

EDUCATIONAL SECTION



NOTES FROM THE CLASSROOM

By Julie Staley



Making the most of your academic year: Use your learning style

If a child can't learn the way we teach maybe we should teach the way they learn.

ONLY yesterday I sat down with concerned parents who were worried that their son didn't know how to study and although extremely bright never quite made it when it comes to tests and examinations.

For years teachers and students have had to struggle with how to teach and how to learn effectively. Each teacher has their particular style but then so do most students. The problems develop when teachers and students don't match. You may have noticed that even your own children learn differently than you do causing you to question why they're not as interested or not "catching on" the same way you did at their age.

You may also be wondering why some teachers were "better" teachers than others or why you liked a certain subject over another. These are actually very important observations. Educational science has studied these questions for years and has determined that when some individuals struggle with learning it may be entirely a question of how they are being taught.

Each of us processes and distinguishes information differently based on our personality patterns, how we interact socially and a general like or dislike for the subject matter or interest. We all like to learn about subjects we are interested in and often struggle in areas that hold no interest.

Revising for examinations in particular is not an easy thing to cope with and it is important that the students' time is used effectively, making the most of every strategy available. This is why understanding learning styles is a passion for me and something we support fully during our revision support pro-

grammes throughout the academic year.

Knowing your own child's learning style can make a significant difference to their learning and development throughout their academic life. At the age of nine my daughter entered the Spanish state system. At this time she could not speak Spanish well and had no knowledge of Catalan. It was a huge step and even though the school support was outstanding she still struggled with Catalan, especially in new subjects. As we know the Spanish system expects students to take numerous examinations at regular intervals. Underperforming was causing Grace huge stress and as parents we knew we had to do something to help her.

Firstly, we asked Judith, our excellent Spanish and Catalan tutor here at MTA to give Grace extra dedicated support and secondly I used my previous experience to understand Grace's learning style to set a revision framework for her to work with. Grace has an auditory preference, with visual tendencies as a secondary style. The rest, as they say is history and her recent successes at school and now university have made me a very proud mum!

So what is all the fuss about learning styles?

• The idea that learning styles vary among students has taken off in recent years. The concept of learning styles has become the cornerstone of good practise. Many educators advocate teaching methods that take advantage of the differences in the way in which students learn. It is endorsed by UK government, reinforced by local authorities and



taught at teacher training centres. The basic theory of learning styles is straightforward. The main principle is that we all learn in different ways. We generally have a preferred style, where when used effectively helps retain information in our long term memory. It is an excellent tool when structuring personalised learning to give an added benefit to the student.

There are various models available to educators, which can over complicate the process of identifying each style and working with the student. However, the most commonly used system, and the one which is promoted by the Department of Education and Skills is the VAK model of classification. This divides learning into visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners; those learners where what they see is key, those who do better by listening and audio activities and finally those who learn best by physical activity.

How can teachers work with this knowledge?

• From a classroom point of view it is not always clear how teachers should respond. Clearly it is not possible to deliver lessons in a way that matches every student's learning style or try to encourage less developed ways of learning. As ever, the aim of

teaching is to make short term learning as enjoyable as possible and to develop learners to achieve a range of skills that can be adapted to all situations. Most schools that embrace the VAK model encourage teachers to make lessons accessible to all pupils by including all of the elements which appeal to all different kinds of learner.

Where a more personalised learning is undertaken there are some key activities for each learning style which will most definitely enhance memory retention and make any learning unique, effective and enjoyable.

Is it a good idea?

• There are many academics who are sceptics but plenty of educators are convinced that learning styles have changed the effectiveness of their lessons. Even the sceptics admit that, despite the lack of scientific evidence, there are definitely benefits from this approach.

Understanding a student's learning style is an important part of building a personalised learning strategy. Obviously it is very important that educators do not just 'label' a student or simply talk about a particular learning style but look to develop a range of activities which suit the student best and make their learning experience the most effective.

As a parent it is a fantastic tool to be able to work with and support your child with. If you have read this article and want to know more, please don't hesitate to contact me and we can discuss key activities for you to do throughout the coming academic year.

You may want to start with understanding your individual patterns of learning and how those mentioned above affect how you learn. From your perspective you can then try to understand the patterns of your child. The differences between you and your child or student are not necessarily wrong or right and you will most likely find their patterns are different, sometimes very different than your own. It's important, however, to capitalise on what works for your child and to help them to utilise those patterns and learning styles toward a greater capacity to learn and remember.

For both the parent and the student to know how he/she learns is one way to help them succeed. This is particularly effective when linked to the lessons your child finds most difficult.

For me, the proof as they say is in the pudding. I have first-hand evidence that working effectively within your learning style gives a good base to success. However, as a final note for all of those students out there currently studying hard. It is only part of the jigsaw; there is no substitution for practise, practise, practise!

Remember there is help out there so do not struggle alone.

At MTA we are delighted to build a revision programme to suit your child's needs. Be aware however that if you leave it too late even the most talented tutors can't make the difference with or without learning styles!

