



Learning Styles Matter

Interview by Megan Schmidt, editor

Classrooms are rich with variation. Aside from differences such as gender and ethnicity, each student may also come from a unique socioeconomic background, religion and family structure.

Most teachers would agree each student behaves and communicates differently from one another. Some listen intently to stories, others are the first to raise their hand during classroom discussions, some prefer independent study and others shine while participating in science experiments. There are teacher's pets, bullies and mediators. Some educators may attribute these differences to personality types or what's happening at home. Some educators believe these behaviors and preferences displayed are manifestations of another type of variation—learning style.

Proponents of individualized instruction say learning styles influence the way students understand information and solve problems and that teaching to these preferred styles may increase students' educational success.

Judy and Joe Pauley have spent many years in the classroom teaching a variety of subjects, including chemistry, physics, English, history, Chinese and English as a second language. For more than 21 years, the Pauleys have championed individualized instruction and have taught educators how to implement this approach in the classroom. They are the authors of "[*Here's How to Reach Me: Matching Instruction to Personality Types in Your Classroom*](#)," which incorporates their research and practice of the [Process Communications Model](#) and interviews with 45 students and 60 teachers to identify six different types of student. The book explains what motivates each type and how each prefers to communicate.

The Pauleys will present a session on individualized instruction at the 2013 National Quality Education Conference being held [in Milwaukee Nov. 17-18](#). Recently, Judy Pauley answered some questions about learning styles, providing a preview of what attendees will learn [at their conference session](#).

Education Brief: *How old is the concept of individualized learning?*

Pauley: Educators have known for more than 100 years that everyone learns differently. The traditional teaching style was lecture-based because that is how many teachers learned. The 20th century philosopher John Dewey tried to change that and said, “We learn by doing.” That led to the standard of teachers assigning 10 math equations for homework every night. Additional research led to an understanding of the visual learning style and the use of pictures, slide strips and movie clips as instructional tools. However, these advances did nothing for kinesthetic or tactile learners. Most of our classrooms today still do not include much, if any, activities to help kinesthetic and tactile learners learn, who are driven by fun and hands-on activities.

Not only do students learn differently, communication and sources of motivation also vary by learning style. If teachers want to reach every student, they need to individualize the way they communicate with each student and incorporate approaches in every class to individualize instruction. Author Tom Savage said, “Students who get their needs met in class seldom cause problems because doing something that interferes with getting their needs met is not in their self interest.”

Education Brief: *Does the current model of education do a good job of taking into account the fact that people do learn differently?*

Pauley: People tend to teach the way they learn. Most new teachers say their college education and training did not prepare them to teach in today’s classroom. They appreciate having experienced teachers as mentors. Everyone pays lip service to individualized learning, but very few teachers are being prepared to apply it in the classroom. Our research shows that when teachers implement individualized teaching, there are very few discipline problems in class. There would be little need for alternative schools and the

dropout rate would reduce. Children do not attend school expecting to be miserable. It just turns out that way because many teachers do not teach the student the way the student learns. Students sit in an environment that is uncomfortable for them until they cannot stand it any longer. Then, they do something about it—they act out.

Education Brief: *Do you think there is a connection between learning styles—whether or not this is being addressed in education—and the current science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) workforce shortage?*

Pauley: There definitely is a tie between learning styles and the STEM shortage. At one conference we attended, we heard the dean of an education department tell another dean that as an elementary school teacher, she used to delay her science lesson until it was the end of the day in hopes that something would happen and she would not have to teach it. How likely was it that she made her science lesson exciting or fun for students? Science and math can be made fun and exciting if educators teach for all learning styles. They must include something in every class to motivate every student and teach using the language of each student. We explain how to do this in our book, [*Here's How to Reach Me: Matching Instruction to Personality Types in Your Classroom.*](#)

Unfortunately many teachers, especially elementary school teachers, are afraid of science and math. Their students pick up on that attitude and get turned off at an early age. By the time they have a teacher who may turn them on to these subjects, they do not have the foundation in math or science to catch up.

What do elementary school teachers need to do to project interest and confidence in math and science and teach to all learning styles? They need to be more comfortable with science and not be afraid of teaching it. They also need to involve students in more age appropriate hands-on science activities and get parents excited about the sciences their students are studying. Parents must stop discouraging students, especially girls, from studying math and science. One sixth grade teacher told us that one of her female students performed at the top of her class in math. At a parent-teacher conference, with the girl present, the teacher told the mother what an excellent math student the girl was. The mother replied, “I don’t know where she gets it from. I was never any good at math.”

The girl lost interest in math and science—and a budding scientist was lost. It will take a village to get interest in STEM subjects back on track. Teaching to different learning styles and individualizing the way teachers motivate and communicate with students will go a long way in reversing the trend.

Education Brief: *How much variation typically exists in a classroom when it comes to learning styles?*

Pauley: In just about every classroom, there are students who are auditory learners, visual learners, kinesthetic learners and tactile learners. Including something in every class for each of these learning styles sounds difficult, but it is easier than the alternative—being a lion tamer. Teachers who individualize will have a more engaged classroom with less disciplinary problems.

The six learning styles we focus on in our teaching are based on the perceptions of the six types and the way they perceive the world and take in information.* Rebels and Promoters tend to be kinesthetic learners. Imaginers tend to be tactile learners. Harmonizers tend to be visual learners. Persisters and thinkers tend to be auditory learners. Harmonizers, imaginers and thinkers are the new terms for types previously known as Reactors, Dreamers, and Workaholics. The names were changed last month. Kinesthetic learners need whole body movement. Tactile learners need to touch things. A teacher in the San Diego School District once said, “You add another entire dimension to individualized learning.” What he meant was that we individualize the perceptual language teachers use with each of their students, we individualize the preferred channel of communication they use, and we individualize the way they motivate each student by including something in every lesson that will motivate each student to want to learn the material.

