

Teaching to Reach Every Child

Stephen Haag discovers how recognizing different learning styles can solve an educator's challenge

Why can't they learn the same way I was taught? After all, it worked for me. Plus, schools have been functioning this way for years. Straight rows and silent noting while the teacher lectured. Memorization, repetition, and recital were the norm. Snack at 10:30 am. If you didn't eat it then, you lost your chance. Getting out of your seat? Not a chance. Classrooms should be orderly with desks neatly arranged and each student in his assigned seat. When children are quiet, we assume they are learning. Order. Discipline. Control. That's what it takes for learning to occur. Or is it?

For some, yes. What about those students who constantly seem to cause disruption? Or those who appear disinterested? Or those who just don't seem to get it? Some are always doodling. Some sing to themselves. Others, move their feet, a ruler, or tap on their desk. When we leave such students on their own, they fail. Rather, we fail. How can we get these students to conform? Must they? Should they?

We teach because we care. If it bothers you when you realize that you can't seem to reach one of your students no matter what you try, read on.

No matter what was tried for a second-grade, eight year old boy known as a terror, he would not conform to class rules. The staff tutored, counseled, implored, and threatened; he simply could neither sit still nor stay awake during his first period math class. In the third grade, those behaviors continued. He was failing and extra work and attention after school made no difference. Again, neither discipline nor rewards worked. Then one day, everything changed.

During a writing assignment, I noticed him lying on the floor, fully engaged in his task. It was the first time I had seen him concentrate to this degree. Fighting my immediate instinct to order him back into his seat, I left him alone with his thoughts and writing. The results were astonishing. From that day forward, we had a pact. I explained his assignments through short stories and anecdotes, and he, without distracting others, had to complete them and maintain passing grades. If he kept his part of

the agreement, he was allowed to leave his seat to sit, as he felt comfortable, to read, do his math, or engage in any other learning activity. He then began to excel.

That was years ago, during my first year of teaching. I thought I had produced a miracle rather than just being lucky. Recently, in an Instructional Leadership course, I came upon a model (Dunn & Dunn, 1993, 1999) that clarified that previous event. It became clear that all persons learn differently from each other. Most young students are global and need to feel comfortable while concentrating. Such youngsters find comfort in informal seating — on carpeting, a floor, a cushion, an easy chair or a bed. Others are analytic and prefer formal seating, such as most classrooms provide. Others are integrated and can learn and retain new and difficult information in either seating design. The young man I have written about must have been global. He needed to choose his environment and feel comfortable while learning.

I never again will require that every child sit at a desk or assume that if he does not, he is not paying attention. For me, as long as each child learns, behaves, and does not distract classmates, whatever works for him will work for me. Now, I just have to explain my reasoning to my supervisor. **X**

References

Dunn, R., & Dunn, K., (2003). The Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model and its Theoretical Cornerstone. In Rita Dunn and Shirley A. Griggs (Eds.), *Synthesis of the Dunn and Dunn learning-style model research: who, what, when, where, and so what?* (p. 2).

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