Rhizome guide to

Visual Auditory & Tactile Learners

There are many different theories of learning styles. A learning style is the way an individual interacts with learning, accesses it, or processes the learning they are engaged with. If the methods of a trainer or teacher don’t accommodate the learning styles of their learners then some people may not be able to learn effectively.

One of the simplest, and most useful, theories is that of Visual, Auditory and Tactile (or Kinaesthetic) learners. These can be seen as 3 doorways through which learning can enter the brain. The right stimulation opens the doors and learning can take place. A lack of stimulation can ensure the doors stay firmly shut limiting, or preventing, learning.

Visual learners learn best when they are receiving visual stimulation, whether it’s colour, graphics, photos or video, or just engaging facial expressions and body language. Visual learners can often be spotted in a group as they are most likely to doodle. Rather than this being a sign of lack of concentration, in the visual learner it is a way of stimulating their brain to learn. They may also take notes as this turns spoken words into a written (i.e visual) form.

Auditory learners learn best through sound. That could be background music, or an interesting tone of voice for example. Auditory learners may well say (or at least mouth) words to themselves – a mechanism that helps them to hear the sound of the written word.
Tactile learners learn through movement, from getting ‘hands on’ with their learning. This doesn’t necessarily mean experiential learning, although it may be. It just requires some physical movement – so activities that involve moving whilst thinking, such as spectrum lines or roving ideastorms, are enough. Tactile learners may create their own movement if none is provided – whether tapping their toes or their pen on the desk.

Of course no one individual is a pure Visual, Auditory or Tactile learner. We are all a mix and many of us can learn through a wide variety of means even if they don’t best suit our learning styles. But some of us do have strong preferences, and for those people a lack of the right stimulation can be a serious obstacle to learning.

**Implications for our training**

Whenever we are training a group we will have a mix of these 3 learning styles present. That places a responsibility on us to ensure that we use a variety of different methods in our training sessions. It can be as simple as supporting spoken information with a visual aid, of using a spectrum line instead of a seated discussion, or of including regular physical games. If we get it wrong we prevent our trainees learning, but if we get it right we increase the learning that’s taking place.

Learning styles also help us to put problem behaviour in workshops into perspective. Suddenly a person behaving in a disruptive way, who we might normally write off as an “awkward customer”, might now be seen as a learner not having their needs met. Perhaps the group has been sat for over an hour with nothing but auditory and visual stimulation. The Tactile learner has good reason to be getting restless, frustrated or bored. Once we realise this we can solve the problem through prior planning, or a quick change of activity in the moment.