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**UNLOCK THEIR LEARNING STYLE!**

**UNLOCK YOUR TEACHING STYLE!**

**AN INTERACTIVE JOURNEY**

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*Research has found that when teaching style matches learning style, motivation and performance improve. While learning style systems abound, this paper seeks to identify systems and thinking that are of value in piano pedagogy. Participants will learn to assess their own learning style and identify others' learning styles. Ways to design piano lessons to accommodate disparate learning styles will be explored. Practical approaches and activities for elementary and intermediate levels will also be presented, some involving audience participation.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout history, many things have been said about teaching. Despite much discussion and research, however, current teaching, including piano teaching, often lacks color and effectiveness. We have at our disposal a multitude of theories and philosophies. We have numerous tools for assessing intelligence, personality type, learning preference, and learning style. If someone is willing to dig through the pile of possibilities in search of the perfect system, you might get a comment something along these lines:

‘I know my child is a global-spatial-social-reflective-kinesthetic-sanguine-abstract-melancholy-left-brained platypus. I’m just not sure what to do with it.’ (Barnier, 2009, p. 14)

The concept of learning styles is not a recent revelation. As long ago as 343 B.C., Aristotle observed variations in the abilities of children, commenting that ‘each child possesses different talents and skills.’ Centuries later, researchers in the early 1900s began to advance personality theories and to classify people according to how they memorized. This interest subsided, only to surface again towards the latter half of the twentieth century. Currently, there are over thirty formal learning style systems available to teachers. (Cortland, nd)

Research has found that when teaching style matches learning style, motivation and performance improve (Dunn & Dunn, 1978). A match between teaching style and learning style is usually accidental. We have all experienced that student who is easy to teach. We tell ourselves that the student is smarter or more musical than other students, when often the student simply learns the same way that we do. We applaud our teaching skill with this student, but count ourselves blameless when others fail to learn. The act of matching

teaching style to learning style is tricky business. First of all, the very term “learning style” is loosely used, and is interpreted differently from system to system. Some systems are highly complex, while others are simple. Further, a student may have one set of learning preferences at age five, another set at age twelve, and yet another at age eighteen. Personalities and learning preferences are not fixed, but in a constant state of evolution. Therefore, efforts to categorize students according to learning style must always be held suspect to error.

If targeting a student’s learning style is so difficult, then why even try? The answer is twofold. First, through the process of observation and assessment, the teacher learns more about the student than they would otherwise. Second, and most importantly, the teacher’s focus moves from themselves to the student. This shift results in student-centered learning, as opposed to teacher-centered learning.

### **ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING STYLE**

The learning style and personality type assessment tool that appeals to me is available from a company called Performance Learning Systems (PLS). Called the Kaleidoscope Profile, the inventory consists of a series of questions designed to determine personality temperament, organizational preference (‘big picture’ versus step-by-step), perceptual preference (how you view the world, either abstractly or concretely), and finally, sensory modality preference (PLS, nd). This assessment tool may be taken by children of different ages, even as young as eight, and by educators and people in the workplace. I have found it to be easy to administer, fun to take, and carefully designed with current research in mind.

I have given this inventory to many piano students. Consisting of several parts, the section dealing with sensory modality preference is most relevant and easily applied to piano teaching. Therefore, I will now focus upon this preference. Following are four statements. Choose the one which seems most true about you.

- A. I learn best by seeing, watching, and reading.
- B. I learn best by hearing, speaking, discussing, and thinking aloud.
- C. I learn best by moving and doing things.
- D. I learn best by touch and feel, by relationship and emotion.

If you chose A, your sensory modality is probably visual. This means that you prefer to learn with visual stimuli in the environment. You probably learned to read quickly, are detailed, speak concisely, and like lots of visual variety in your home and workplace.

If you chose B, the auditory modality is probably your preference, learning most easily through listening to others speak, listening to yourself speak, and talking things through with others. You may be very quiet in the classroom because you don't want to miss anything; however, you are often quite talkative in other situations.

If you chose C, you are mostly likely a kinesthetic learner who finds physical movement to be helpful while learning, whether it be acquiring knowledge or solving a problem. In other words, you are not too happy sitting still, as this blocks your creativity.

If you chose D, then you are considered to be a tactual learner. The tactual modality is included as a sensory modality by the online education company Performance Learning Systems, (PLS, nd). In other systems this modality is termed 'tactile,' rather than 'tactual,' and refers to physical touch alone. 'Tactual' refers instead to emotion and touch together. The tactual learner most easily accesses learning when they have an emotional connection to the subject matter, or has a positive relationship with their teacher or others in a group.

