Learning Styles and Language

Since the 1970's, researchers have identified more than 70 different models that purport to identify learning styles. Typically, these models come with “instruments” (usually questionnaires) for determining learning style preferences. Unfortunately, there is little solid research to support the validity of these models or their reliability to predict what teaching strategies will work best for which students.

Probably the most familiar model known outside of the education profession is VAK, which stands for Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic (which includes all the other senses as well as the emotions). This model suggests that teachers need to know which of the sensory modalities their students prefer when they process information. When they bring to mind a past event or experience, do they do it by making a mental picture, or hearing sounds, or using one of the other senses, or by recalling emotions?

Most of the VAK models claim to identify learning styles based almost entirely on language—that is, on the words that a person uses. For example, a person who says, “That's clear now,” or, “I see what you mean,” or “I get the picture,” would be identified as a visual learner. Someone else who uses words relating to sound, such as, [continued on next page]
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“That sounds right,” or “That rings a bell,” would be an auditory learner. And a person who talks about concepts being “heavy,” or who says that she’s “touched” or “moved” by an experience would be a kinesthetic learner.

Unfortunately, the VAK analyst would run into some problems in our culture. If she’s in California and someone says to her “I hear ya,” does she know for sure that that person is auditory, or is he just using the local and current lingo? What about someone who says “I see what you’re saying?” Is that person visual or auditory?

One problem with language-based models is that our spoken language is heavily influenced by our culture and not just by our internal preferences about how we learn best. Before we can make reasonable guesses about a student’s learning style preferences, we need to understand that external clues alone are not sufficient. The very same event can be processed by a given individual in any of these three modalities.

The Internal Experience

Let’s go back to my memory of Lily. Using the VAK model, what would you guess are my learning-style preferences? Visual? Yes! I recall the event in pictures, and I use words like “clear” and “vivid” in my description. Kinesthetic? Yes! I have tactile memories—feeling the seat under me, feeling Lily’s legs against my shoes, feeling her trembling—and memories of the emotional content of the situation. What about auditory? Well, no. There’s no apparent sound in my memory, no words that I remember hearing, not even the sound of Lily’s vomiting.

I hardly ever use the auditory modality to process information—even when I’m recalling a piece of music I’ve heard, or when I remember my mother’s voice calling me. When I recall music, my memory takes the form of a sort of architectural drawing that “follows” the pitch and intensity of the melody. The memory of my mother’s voice comes to me in the form of a picture of my mother in the kitchen, asking me to help her with dinner (though I don’t hear her words). I also feel my resignation and an accompanying sigh, knowing that she’s going to ask me to prepare the salad (something I don’t like to do).

But maybe my experience is idiosyncratic. Well, then, let’s look at more data. When I give a presentation, I ask the group to close their eyes and think about the first dog-training class they ever attended. I give them a few minutes to “think” about it, without suggesting any particular sensory modality when I give the assignment. Then I ask them to call out some things that come to mind, still keeping their eyes closed in order to shut out as much external distraction as possible. Here are some of the typical contributions:

“Feeling scared. Lots of questions. Will my dog behave herself? Will the others like me and my dog?”

“Voice saying ‘NO!’ loudly. Objects dropping on the floor. The tapping of doggie footsteps. Of chairs scraping on the floor.”

“The huge size of the auditorium we’re in and, by contrast, the small group of people and dogs in our part of it.”

“How does that sound to you?”

“These questions are designed to reach the visual, the auditory, and the kinesthetic learners.

I also pay attention to the famous Glazed Look in the eyes of a student—and then try a different approach. Here are a few actual examples of how I have done this in my classes.

Now let’s try another experiment. Recall a storm you were in. Which modalities first come into play? Do you see the darkening sky, the dramatic clouds, a bolt of lightning? Do you hear and feel the rumble of thunder? Do you feel anxiety, knowing that your dog is thunder-phobic? Do you hear the patter of rain on the roof?

Let’s say your first memory was visual and kinesthetic—the bolt of lightning, and anxiety for your dog. Can you go back to that storm in your mind and hear the sound of rain hitting the roof? Most of us can intentionally draw on a modality we don’t ordinarily use. That’s why we talk about preferences in learning styles. And maybe one of our jobs as teachers is to help our students learn that they have access to more possibilities they know of when they’re learning. For example, while my strong preferences are to process information in visual and kinesthetic ways, I often recall storms using my auditory and kinesthetic modalities.

Using Learning Styles in Classes

Assuming that learning-style preference is fairly stable (and it seems to be), we can’t easily guess at how a particular student learns most effectively and efficiently. But we can get close to finding out by asking pointed questions and by experimenting.

For example, when I demonstrate a new behavior in class, I ask questions like these in quick succession:

“Is that clear?”

“Do you feel you can do this?”

These questions are designed to reach the visual, the auditory, and the kinesthetic learners.
Heather is teaching her dog Joey focused heeling, but her left, treat-holding hand dangles at her side. Instead of focusing on Heather, Joey is focused on her left hand, or more precisely, on the treat in her left hand. I find myself repeating, “Keep your left hand at your waist,” many many times to no avail. Finally, I walk up behind Heather, gently hold her left wrist to her waist, and ask her to start walking. “Oh, so that’s what you mean!” she says and then gets it right with Joey. Heather is a kinesthetic, not an auditory, learner.

Jerome never seems to be watching me as I demonstrate how to teach the about turn. And when he tries to do it with his dog Sam, he can’t get it right. After class, I sit down and talk him through the process, pausing every few sentences to ask “Get it?” and continuing only after he says, “Yes.” Suddenly, he understands and gets it right with Sam. Jerome’s preferred learning style is auditory, not visual.

Betty is working on the Figure Eight with her dog Lucy, stumbling through it every time, even though I’m coaching her step-by-step. Finally, I diagram the exercise on the chalk board and put bits of masking tape on the floor in key places along the path of the Figure Eight. Betty walks the pattern a few times without Lucy, and then she and Lucy breeze through a perfect Figure Eight. Betty has a preference for visual learning.

I design homework assignments in the same global way so that whatever the preferred learning styles are among my students, I will reach them. In addition to handing out the written homework sheet, I talk about what’s on it. I also solicit questions about the homework in order to pick up anyone I might have missed.

I sprinkle the homework instructions liberally with visual, auditory, and kinesthetic opportunities. For example, I suggest that students “count bananas” (silently) to increase the duration of a Stay. “One-ba-na-na” takes just about one second to say, so they can build the Stay by time units as small as a quarter second by saying just “One.” Much more fun than “One-one-thou-sand”—especially for my auditory students.

I also hand out what I call a “fridge grid”—a sheet of paper that students post on their fridge with a magnet. The grid is simply a matrix, organized by day of the week on one axis and the homework activity on the other. This grid delights my kinesthetic and visual students.

We can use the VAK model to enhance our teaching, as long as we remember that our students are individuals with unique ways of taking in and retrieving information. Instead of using the model mechanically, based on language alone, we can acknowledge the inner diversity of our students.

The secret is to explore the world beyond our own unique ways of learning and to honor the ways of our students. So what do you remember about your first dog, or your first dog-training class, or your first time teaching a class or helping a client with a behavior problem? If you’ve ever experienced a communication impasse with a student (as I have), consider that you might simply not share a learning style preference.

References


Gordon, L. (1993). People types & tiger stripes: A practical guide to learning styles. Center for Applications of Psychological Type (originally published 1979). Lawrence proposes some helpful ways to use the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to help teachers discover and work with the learning styles of their students.


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