

A Key to Academic Success: Learning *How* to Learn

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

This famous quote comes from Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism. It’s amazing how relevant it is today in so many facets of life.

Where I like to apply it is when talking about learning. If I could paraphrase the ancient Chinese sage, I would say this: “Give a student the answers and he passes the test. Teach a student how to learn and he passes all of his tests.”

Learning *how* to learn is critical to a student’s long-term success, not only in school, but in life. Acquiring learning skills is not something the schools address. They are mandated to push through curriculum, give the tests, move the students through the grade and prepare for the next year’s lot.

No two people learn exactly the same way. Some people learn better in one environment than another. Often, teens become convinced they can’t learn when in fact they’d learn just fine if the information were presented differently.

Unfortunately, a one-size-fits-all teaching method is never going to reach every student. Sometimes teens get labeled with Attention Deficit Disorder when what’s really going on is that the teacher doesn’t know how to reach the student. I’m not advocating against correct diagnoses and prescription drugs when they’re appropriate—there are teens with ADD whose meds have made their worlds good again—but it’s possible that not all diagnoses of ADD are equally correct. When people get a handle on the way they learn, they can customize their learning experiences and fill in the gaps their teacher might leave.

Human beings have three main ways to take in new information: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. For most of us, one of these ways is dominant and the other two are weaker.

Visual learners like to see pictures, colors, charts, and graphs. They usually do well with reading. They talk in visual terms like “picture,” “view,” “see,” “look,” and “vision.” Visual learners like to sit in the front row, looking at the teacher and the board. They take good notes but sometimes miss the oral parts of the lecture.

Auditory learners like words that have to do with sound such as “hear,” “listen,” “tune,” “ring,” “chime,” and “music.” Auditory people are the ones mentally recording everything the teacher is saying but often looking away. They’re often repeating what the teacher just said in the form of a question. Sometimes the frustrated teacher, not understanding what the auditory learner is doing, says, “That’s what I just said. Were you listening?”

Kinesthetic learners learn by touch and movement. Words that appeal to kinesthetics are "feel," "sense," "handle," "do," "gut," and "intuition." Kinesthetic people like to feel things out, be emotionally connected, and learn by doing. Other people get annoyed at them because they can't seem to sit still, but they process information best by moving their bodies.

How do people know which kind of learners they are? There are tests they can take, but most get a pretty good sense of their learning styles just by becoming aware of the way they behave in class. They can also pay attention to the way they express themselves. If they "get it," "grasp the problem," or "have a feel for" a certain subject, they're probably strongly kinesthetic. If a phrase "rings true" or "sounds familiar," they're likely to be high-auditory. If they "see what you mean," or "get the picture," they're probably visual learners.

Visual learners can help themselves stay connected to the lessons by sitting where the teacher will be in their immediate visual field. They learn best by reading or seeing a thing being done before they try it themselves. They absorb more information when they use lots of colors and graphics in their notes.

Auditory learners can boost their learning by reading lecture notes out loud. They learn best by having something explained to them verbally before they try it. It helps them to talk to a parent or friend.

Kinesthetic learners want to try something for themselves before they have it explained to them. Since touch is important, kinesthetics learn better when they incorporate movement and physical objects into their lessons.

Students who have come to believe they're poor learners have a major "Aha!" when they realize they learn just fine in their own way. In many cases, it's not that they can't learn; it's that the way they learn and the way the teacher teaches aren't a match! Once they have this information, teens can take charge of their learning again and fill in what's missing from their learning environment.