Learning Styles and Sunday School Kids

by Tim Tutton
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He started to cry. He was in a college class. He was not an ordinary college student. He was in his early 30’s, a man who had been in the military, and now felt God’s call to the ministry.

The topic covered that day was on learning styles. He was personally affected. He stopped at my desk after class and asked, “Why didn’t anyone tell me this before?” I thought there was something wrong with me.

His learning style made it difficult for him to do well in the typical educational setting. He thought he was “dumb.” He tried hard, but could not measure up to some of the other students. He had done well in his particular assignment in the Navy. He was a “hands-on” kind of guy. Show him something or let him practice, and he “had it.” Tell him something or make him read it in a book, and he struggled. “Just let me figure it out,” were words he often used.

Learning styles are also important to understand in other settings, such as in the home or business. I worked for a man whose method of learning and understanding things was very different than mine. We worked together in an office and I was assigned the task of answering the phone during his lunch break. Upon returning from lunch and finding phone messages, he wanted the messages to be read to him, even if the messages were clearly written out.
My thought was, “Why should I read the messages? I’ve written it in black and white, and I even have good penmanship?” But he and I are different. God made us different.

So are learning styles really that important? Having a basic understanding of learning styles will help you, in your understanding of yourself and other. Your understanding will help you become more effective in your own educational pursuits, and more effective in the reaching and training of others. Yes, the way a person learns has a great deal of influence, especially in formal learning settings like school, college and even Sunday School. It can be compared to a child having poor eyesight and not being able to read the white board, or another child being unable to read a test paper. What about the child who can not read a piece of paper that was printed in blue ink? All of these children appear “normal,” but they have limitations due to the way they are made. They have done nothing wrong, and they are not “weird.” They are different and their limitations can be corrected. The first two children with corrective optical’s, and the third child, with an understanding teacher who makes sure all papers are printed in black ink.
For many years, educator’s classification of learning styles was based on the way an individual received and processed information. There are three classification that were often used. These classifications are called modalities. The question that used to be asked in working with a person was, “Does this individual learn best by hearing, seeing or moving?” Those who learn best by hearing are said to have an auditory preference. It was estimated that 20% of the population learn best that way. Some learn best by seeing information. This is called the visual preference. About 40% learn best this way. Some say that percentage may be as high as 80%. Others need to move and touch, so they are said to have a tactile/kinesthetic preference.

Some researchers refer to four modalities splitting the tactile/kinesthetic into two separate learning preferences. The tactile learner is greatly influenced by touch. The kinesthetic learner must move to learn. One thing to remember is that each person will have a dominate learning preference, but will learn to a lesser degree from another modality. Although a learner may discern what way they learn best, they are usually not conscious of how their learning is affected by other modalities. A typical learner uses all the modalities to learn.
The State College of Florida recently revised this list to include nine classifications which they call “learning differentials.”

- **Visual Language**: Language skills are learned best by sight and reading.
- **Visual Numerical**: Numbers are learned and remembered better when the numbers are written.
- **Auditory Language**: A person learns best by listening.
- **Auditory Numerical**: Learns best with numbers when they can hear them.
- **Tactile Concrete**: Learn best when they can touch what they are studying.
- **Social Individual**: Learns best by working alone.
- **Social Group**: Learns best by interacting in a group.
- **Oral Expressiveness**: Expresses self best when talking.
- **Written Expressiveness**: Expresses self best when writing.

These categories have some value and validity, but need more development to totally comprehend what is happening in the lives of individuals.

Several learning theories have been developed to understand the way children learn. One of the simplest theories is that proposed by Neil Fleming, an educational developer. He was also written about in an article entitled “Learning Styles Again, VARKing up the Right Tree.” According to Fleming, children learn from four major styles. Each child will show one of these styles as his primary learning method, but will also have a secondary leaning style. His learning style theory is developed using the acrostic VARK.
• **Visual learning style**: Preferred learning style by seeing and memorizing visual components.

• **Auditory learning style**: Preferred learning style by listening, remembering, and following instructions.

• **Reading/writing preferred style**: Centers around reading and referencing along with possible writing and note-taking.

• **Kinesthetic learning style**: Loves to explore and understands things by “playing around.”

Fleming continues by explaining how to identify a child’s learning styles using his model.

If the child is drawn to art, painting, craft, and books with pictures, then the child is probably a visual learner.