## **VIDEO CLIPS OF TEACHING ACTIVITIES**

The following video clips showed piano teaching activities that would be considered visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or tactual.

The first clip showed an activity that visual students would enjoy (Video clip #1). In this activity, two students were given a written list of questions about a piece they had never seen before. They were given twenty seconds to silently read the list. The list was then taken away, and the music shown. After twenty seconds, the music was removed, and the list of questions returned, with the students asked to answer the questions in writing. Finally, the music was shown again, and the students were allowed to check their answers against the music. This simple activity not only heightened the students' ability to notice important elements in a score, but also reminded them to look over a score before sight reading.

Visual students are excellent observers. Video clip #2 showed a student watching the teacher play a two-note slur, once with good technique and two times with bad technique. The

student then decided which of the three was correct. The student could also have been videotaped playing two-note slurs. This video could be watched by the student, allowing them to analyze their movement in comparison to the teacher's model. These activities should be done soon after introduction to the concept of two-note slurs. They serve to reinforce proper technique from the beginning, avoiding constant correction later.

The auditory learner likes to listen to themselves and others! Anytime you ask a student to speak or sing aloud, auditory learning is happening. In Video clip #3, participants observed a student listening and speaking. The teacher played a piece that the student had already learned to play. When the student heard a wrong note or rhythm, they exclaimed, "Wrong!" They then told the teacher how to correct the mistake, something that students delight in doing!

The kinesthetic learner accesses their abilities through physical movement. When learning, they prefer to move around, certainly a challenge to piano teachers. Kinesthetic activity is essential to the development of a sense of pulse. Pulse may be experienced through walking, marching, swinging of the arms, or tapping the beat on the body with whole arm motions, to name a few possibilities. Pulse may also be experienced through passing a ball from student to student in time with the music, or by bouncing and catching a ball in time.

Kinesthetic learners usually learn to read later than the visual learner, and tend to speak more slowly than other learners. They don't want to talk about a piece; instead, they want to 'get their hands on it' as soon as possible. The next clip showed how large body movement can help a student alter their technique for greater technical comfort and a more musical effect (Video clip #4). In this video, the student had difficulty with the 5ths at the end of "Rhythm Machine" by Lynn Freeman Olson (Olson, 1978). At first, when playing the 5ths, the student pushed down with the arm, collapsing the wrist. I then asked the student to stand. While listening to this section, the student, from the standing position, was coached to "jump" on the 5ths. Upon returning to the piano, the student was able to transfer this idea to the passage for a lighter and bouncier effect, allowing the wrist to "pop" up on the 5ths.

After teaching many students, I am now a believer in the tactual modality. There are students who must have an emotional connection to the music in order to play the notes, and to perform at their optimal level. They are the touchy-feely students, if you will. I once had a student that could not coordinate two measures of a particular piece. After trying every trick

in the book, the notes were still beyond her fingers. Knowing that this student was very sensitive, I asked her to think of an adjective that described the passage. I next asked her to play, and, suddenly, success!

The next student the audience observed really loves “Star Wars.” Melodies from the movie inspired him to compose a piece of his own. Entitled “The Heart of Space,” he performed this piece on my last studio recital. Video clip #5 showed the student performing this piece, inspired by his love of “Star Wars.” Because the student had an emotional connection to the piece, and because it was his own creation, this was an example of tactual learning.

### **AUDITORY PLUS ONE**

When designing teaching activities, it is usually best to combine two or more sensory modalities. The reason is because the sensory areas of the brain are in different places. If more than one sense is involved in learning, then more areas of the brain participate, resulting in stronger and longer-lasting learning. When combining two modalities, remember the phrase “Auditory Plus One.” As much as possible, include auditory learning because the speech and hearing centers of the brain take up the most space. Next add an element to the activity that accesses another modality.

The next video clip showed a small group of students singing the melody for the tune “Bingo” (Video clip # 6). Instead of singing B-I-N-G-O, the students first sang the names of the lines of the bass clef: G-B-D-F-A. Upon repetition, a “shh” sound was substituted for the A, and only G-B-D-F were sung. The next time, a “shh” sound was substituted for the F and A, and only G-B-D were sung. This continued until a “shh” sound substituted for all the letters. The activity was then repeated with lines of the treble clef. (Barnier, 2009, pp. 88-89). As the students sang, the teacher pointed to these notes on a velcro staff board. When the ‘shh’ sound was substituted for a letter name, the note head was removed from the board. The combination of singing aloud and viewing the notes resulted in an ‘auditory plus visual’ activity.

In Video clips #7 and #8, participants observed the combining of auditory and kinesthetic modalities. The student in this clip was having trouble sorting out a difficult rhythm in the first four measures of “Toccatina” by Susan Ogilvy (Ogilvy, 1989).

