

# Learning Styles

## The kinds of learning styles to know in your course

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from the new Third Edition of How to Teach Adults, by William A. Draves. How to Teach Adults is the most popular book on the subject, with more than 100,000 sales.*

Adults participating in a course have always been complicated, with individual characteristics and learning styles. Yet one of the primary aims of the last century was to develop conformity in skills and knowledge. Thus the typical class has resembled a factory setting in many ways, with the participants all expected to be at the same point and have the same level of accomplishment.

Teachers have often followed the factory model by teaching only one way. Once I overheard this conversation between a teacher and learner who was behind in math:

Teacher: "I could teach you math a different way."

Learner: "Why don't you?"

Teacher: "Because I'm the teacher."

This is the wrong approach. Yet slowly but surely teaching is moving from the delivery of content to helping adults learn. One reason is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the workplace is increasingly valuing individual strengths rather than conformity in skills. Another reason is simply that we know more now about learning styles, and that we do not all learn in the same way.

There is a fascinating growth of research about the brain and how our physical, neurological and hormonal make-up affects how we each learn. This learning research regarding nature has been accompanied by learning research regarding nurture. So others have been studying how social and cultural forces affect how we each learn. Together, the research is helping us as teachers understand and address our participants' different learning styles.

There are several different ways of looking at learning styles. They include:

- Sensory learning styles.
- Gender learning styles.

- Generational learning styles.
- Ethnic and cultural learning styles.
- Neurological learning styles.

### Sensory Learning Styles

The traditional way we have understood learning styles is that many of us have a preference in how we use our senses to learn. There are:

- **Visual learners**, who prefer to see or read something.
- **Auditory learners**, who may retain more knowledge by listening.
- **Motion (kinesthetic) learners**, who need to touch, practice or actually perform the function or task in order

**"Mrs. Gascoyne said they didn't want to treat me differently from everyone else in the school because then everyone would want to be treated differently and it would set a precedent." — Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time***

to learn it.

For example, if you are talking about a novel, an auditory learner may retain more by listening to the book on tape. And if you are discussing how to organize a home office, a touch learner may understand it better by actually moving furniture around.

### Gender Learning Styles

Men and women learn differently. And because males and females mature at different rates, there are even greater distinctions between how boys and girls learn.

Men are generally better at learning spatial relationships (for example, maps and directions), math, science and tech-

nology skills. Women are generally better at verbal skills, language, and written communication.

Women mostly enjoy relationships and like group learning, while more men prefer learning independently. Women find it far easier than most men to express feelings, and are able to communicate feelings more quickly than men are.

Men generally have a harder time hearing than most women. In a one-to-one situation, most men prefer the teacher to sit next to them. Generally women prefer someone to sit across from them.

Males are far more likely to doodle, fiddle, and stare out the window than women. Males have a shorter attention span, and benefit from more frequent exercise or physical activity.

Females are likely to be able to sit longer and smile far more often than males. In school and college, girls turn their homework in on time. Males are more likely to disagree with or argue with an instructor. In school and college, boys often turn their homework in late.

On a bell curve with the average learner in the middle of the curve, there are apt to be more males at the low (lower performing) end of the curve. And there are apt to be more males at the upper (higher performing) end of the curve. Women are more likely to be clustered closer to the median or average.

All of these gender learning styles originate in the neurology and hormonal differences between males and females. For example, males do not want to fidget. Instead males have 15% less serotonin than females and use fidgeting as a way to focus. Males do not want to be devoid of expressing their feelings. Instead, the synapses between the neurons associated with feeling and the neurons associated with verbal expression are not as well connected as they are for females.

It is critical for us as teachers not to attach motivation or 'want to' labels to learning phenomenon that are clearly neurological and hormonal in origin.