If the child remembers most of the things that he hears and responds accurately to most of the commands and instructions given to him, that child is a verbal or auditory learner. This child usually does not take notes and sometimes will also appear distracted. When asking a question, the child will answer correctly or accurately.

A child that tends to read and is drawn to objects that require detailed attention and cross-referencing, is likely to be a read-write learner. The child will glean much from reading and research. He loves to take notes and prefers to take notes that are written in a form for him to copy. When studying for a test, this person will make copious notes, and attempt to visually memorize them.

If a child tends to explore things, hold things, manipulate objects, and often ends up becoming quite adept at handling objects, Fleming calls this person a kinesthetic learner. Fleming also states that this learning style is easier to identify if the person adapts quickly from being able to handle one object, to being able to work with another object, transferring what was learned from the first to the second, even if the second is more complex.
Joel Christensen, in an article entitled “Interpretation Can Target Everyone,” explains these four classifications a little differently. He states that the person with visual modality “learns or express what they have learned through art, sculpture, graphics and mapping.” He further explains that those with strong auditory perception are helped to learn through patterned sound” such as speech, music and song, and have a keen sense of rhythmic patterns. Those with a kinesthetic modality learn through patterned movement, such as gesturing, posturing, touch and physical action.

Christensen offers another modality which he calls symbolic/abstract. This would include reading, writing and arithmetic which have no meaning themselves, but relate to real or imagined things. He further includes a fifth possible modality, synergic or cooperative, which combines the symbolic/abstract with the visual.

Another way to understand these learning preferences is to listen to what the leaners say in a learning situation. A visual learner may say, “I see your point.” An auditory learner may say, “I hear that you are saying.” A kinesthetic learner will say, “I feel like we are moving in the right direction.” While a tactile learner says, “So, what are we going to do now?” Each learner is responding according to their perception of the learning situation.

All this is interesting information, but you may be asking, “How does this translate into helping a person or child learn?”
Some suggestions for the Auditory learner:

A. Use music and sound effects
B. Use speech and lectures
C. Have the students close their eyes and focus their listening skills
D. Listen through a funnel or tube
E. Use sounds to enhance a mood or emotion, such as:

- A train
- A horn
- An old-time piano
- Falling rain
- Wind
- Waves
- Rippling water
- City noise

F. Have the learner make sounds related to the material being taught or heard.
Some suggestions for the **Visual** learner:

A. Use slides and powerpoint presentations
B. Use pictures, drawings, graphic designs
C. Crafts
D. Printed words
E. Look at things in a new way:
   - Through a frame
   - Use a magnifying glass or binoculars
   - Through the branches of a tree
   - Through a tube
   - Using one eye
F. Look for shapes in nature
G. Use props to represent things that are being studied (a sandwich for layers of rock)
H. Use a mime or puppets

Some suggestions for the **Kinesthetic** learner:

A. Use movement
B. Imitate movement of animals, people, and things
C. Touch the objects being studied:
   - Fur
   - Textures
   - Ice
• Water
• Flowers
• Leaves

D. Lift, move, tinker, and manipulate things
E. Discover, take things apart, and put things together, explore, find
F. Play catch while learning rote memory lessons
G. Drawing, molding clay
H. Having the learners recall their reactions to certain tactile sensations: hot sand, cold grass, etc.

Some suggestions for the Symbolic or Abstract learner:

A. Printed handouts
B. Written poems, stories, and descriptions
C. Reading as a group
D. Preparing stories as a group
E. Singing from a song book
F. Writing songs to complement a specific lesson
G. Reading and researching projects
H. Use word association
As the years have gone by, there has been a great deal more research done in the area of learning styles. This has resulted in a different way to classify learning styles. There are four categories that are most often used now. The modalities (hearing, seeing and moving) are just part of the classifications. The learning style classifications now used are innovative learners, sometimes referred to as imaginative learners, analytic learners, common sense learners and dynamic learners. By understanding these classifications a teacher, parent, or individual can more effectively create a productive learning atmosphere.

