prefer to spend time in pleasing, organized spaces.

To help visual learners, you can:

- **Give instructions in written form.**
- **Post important information** on the classroom walls.
- **Organize information** by using color coding, pocket folders, etc.
- **Provide assignment checklists** and post due dates on calendars.
- **Use flashcards, charts, pictures and timelines** when you present new information.

Auditory Learners

Auditory learners like to sit where they can hear well. They often play music in the background when they study. They learn by reading aloud, or by talking with others (or to themselves) about what they are studying.

To help auditory learners, you can:

- **Encourage them to create songs or rhymes** that relate to things they need to remember.
- **Allow them to whisper quietly** to themselves when they are attempting to recall information.
- **Build opportunities** for small group and class discussions into your lesson plans.
- **Provide students with opportunities** to restate information in their own words.

Kinesthetic Learners

Kinesthetic learners use a lot of gestures. They are often described as

“talking with their hands.” They need opportunities to have hands-on experiences and enjoy taking things apart. They are active—they often prefer to move around rather than sit still when they study.

To help kinesthetic learners, you can:

- **Provide alternatives to reading**—manipulatives for working out math problems, flash cards and magnetic letters to learn the alphabet, for example.
- **Develop options** other than written assignments—dioramas, models, demonstrations, etc.
- **Plan alternatives to desk work** so students can burn off excess energy.

Know your own personal style

Teachers generally reflect their own learning style preferences in the teaching strategies they use. It makes sense, then, that one of the best ways for teachers to accommodate a variety of learning styles is to understand their own preferences and to adapt and expand them to meet the needs of their students.

For example, if a teacher has a strong visual learning preference, it is likely this trait is reflected in the instructional strategies she uses in the classroom. If she is aware of this, she can consciously work to choose strategies and techniques that would appeal to other learning styles. She might increase her use of tapes and music

and provide opportunities for students to become physically involved in learning activities, for example.

You don't need to change your teaching style or abandon the methods with which you feel most comfortable. It's more a matter of increasing your teaching repertoire. You can look for opportunities to vary classroom methods, materials, assignments and assessments that address a variety of learning styles. One way to do this is to collaborate with other teachers who have different strengths than your own.

Adapt your style to address your student's strengths

Once you understand your own learning and teaching preferences and know what type of learners are in your classroom, you can customize your instruction. Here's a strategy that can help:

- **Begin by planning** your lesson for the whole class. (You can't adapt a plan unless you have one to begin with.) Define the setting—the curriculum content, the amount of time involved, etc. Outline your teaching objectives—exactly what is it that you want your students to learn during the unit? Then, document how you plan to teach the unit, using as many techniques or methods as you desire.
- **Now it's time to think** in terms of specific learners and their individual learning needs. Make a list of those students whom you suspect will have difficulty with the unit. Consider what adjustments you will need to make to your plan to address the learning styles of each of those students. Adjustments might include:

Encourage other learning abilities

Of course, students learn in many different ways. Harvard professor and psychologist Howard Gardner introduced his groundbreaking theory of multiple intelligences in 1983. The idea behind Gardner's theory is that, if teachers value the differences among their students and take those differences seriously, it should have implications for how those teachers teach.

The learning strengths that Gardner includes in his theory are:

- **Linguistic.** Students with this kind of intelligence enjoy reading and writing and other language-oriented activities, such as doing crossword puzzles.
- **Logical-Mathematical.** Patterns and puzzles can engage the interest of these students. They enjoy arithmetic problems and strategy games such as chess.
- **Bodily-Kinesthetic.** These students need to be physically active. They are often athletic. They enjoy using tools and building things.
- **Spatial.** These students think in images and pictures. They may be interested in drawing, painting or photography.
- **Musical.** These students enjoy musical expression—writing and performing songs, for example. They are usually quite aware of sounds others may miss, so classroom noise may affect them.
- **Interpersonal.** These students are good at communicating and understanding others' feelings and motives. They enjoy taking the lead on projects and helping others.
- **Intrapersonal.** These students are often shy. They are very aware of their own feelings, and are generally self-motivated. They may benefit from opportunities to talk things through in a one-on-one setting.

* *Presentation style.* Present information in a variety of ways to meet the needs of your visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners.

* *Complexity.* Some students enjoy the challenge of dealing with the big picture, while others learn better when material is presented in chunks, with one idea building on another.

* *Participation.* Some students prefer to listen quietly and think about what they are learning, while others need to be much more verbal. Provide opportunities for all forms of student participation.

* *Classroom environment.* Consider such factors as light, temperature and sound levels.

- **Be prepared to make necessary adjustments** to your plans as you progress through the unit.

A final word

Remember that while everyone is unique when it comes to learning styles or preferences, no single style is better or worse than any other. The important thing is to recognize that your students are unique and to be as flexible as possible in meeting their unique learning needs.