Spirited Susan Ogilvy

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As seen in the video, hand-tapping the rhythm while saying ‘left-right’ did not help. Because I knew the student had dance experience, I finally asked her to tap the rhythm with her feet instead, including the crossover in Measure 4! She was then able to successfully coordinate saying ‘left-right’ with tapping her feet. After mastering the foot movement, she returned to the bench, surprised to discover that she could play the passage!

### MULTI-SENSORY EXPERIENCES

When more than two sensory modalities are combined in an activity, a multi-sensory experience is born. In the next activity, all four sensory modalities are engaged.

‘One student is asked to call out the name of a five-finger pattern or eight-tone scale. Two other students toss a beanbag back and forth, saying in sequence the letter names of the requested pattern/scale. Only the person catching the beanbag says one of the letters, with play continuing until all the letters are spoken. At the same time, the student who chose the pattern/scale writes the stated letter names on a whiteboard. If no mistakes are made, this person chooses another pattern/scale. However, when one student catching the beanbag makes a verbal mistake, they, in effect, “miss” the toss and are asked to change places with the person at the whiteboard.’ (Barnier, 2009, p. 49)

This activity incorporates auditory learning through speaking and listening. If one of the partners does not listen, they become lost in the sequence of letters. It also accesses the kinesthetic modality through the physical act of tossing the beanbag. Working with others

taps into the tactual modality, while the visual modality is strengthened through seeing the letter names written on the whiteboard.

Sometimes alternative teaching methods evolve out of circumstance. I had a transfer student this spring whose technical abilities were good, but whose music reading was not as well-developed. I chose a piece that was beyond her reading level, but yet sounded hard and could be taught without music. The piece I selected was “Rhythm Machine” by Lynn Freeman Olson (Olson, 1978). I taught the piece by rote, and invited her to name each section. She called the opening section “Rhythm Sticks” (Meas. 1-6), and dubbed another section “Crossing 5ths” (Meas. 9-16). For a third section (Meas. 17-24), she chose the name “Moving Ships.” *Video of this child performing each of the three sections was viewed (Video clips #9, #10, and #11).*

We then arranged the sections in order as they appear in the piece, creating an abstract, or non-traditional, visual representation of the score:

Rhythm Sticks (play 2 times)  
LH D – A (count to 8)  
Moving Ships (play 2 times)  
Crossing 5ths  
LH D – A (count to 8)  
Moving Ships  
Moving Ships (end with c# on top of RH)  
Rhythm Sticks  
New Crossing 5ths

Through watching and imitating the teacher while learning the piece by rote, the student’s visual and kinesthetic modalities were addressed. The tactual modality was tapped when asking her to personalize the solo by naming its sections. After learning the piece, she found great fun in locating parts of the abstract in the score, further enhancing her visual understanding. This lesson design strengthened all four sensory modalities.

Multi-sensory scenarios immerse students fully in the learning experience, resulting in especially strong connections for future use. Recently I worked with a group of pre-college students in a workshop setting. I asked them if they had ever played a sonatina. Each one nodded, “yes.” I then asked them what they knew about sonatina form, only to receive blank

stares. Participants were asked to pretend that they were not trained musicians, and to write down two words that came to mind when they thought of the word ‘sonatina.’ *Responses were then shared verbally.* These types of student responses can be surprising, some appropriate, some clueless, and some humorous.

Following is a multi-sensory experience designed to teach the concept of sonatina form:

1. Sonatina, Op. 36, No. 1 by Clementi, first movement, was played on a CD (Szokolay, 1995.) At the same time, participants waved colorful streamers in the air in response to what was heard in the music.
2. Participants were asked if they had ever played a sonatina before, and how this sonatina compared to others they had played and heard. (Comparing with other pieces played in the past attaches meaning to an experience, making it more relevant to the learner. It is estimated that at least 90% of the sensory information received by the brain is discarded. It is necessary to find a previously activated network into which new information fits.)
3. The written music (CD Sheet Music, nd) was examined. At selected points in the music, the themes and keys were located and a visual ‘map’ begun. The volunteers were asked if ‘their’ theme reminded them of any of their friends. These friends’ names were written above each theme, bringing a personal touch to the work.
4. Participants were divided into Theme I and Theme II groups. The sonatina was heard again, with streamers waved by groups when they heard ‘their’ theme.
5. The terms Exposition, Interlude, and Recapitulation were discussed, and their location added to the map. Note: Interlude is used here because the section is only eight measures in length, but the term Development could be used if the teacher prefers.
6. The sonatina was played a final time while volunteers moved around the room to signs naming parts of the sonatina.