Cynthia Ulrich Tobias, an expert on learning styles, and a frequent lecturer to homeschoolers, in her book, “The Way They Learn,” uses four different categories. She uses the classifications Dominant Concrete Sequential, Dominant Abstract Sequential, Dominant Abstract Random, and Dominant Concrete Random. My observations is that the dominant concrete sequential matches well to the common sense learner. The dominant abstract sequential matches the learning style of the analytic learner. The dominant abstract random can be compared to the innovative/imaginative learner. The dominant concrete random resembles the dynamic learner. Making these connections in the discussion here, we will use only the designations that follow.
The imaginative or innovative learners learn by listening and sharing ideas. They love to talk, but not just talk, discuss. Often this type of learner feels they are getting smarter the longer they talk because more ideas are being generated. They like to participate in small group discussions. These learners are seeking meaning to what they are learning. They’re favorite questions begin with “Why?” and “Why not?” They are sensitive, friendly and sociable individuals. They are students of human nature. They define themselves in terms of friendship. Often these individuals have careers in the humanities, personnel work, or counseling.

An innovative learner works best in a noisy setting. They like to have a “busy” work atmosphere where something is “happening.” They like to have people around them as they work. This type of learner likes to have people nearby so they can call on them at any time to “bounce something off” them. They love to hear other people’s opinions. This adds to their ability to think and formulate the answer to what they are learning. They want to make the world a better place. The innovative learner judges things they are learning based on value. They are seeking personal meaning in what is being taught.

An innovative learner does not like lectures, especially if the speaker drones on and on. They want to be involved in the teaching/learning process. An innovative learner wants to get to know the teacher so they can interact and glean from each other in a personal way. The innovative learner respects authority, and this is often gained by personal interaction with the instructor. Usually the innovative learner is very cooperative, but they do want to “have their say.”
This learner dislikes memorizing. An innovative learner does not enjoy working alone. Sometimes you will hear this type of learner say, “Where is everyone anyway?” An innovative learner loves to hear the teacher say, “Let’s move our chairs into a circle...” for they know that now they are really going to learn something.

Helping the  **innovative/imaginative** learner:

A. Explain why it is important to learn the topic being presented. Sometimes just simply giving the reason for doing something is enough to satisfy them.
B. The information must be directly related to the student’s life. Example: in teaching about water include the question, “How many ways did you use water yesterday?”
C. Relate the past to the present. Answer how what is being learned affects us as individuals.
D. Explain the “Why” near the beginning of the learning session.

Use these teaching methods:

A. Observation and reflection
B. Group interaction
C. Role play
D. Group singing
E. Story telling
F. Drama
G. Arts and crafts (if done in a group and for a specific explainable reason)
The innovative/imagination learner can be a joy to teach in the right setting. They “bloom” as they interact, discuss, share opinions and come to meaningful conclusions. This type of learner will not forget what has been gleaned and will recall the verbal interaction for a long time. Given the right circumstances for learning the innovative learner will “shine.”

The analytic learner wants “the facts.” They love information and lots of it. These learners want the information presented in a logical and sequential manner. They want notes to be given progressively. They enjoy listening and taking notes. The analytic learner wants the teacher to be organized and does not like a teacher who “skips around” in presenting the lesson. They also want the material to be clear and accurate. The analytic learner typically learns well in the traditional methodology used in most schools and colleges. That methodology has three components: lecture, notes, and testing.

Analytic learners are more interested in information than in people. However, they like to hear from individuals who can give them more information and insight into the topic being learned. This learner thinks in terms of correct or incorrect answer. They not only want the facts, they want the truth.

An analytic learner enjoys learning in a quiet setting. They can not understand how others can learn anything in a noisy, chaotic place. In college, you will find the analytic learners in a “study cubicle” behind the rows of books in the library. They are surrounded by notebooks, reference books and, of course, the class text. They are getting, gleaning, interpreting and committing to memory every important piece of information.
Often analytic learners become lawyers, statisticians, historians and accountants. They value facts, figures and the theoretical. They love research and finding the answer. Analyzing and finding errors is an enjoyable “game” to them. Archaeologists are often analytic learners. They take the facts they know, theorize logically what could have been and proceed to a very organized discovery. These learners want to add to the world’s knowledge.

An analytic learner sees himself as being an intellectual, able to think, reason, and bring things to a conclusion. They define themselves by how smart they are. In the typical classroom setting they will be identified as “smartest” because they get the best grades, usually ‘A’s. In a magazine article, Marlene LeFever, a Christian author and educator, writes this, “When I was a child, my parents gave me a dollar for every “A” on my report card. My brother, on the other hand, got a dollar for every subject he passed.”

