

Can You Teach an Old Dog New Tricks?



Hassan A. Aziz PhD, FACS, MLS(ASCP)^{cm}
Associate Editor of Education and Administration

I admit that every once in a while, I find myself dealing with a student that is struggling to learn the basic and essential principles of the material we are teaching while the rest of the class has moved on and ready for new material. By no means, these are weak students. They have met the rigorous admission criteria and their academic records prior to entering the program prove that they possessed the necessary intellectual abilities (and the grades) to succeed in the program.

So, I decided to dig deeper into this issue and talked to colleagues in different disciplines. I became more convinced that we, the teachers, need to better understand our own neurological strengths and weaknesses to reach all of our students.

Students come to us from diverse learning styles that require different teaching approaches. So how can we adapt our teaching to reach and engage as many of them as possible?

Interestingly, the answer lies in first knowing ourselves as teachers. To do this, one must understand your own "neurological style" and the way it could influence the way we teach. We all have a left-, a right-, or a middle-brain preference, that influences our teaching patterns.

The neurological profile guides the way we teach our classes; left-brain teachers tend to teach in a "left-brain style," right-brain teachers teach in a "right-brain style," and middle-brain teachers tend to vary between the two approaches.

Teachers are more inclined to reach students who share the same neurological strengths. A left-brain teacher needs to make a conscious effort in order to better reach a right-brain student in the classroom.

Left-brain teachers prefer to teach using lecture and discussion. They follow outlines, and they like to adhere to prepared time schedules. They challenge their students to work on problems and assignments independently and they like to assign more research and writing than their right-brain peers. They maintain a reasonably quiet, structured classroom.

Left-brain students prefer to work alone. They like to read independently and incorporate research into their papers. They favor a quiet classroom without a lot of distraction.

Right-brain teachers prefer to use hands-on activities over a lecture format. They incorporate more visual aids into their lessons. Right-brain teachers assign more group projects and activities, and prefer a busy, active, noisy classroom environment.

Unlike left-brain students, right-brain students prefer to work in groups. They absolutely do not like to write another tedious term paper.

Students with left- or right-brain tendencies prefer to be taught to their neurological strengths. Although they can learn by different methods, they get most excited and involved when they can learn and do assignments in their area of strength.

To be more successful in your classroom, step outside your comfort zone and try to incorporate new neurological teaching methods. If you are a left-brain teacher, add at least one right-brain methodology (such as role playing or group project) into your lessons. If you are a right-brain teacher, consider lecturing more often, or assigning more individual and/or research-oriented projects. If you are a middle-brain teacher, select and incorporate something new from either area.

Better yet, give your students a variety of assignments to choose from. You may be pleasantly surprised to see students gravitating towards their own neurological strengths when given a choice of assignments.

The good news is that we, even the seasoned ones, can strengthen the weaker parts of our brains because they are always searching for new meanings and connections.

So, yes, you can teach an old dog new tricks!

Hassan Aziz, PhD, FACSS, MLS(ASCP)^{cm}

Dean and Professor

6300 Ocean Drive, Unit # 5805

Corpus Christi, TX 78412

Email: Hassan.Aziz@tamucc.edu