Education Brief: *Why does this topic interest you? Is there a personal experience connected?*

Pauley: We are losing our artists, entrepreneurs and Einsteins—our reflective students—because teachers don’t know how to reach them. They do not know how to play to their

strengths and do not speak their language. These students make up about one-third of the student population. In our 21st century technical society, we cannot afford to write off these students. Many of them, if given the nurturing they need, will become some of our best and brightest future citizens. These three personality types comprise the majority of students who are dropping out of high school and end up in circles of drugs, crime, jail and death. We need them to be productive citizens and they need a quality education in order to achieve this.

We have a daughter who has Downs Syndrome. She is a kinesthetic learner who is motivated by having fun. One day, her special education teacher called to tell us she was at her wits end dealing with her. We made several suggestions. Two weeks later, the teacher called us. "It's amazing to see the change in your daughter and the best part is that I'm not tired any more going home. Will you come in and do an in-service session for the regular education teachers? They don't know how to reach their creative students any more than I did," she said. As our daughter moved on to middle school and high school, we offered to host more in-service sessions. Then phone calls started to pour in from other schools requesting sessions.

Our friend's daughter is also a kinesthetic learner who is motivated by having fun. She was expelled from day care because of miscommunication between her and her teachers. The day care wrote a three-page evaluation that did not contain a single positive word about her. Two years later, she went to kindergarten. At a back to school event, the kindergarten teacher said, "This is my classroom. We do things my way. Not everyone buys into it immediately, but eventually they all come around." One day the young girl said, "I'm never going to school again." Of course, the law would not allow her to quit school and she got ulcers in kindergarten. Things improved in the first grade when the teacher began applying the concepts in our book "*Here's How to Reach Me*." The second grade teacher did the same and soon the girl genuinely enjoyed school and made many friends.

The third grade teacher did not apply these concepts and the girl was in trouble nearly every day. After the fourth grade, her parents transferred her to a nearby progressive school where they teach the way creative students learn. She went from hating

school to loving it. Now, she is a junior in high school and recently we heard her tell her older sister that she is starting to have stomach problems again.

Education Brief: *What are some ways a teacher can accommodate different learning styles in the classroom?*

Pauley: In chapters two to seven in our book, [*Here's How To Reach Me*](#), we include ways teachers can motivate each of the six different types of students. In chapter nine, we dedicate an entire page for each type that explains how they behave when distressed. We also offer many suggestions on positive interventions teachers can use to invite them to stop behaving negatively.

One of the things we tell graduate teachers is to greet students at the door, and provide “battery charges” for their motivational needs. That way, no matter what happened to the student at home, on the way to school, in another class, in the hallway, at lunch or at recess, they enter class in a positive state of mind. Here’s just a few ways teachers can reach students of each type:

Creative

A few ways teachers can motivate creative students are, let them out of their seat occasionally and move around, communicate with them playfully, encourage them to do hands on experiments in science and activities in other subjects, encourage their creativity by having them role play, write short stories, or draw pictures illustrating the lesson.

Entrepreneurs

To motivate entrepreneurs, teachers can do things to help the student interact with their peers. For example, teachers can put them in charge of something, let them think on their feet to answer questions, or let them move around, act, dance or sing.

Reflective

To motivate reflective students, teachers can help them prioritize assignments, allow them their own private space and alone time to reflect and encourage them to be imaginative.

Empathetic

To motivate empathetic students who like to share feelings, teachers can greet them by name with a smile every day, allow them to work in groups with their friends, provide opportunities for them to be peer tutors and allow them time to socialize during class occasionally.

Logical

To motivate students who are logical and love to process a lot of data, teachers can provide a syllabus with due dates, acknowledge and reward accomplishments, display their work on the bulletin board and encourage them to mentor other students.

Conscientious

To motivate students who are conscientious and form opinions quickly, teachers can show that they respect them, encourage them to share their opinions, encourage them to write editorials or letters to the editor about subjects they are concerned about, encourage them to mentor or tutor other students. Teachers can also encourage and reward honesty and integrity and serve as a role model for them, etc.

Education Brief: *What do you think education will look like in 10 or 20 years from now?*

Pauley: Educators have recognized the benefit of individualized instruction for decades. The question is, why have they not implemented this practice? Change is uncomfortable. People will pay lip service to the flavor of the month, but often continue to teach the way they are comfortable teaching. Usually, that means they will teach the same way they learn. Students who learn how their teachers learn will continue to do well in their classes. Those who do not learn that way will continue to struggle.

I am an optimist. We can teach our new teachers to individualize the way they teach. We must first persuade universities to model individualized instruction when they teach their courses so that future teachers can see how their professors individualize instruction. In this way, they can be adequately prepared to apply individualized instruction in their classes when they teach.

Currently, 50% of new teachers leave the field after a few years. This is partly because no one helps the teachers get their motivational needs met and they feel they are

not adequately prepared to teach and get discouraged. A stifling environment in some schools is also a factor. Many people are working hard to improve our education system. I believe that with a concerted joint effort we can do so. If we always do what we always did the way we did it, we will always get what we've always got. That is not acceptable in today's rapidly changing world.

***Editor's notes:**

For more information about the six personality types identified in this article, see page 3 of ["Establishing Relationships: The Key To Maintaining Quality Teams,"](#) by Judy Pauley or ["Establishing Relationships to Reduce Bullying and Increase Student,"](#) by Judy and Joe Pauley.

Joe Pauley also contributed to this report.