Today my brother builds dune buggies and solar homes, and I write Christian education books.” I have an idea that Marlene LeFever is an analytic learner and her brother does not fit that learning style at all. Which sibling was smarter? Both are equally competent with the talents and abilities given them by the Lord.

Helping an analytic learner:

A. Lecture with notes provided and blanks to fill in.
B. Discussions…especially if it is structured. Even better would be questions
to answer during the discussion.
C. Class discussion focused on content
D. Films, power point presentations, overhead transparencies and other audio visual techniques
E. Guest speakers especially experts in field being discussed.
F. Competitions
G. Demonstrations
H. Self-study and research

The next learning style is the common sense learner. Sometimes this learner is referred to as the practical learner. This learner likes to move during the learning process. The common sense learner dislikes sitting quietly in the typical classroom learning setting. This type of learner can become very disruptive.

A few years ago I had a little boy in my Children’s Church who was this type of learner. He was 6 years old at the time. During class time, he would be on the floor, under the chair, kneeling on the chair, on the chair of the child next to him and, one time, he was even standing on the chair. Was he getting the lesson? If I had given him the chance, during the review game time, he would have answered all the questions about the lesson. Every answer would have been correct. Don’t think they are not “getting it.” They are learning but just learning in their own individual way.

I heard about a boy who would sit in the back of the school classroom and play with the doorknob on an unused door during class. As long as he could do that, he was able to pay attention and contribute to the class. One day a substitute teacher came to the class and would not allow him to play with the doorknob. He couldn’t handle the change, became disruptive
and ended up in the principal’s office. The regular teacher, upon her return, did everything she could to rectify the misunderstanding.

The common sense learner is realistic and practical in his learning process. He wants to know what the logical consequences to having the information. In his mind the information should help him do something. This learner seeks solutions to problems. He is a “fixer” and loves to make things happen. A common sense learner wants to make things work. He likes to try out things and do things. He doesn’t want to talk about things, he wants to do things. Because he is practical, he wants to find practical solutions to real life situations. The common sense learner is straightforward in his approach, and does not enjoy the theoretical or discussing a multitude of possibilities. He wants the solution and the “sooner the better.”

The common sense learner does not like text books or reading. However, he does enjoy “how-to” books. This learner can take a repair manual, read it, understand it, diagnose the problem and fix it. To him there is a good reason for the reading, finding the solution to the problem. He grades success by how well projects work. Often the common sense learner is mechanically adept and computer literate. He’s the car mechanic, the plumber, the electrician and the home builder.

The common sense learner often is impersonal and likes to work alone. This learner sometimes has a problem with authority, and will work around the authority structure to “get the job done.” He may not like working at the front desk at the car shop, but he will work well in the back under the car finding the problem and making the car run again. He will get great satisfaction in helping people by making their equipment work properly.
Help a *common sense* learner by:

A. Problem solving  
B. Inquiry  
C. Experiments  
D. Building, creating, making assignments  
E. Props  
F. Scenery  
G. Visual aids  
H. Computer generated games  
I. Computer generated projects  
J. Computer generated learning activities  
K. “How does it work” projects

The last learning style category is the *dynamic* learner. These learners are creative and enjoy creativity. They thrive on learning new things and teaching others their new discoveries. These learners love to lead and flourish in student directed classrooms. They are seeking new and hidden possibilities. They enjoy challenging complacency and are often enthusiastic and adventuresome. The dynamic learners enjoy the teachers who stimulate creativity and ask the questions, “What do you think?” or “How do you feel about...?”

The dynamic learners are typically good communicators and communicate with great skill. They enjoy dramatics and love to be involved with acting. This is a great way for them to demonstrate their new knowledge. Often they become extremely excited about a project or activity. They will
demand flexibility and will need options and loose structure. As they move forward on a project their decisions will sometimes be based on hunches or intuition not fact. The phrases, “I think” or “I feel” will occur frequently in their conversations, especially if they are given a leadership role.

One flaw for the dynamic learner is following through on a project to its conclusion. This learner likes to move from one project to another quickly and the motivation to do this centers around excitement. They are like this because they are good organizers, and once the organization is in place they want to move on. They are often motivated by experimental attitudes and behaviors. Their speech includes the phrase, “Let’s do...” or “Let’s try…”

Thus the dynamic learner needs structure, but it can not be too controlling and should be exercised with much wisdom or the dynamic learner will feel stifled. Remember this learner tends to disregard authority in their quest to get something done and “make a difference.”

