



Beyond “Learning Styles”: Give Students More Than One Way to Learn

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The great thing about being human is that we're different. Put 25 students in a classroom and you'll have 25 combinations of experience, ability, curiosity, background knowledge, attention span and motivation. One student may grasp an idea immediately from a diagram, another after hearing a good explanation, and another only after working with the idea and seeing how it applies.

Years ago, educators commonly described these differences as **learning styles**. Students were classified as visual, auditory or tactile/kinesthetic learners, and teachers were encouraged to tailor instruction to each student's preferred style. That idea remains popular, but educational research hasn't demonstrated that students learn better simply because instruction is matched to a designated learning style.

That doesn't mean teachers should return to the lecture, textbook and chalkboard and forget everything else. Quite the opposite. The useful lesson buried inside the old learning-styles model is that **good teaching gives students multiple ways to encounter, understand, practice and retrieve important information.**

Let's take a history lesson on the Battle of Gettysburg and see how that works.

Let Students See It

Gettysburg is difficult to understand without geography. Students can memorize names such as Cemetery Ridge, Little Round Top and Seminary Ridge, but those names become much more meaningful when students see where they are in relation to one another.

A teacher might begin with a battlefield map showing Union and Confederate positions during the three days of fighting, supplement it with photographs or illustrations and perhaps use an

animation showing how the battle developed. Students can then connect names, troop movements and events with physical locations.

The purpose isn't to accommodate students labeled “visual learners.” **The material itself has an important visual component.** A map can communicate spatial relationships more effectively than several paragraphs describing them.

Let Students Hear It and Talk About It

Some ideas become clearer through explanation and discussion. After students have seen the battlefield, the teacher might ask why General Robert E. Lee ordered Pickett's Charge against the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. What did Lee believe might happen? What were the risks? What alternatives were available?

Now students aren't merely receiving information; they're using it. A class discussion requires them to retrieve facts, listen to competing interpretations and explain their reasoning. Reading a portion of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address aloud adds another dimension, particularly when students discuss what Lincoln meant by a “new birth of freedom.”

Again, the point isn't that certain students are “auditory learners.” **Speaking and listening are appropriate ways to explore some kinds of information.**

Let Students Do Something With It

Students can also deepen their understanding by actively working with the material. They might construct a simple battlefield model, plot troop movements on a map, compare casualty figures, investigate the experiences of an individual soldier or create a timeline of the battle.

Technology provides possibilities I couldn't have imagined when I first wrote this article in 2007. Students can explore interactive maps, examine digitized primary-source documents, take virtual battlefield tours and compare historical interpretations from museums, archives and other reliable sources.

Hands-on activity shouldn't be included merely to keep restless students busy. **The activity should require students to think about the subject.** Building an elaborate battlefield model teaches little if the student doesn't understand what happened on that battlefield and why.

And Let Students Read and Write

The traditional learning-styles categories sometimes overlooked two of education's most important activities: reading and writing. Students studying Gettysburg should still read historical accounts and primary sources, and they should be expected to put some of what they've learned into their own words.

Writing is particularly useful because it exposes gaps in understanding. It's easy for a student to look at a map or listen to a discussion and think, “I understand this.” Ask that student to explain

why the Union position at Gettysburg was advantageous, and suddenly the difference between recognizing information and actually understanding it becomes apparent.

Different Methods, One Learning Goal

So I've changed my thinking somewhat since writing the original version of this article. I no longer believe teachers need to identify one student as a visual learner, another as auditory and a third as kinesthetic and then try to customize instruction accordingly.

I do still believe strongly in the teaching practice that led us toward that idea in the first place.

Don't depend on one method when several good ones are available. Explain an important concept. Show it when a visual representation helps. Let students discuss it. Give them an opportunity to apply it. Have them read about it and put their understanding into words.

Then do something even more important: **check whether they learned it.**

A teacher's goal isn't to discover which little box each student belongs in. It's to provide enough good explanations, examples, practice and feedback that students can make the connections necessary for understanding.

In that respect, the old “learning styles” idea wasn't entirely wrong. We simply put too much emphasis on the **styles** and not enough on the **learning**.