Learning How to Learn with VAK

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

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 that 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.

We all take in new information through three main sensory channels: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. For most of us, one of these is dominant and the other two are weaker. Knowledge of our brain’s preferred learning style helps us to ensure that we utilize that sensory channel in our learning. In addition, our brain learns best when it receives information through all three channels, so be aware of your dominant learning style, but utilize all three in your learning.

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 frequently looking away. They often repeat 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. Weren’t 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 learner 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 learning.

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 may not be emphasized by their teacher! Once they have this information, teens can take charge of their learning again and fill in what’s missing from their learning environment. And again, we emphasize that utilizing all three sensory channels is the ideal for effective learning—so go V-A-K!