Help the dynamic learner by:

A. Poetry
B. Skits and unstructured drama
C. Artwork
D. Music
E. Student led discussions and activities
F. Case studies
G. Open-ended discussions
H. Brainstorming
I. Interviews
J. Writing opinion articles

It would be easy to teach if all your students were from one group. It sure would be exciting to have all dynamic learners. So what do you do if some come from each of the four groups? Larry Richards developed a method he calls the Hook, Book, Look, Took method. Basically it is an outline using a question for the teacher to answer to help learners from each group. Here’s how it works:

- **Hook** – “Why study the lesson?” Helps the imaginative/innovative learner.
- **Book** – “What do I need to know?” Challenges the analytic learner.
- **Look** – “How does this apply to me?” Satisfies the common sense learner.
- **Took** – “What am I willing to invest in what I have learned?” Motivates the dynamic learner.
So what must be done by the teacher is to think and plan, recognizing the strengths, weaknesses and needs of each learning style, and develop a lesson plan and procedures that will maximize their potential within the learning time and structure.
There is another area that I would like to discuss in this paper. We have talked about learning styles and the two major ways to identify learning styles and methods used in teaching to the different styles. Now let’s consider some things that affect learning.

Our son, Timothy, has a neurological condition called sensory integration dysfunction. Basically this means that some of his senses do not work in the typical way. For example, he is extremely sensitive to sunlight. He reacts abnormally to touch. Certain foods he will not eat because of the texture. Timothy is not the only person who is affected by external stimuli. Everyone is to a certain degree.

Here are some elements that affect learning:

**Environmental**

- Sound – Some learn best with noise such as music, the television or just “activity” noise. Others need quiet with no sound distractions.
- Light – Some learners, probably most, work best with subdued or dim light.
• Temperature – Most learners do best when the temperature is neither too hot nor too cold, probably around the 68-70 degree range.

• Design – Some learners are distracted by the design of the room. If things in the room are not straight and orderly this can bother some people. If there are too many decorations, the learner can be distracted by having to study what is there.

**Emotional**

• Motivation – Some learners are highly motivated personally. Others will need outside encouragement such as praise, consequences and rewards.

• Persistence – All learners have a degree of persistence. This quality involves enduring and doing what is necessary to complete the task.

• Responsibility – Those who have a strong personal responsibility for their progress in learning will typically accomplish more than those who do not.

• Structure – Some learners work well with perimeters; “tell me what to do and how to do it and I will do it.” Others learners want loose boundaries; “tell me what you want and let me figure it out.”

**Sociological**

• Learning by self – Some learners need to be alone to learn well.

• Learning in pairs – Some learners learn best with a partner.
• Learning with peers – Some learners are motivated to learn by people their own age and grade.

• Learning on a team – For some the team concept works best. Maybe a strong leader and others with strengths and weaknesses all working together to reach the goal of each individual learning well.

• Learning with an adult – Some learners need the guidance and encouragement of an adult who will keep them moving toward the goal.

• Learning in a different setting – Some people like a change of setting to motivate learning. Moving the classroom outside or changing the seating pattern will influence learning.

Physical

• Intake...food/drink – Too much or too little food can hamper learning. The kinds of food can influence learning also.

• Time – Some work well early in the day, some later in the evening. Time of day plays a role in learning.

• Mobility – When memorizing something there are people who must pace back and forth. Others just want to stand. Others rock back and forth or move their arms dramatically.

Psychological

• Hemisphericity – Some people are left-brain dominant in their learning while others are right-brain. We are not going to discuss this aspect of learning in this paper.
• Impulsive or reflective – Personality does play a role in learning. Some people are very impulsive, while others are thinkers. The thinkers want the facts and to know the consequences before making a decision.

So many things affect learning. Our great God has made us very unique and has provided the desire to learn and develop. Using the knowledge that we have today about learning styles, modalities and the elements of learning, we can better understand ourselves and others. Specifically, we can more effectively teach and motivate those that God has placed in our lives. We want to see them develop into mature and productive Christians. Colossians 1:10 says, “That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.” This should be our desire for every believer and especially for those with which we have contact. Let us determine, with God’s help, to be as effective in our teaching as we possibly can.

Recommended books:

LeFever, Marlene D., Learning Styles, Reaching Everyone God Gave You to Teach, copyright 2001, Cook Communications Ministries, Colorado Springs, Colorado.