Learning Styles

Topic: The How To of Youth Work

Author: Beth Perrott

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Biography:
Beth Perrott is a Youthworker at Beccles Baptist Church in Suffolk. Beth has been in Christian ministry for nine years. She studied Applied Theology at Moorlands College. Beth has two children, a boy and a girl. At the moment her and her husband are redesigning their garden so find themselves knee deep in mud at every spare moment.

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time lessons were, on the most part, taught in the same way- a teacher would tell information to the class and students were supposed to retain that information. However, over the last decade or so the importance of differing learning styles has been at the forefront of education. A learning style is a person’s natural pattern of acquiring and processing information. Not all people are able to take in vast amounts of information through verbal lessons, people learn in different ways. Ignacio Estrada once said “if a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn”.

THEOLOGY

The bible speaks of ‘gaining knowledge’ and ‘increasing in learning’. 2 Timothy 3:16 says all of Scripture is useful for teaching and training in righteousness. As youthworkers we teach scripture, making that scripture more accessible to young people is vital to our work. By applying various learning styles to our lessons, we help them to understand the bible better, in a way that is most helpful to them; this is how we train young Christians in biblical knowledge and application.

Not only will you have a preferred learning style for your own personal learning, as a teacher you will likely have a favoured learning style of teaching so be aware to teach all different learning styles, not just your preferred one. Although it is not always possible to teach a range of learning styles, as we reach out to each person’s abilities and individual preferences we may enable our young people to grasp even better the great wonders of our God.

PRACTICALITIES

There are many different learning styles but we will focus on a basic 3: Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic.

Visual Learners
Visual Learners process information best through visual elements. They are best aided in their
learning when they can see information, whether this be in pictures or text. They like to take notes and make lists and they think in pictures. They may find it hard to listen to someone talking for a long period of time. Be aware of visual learners in your youth group, they may interrupt and can be fast talkers as they try to piece together a picture of information in their head.

Auditory Learners
Auditory Learners respond well when things are explained aloud or when they read information aloud themselves. The once popular verbal lessons suit them well. Auditory learners benefit from group discussion. You can spot an auditory learner as they tend to speak slowly and explain things well but can get easily distracted by sounds and can hum or sing often.

Kinesthetic Learners
Kinesthetic learners learn best through hands on activities, problem solving and trial-and-error. They can be some of the hardest students because they have short attention spans and find it hard to sit still for long. They like to touch things and try things out, and can often seem distracted and disruptive.

REFLECTION & LEARNING

In my church youth group we have up to 20 teenagers in our bible study and they represent a variance of learning styles, as does any group. Our youth work team purposefully design our programme to cater for different learning styles so that each person can learn to their full capacity. Not only does this help them to learn but it enables them to stay focussed which means they distract the group less and the session runs smoothly.

Visual learners
In the past I have tried a note taking process with some young people called graphic recording. The young people draw a visual representation of the sermon or bible study. This can include words, pictures, mind maps, abstract drawings, arrows- anything that will help them to remember key points. We’ve found this particularly helpful for times when students have remained in the ‘adult’ service, and for visual learners this works really well as they will remember the picture they drew and from there they can bring to mind some topics from the talk. In a bible study pictures, mind maps, videos and demonstrations can be useful for visual learners. We try to use an array of pictures and words and place them on a table or board as we engage in the bible study, this helps visual learners to stay focussed and lets everyone know what exactly we’re talking about if they’ve zoned out for a minute!

Auditory learners
Auditory learners prefer to hear information rather than read it so we find it helpful to summarise a bible passage after reading it together, particularly if it’s a long passage or a new story. Auditory learners find group discussion really helpful as they can process other people’s ideas and opinions and use this to aid their learning. Most people remember songs (we’ve all got a jingle from a television advert stuck in our heads at some point!) so, in our youth group we’ll sometimes put a bible verse to a tune which helps auditory learners to remember, and they don’t seem to mind it being too corny. Auditory learners can benefit from role play and drama as they can hear the story or express it through words themselves.
**Kinesthetic learners**

Kinesthetic learners love to get ‘hands on’ with a story so when telling a parable from the bible give them something to feel, or focus on the feelings that people may have experienced. Object lessons are great for kinesthetic learners as it gives them something to touch. Short blocks of teaching will help them to keep focused and learn better so try to mix up your teaching between speaking, discussion, group work, and hands on activities related to the theme. They like crafts and learn well through games which are related to the topic.

**DEVELOPING PRACTICE**

I would encourage you to try tailoring your lesson to different learning styles and see what effect this has on your group. If you have a small group you could get them to take a ‘learning styles’ quiz (you can find lots online) or think yourself about which behaviours they display and which learning style they might prefer and modify your teaching to suit them.

A great book to read if you’d like to investigate more about learning styles is Marlene D. Lefever’s ‘Learning Styles’, she has some great ideas about how to capture people’s attention by adjusting our teaching to people’s learning styles.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

You can find lots of information about learning styles on the internet. Here are a few I have found most helpful.

http://childrensministry.com/articles/how-to-tailor-your-lessons-to-kids-learning-styles/
http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/discipleship/rethinking/learning
www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/churchhomeleadership/080102.html

And if you want to take it even further, I thought this was great

http://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/article?id=2314