In this experience, each sensory modality is addressed, and in a few short minutes, participants gain a solid understanding of basic sonatina form. Each step of the plan may be analyzed with regard to the sensory modality at play (the numbers below correlate to the numbers above):

V = Visual; A = Auditory; K = Kinesthetic, T = Tactual

1. VAK
2. AT
3. VT
4. VAK
5. V
6. VAK

Multi-sensory experiences may be used to help students discover and understand other forms. “Solfeggietto” by C.P.E. Bach is a standard work from the intermediate literature. I always enjoy teaching this piece. Within it is found not only a beautiful, melodious ‘etude’ for showcasing the performer’s technique, but also an easily understood musical form with simple harmonic changes. Participants were asked to stand and spread apart a bit. The four-measure theme from ‘Solfeggietto’ was played, and participants were asked to think of a word that described the theme.

Participants were then asked to shape the theme in the air (using crepe paper streamers) with right-hand arcs, first lower, then higher. The entire work was next heard (Olson, ed., 1992), with the theme shaped as just described. When passages were heard that did not sound like the theme, participants were asked to do something else of their choosing with their hands or arms. The audience was asked, “How many times did you hear the theme? How many times did you hear other musical material?” In the piano studio, students, either alone or in a group, could listen to the complete work, determine the length of each section, and create a map of the piece. (*A map of the piece was shown, including themes, transitions, and measure numbers.*)

Students would next examine the score, determining key areas which would be added to the map. (*The form was shown again with key areas added.*) It is interesting to note the length of Bach's transitions. Transitions 1 and 2 are each four measures in length. The Re-Transition, however, is ten measures long, and clearly divided into two parts. My favorite spot in the

entire piece happens in measure 22, near the beginning of the Re-Transition when Bach slams on the brakes with the left hand D-flat octave. The remainder of the music serves to dissipate the energy accumulated through a multitude of sixteenth notes, and also brings the piece back to the tonic key with one final thematic statement.

In this experience, the student ‘discovers’ the form, rather than being ‘told’ the form, and every sensory modality is used. Understanding the form has an important benefit for memorization. The student could be encouraged to find ‘lily pads’ where performers may jump if lost. These lily pads would most logically occur at crucial points in the formal design, as this slide shows. (*The audience is shown the form of the piece with ‘lily pads’ appearing in selected spots.*) If the student has a memory lapse when performing, they will know right where they are in the form, and can ‘jump’ to the nearest ‘lily pad.’

The key to long-term maintenance of “Solfeggietto” is the student’s ongoing personal relationship to the music. Once the piece is ready for performance, I ask students to discover one new thing about the piece before I hear it again. This encourages them to continue searching for meaning in the piece. I also ask them to listen or re-listen to recordings of the piece by various artists. We next discuss individually or as a group these alternate approaches to interpretation. “Solfeggietto” has inspired some artists to create transcriptions of the piece for other instruments. Several arrangements of “Solfeggietto” are available online. My favorite recording/arrangement of the piece is by jazz clarinetist Eddie Daniels. In the track called “Solfeggietto/Metamorphosis” from the album “Breakthrough” (Daniels, nd), Daniels performs Bach’s version first, then launches into a mind-blowing jazz improvisation based upon the piece. After listening to music like this, performers will undoubtedly breathe new life into old interpretations. (*The audience listened to a portion of the Eddie Daniels’ recording.*)

## CONCLUSION

The use of learning styles actively involves students in the learning process. Without student participation, the lesson is lifeless, with the teacher engaging in a great deal of playing, talking and lecturing while the student listens. This static instructional model serves the teacher more than it helps the student. Although the student may apply some of the suggestions made by the master teacher, the student actually participates very little, and may even not play very much. There is often no self-evaluation, discovery learning, or generalization of knowledge, with the student dependent upon the teacher to learn.

In a dynamic instructional model, students' needs move to the center, and, as a result, they learn to teach themselves. The student may also interact with other students and the curriculum content. In this dynamic model, the student still learns to play the piano and read music, but develops an ever-increasing ability to self-diagnose difficulties, practice efficiently, and transfer learning to other musical situations.

Teaching with learning styles in mind places the student center-stage in the learning process. There is disagreement over which learning systems work best. There is also controversy about whether learning styles even exist. There is agreement, however, that teachers must closely observe their students, searching for clues that might help them learn. I urge you not to give up on your students, but to keep searching for "what works". It doesn't matter if a learning style test says the student is a visual learner. If a kinesthetic activity instead unlocks that door, then shout for joy. The open mind will open many doors.

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