

# Understanding Learning Style

BY JANET PALMBERG

No two piano students are alike. Each presents a unique collection of personality traits and learning preferences that poses a fascinating challenge to the piano teacher. In the words of Forrest Gump, “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna’ git.” Like a box of chocolates, piano students bring many surprises, but only if you are prepared to uncover them.

The concept of learning style is broad. In the piano teaching community, learning style discussion has mostly been associated with sensory modality preference, the idea being that one learns through the senses. In the educational community at large, however, learning style is also associated with personality type, perception style, and organizational style.

There are a number of systems that categorize personality types. For understanding personality types, I recommend the system developed by David Keirse and Marilyn Bates, a user-friendly system that divides personalities into only four types. Perception style and organizational style are easy to diagnose. A learner’s perception style is usually either concrete (learning best through hands-on activity) or abstract (learning best through thoughts, words, symbols, or numbers). A learner’s organizational style will probably be either sequential (preferring step-by-step instruction) or global (preferring the big picture).

The learner’s personality type and perception/organizational styles are important, but sensory modalities are most familiar to us as music educators since we deal with music listening, reading, performance, and interpretation on a regular basis. Piano teachers have historically identified these preferences as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. A few recently developed systems additionally recognize the sensory modality preference of learning through touch and the emotions, known as tactual modality.

## Analyzing Sensory Modality Preference

There is no evidence that individuals learn through only one sensory modality; rather, they may simply prefer one more than others. Students that learn best by seeing, watching, and reading prefer *visual modality*. *Auditory* modality is the preference of those that learn best by hearing, speaking, discussing, and thinking aloud. Moving and doing things is the preference of the *kinesthetic* learner, while the *tactual* learner accesses learning most easily through small motor muscles and emotion. (See Example 1)

## Teaching to Sensory Modality Preference

Identifying the student’s sensory modality preference helps the piano teacher design efficient strategies for teaching skills and repertoire. The opening measures of “The Tempest” by Nancy Faber may be introduced in various ways, depending on the student’s modality preference. (See Example 2)

The *visual* learner could be shown the score and asked to analyze the key and chords before playing. The broken triads

could next be blocked to encourage seeing each triad as a group of three related notes, rather than as three individual notes. When working with the *auditory* learner, the teacher could perform the opening without the student viewing the score. The student could then be asked to talk about what was heard. The *kinesthetic* learner could experience the piece with large muscle movement by moving one arm through the air in the shape of a rainbow for each phrase heard (in this example, two phrases). The *tactual* learner could be asked to name an adjective that describes the opening of the piece, thus facilitating an immediate emotional connection to the music. Both the *kinesthetic* learner and *tactual* learner would enjoy being shown how to play the first two measures, then immediately trying to play these measures themselves.

Thus the piece is first approached through the student’s preferred modality. The teaching process should, however, move quickly to accessing other modalities. I will use the *kinesthetic* learner as an example. After connecting to the performed piece through large muscle movement and playing the first two measures by rote, the student could then be asked to create a written, visual picture (sometimes known as an abstract) of what was played. The resulting abstract might appear as in Example 3.

Finally, after playing from the self-created abstract, the student would be fully equipped to confidently read the actual score. Further, recognition of the triadic and chordal shapes found in “The Tempest” would easily transfer to reading similar patterns and shapes in other pieces.

The above suggestions pertain to emphasizing one sensory modality at a time. Research has shown that experiences combining more than one modality at the same time, or *multisensory* experiences, can result in even better retention, while at the same time serving to strengthen weaker modalities. This is due, at least in part, to the storage and linking of experience in more than one part of the brain.

Continuing with the example of “The Tempest,” the *visual* learner could combine the visual and auditory modalities by speaking the chord names while playing the blocked chords from the score. The *auditory* learner could draw a “picture” of the sound as the teacher plays the piece. The *kinesthetic* learner could count beats aloud as the rainbows are shaped in the air. In doing so, the learner will discover that some musical units in the piece are eight counts long (as in the first phrase), while other units are shorter or longer. The *tactual* learner could view the score while searching for words describing the music.

If you have ever wondered why some students seem easier to teach than others, it may be because these students’ learning styles are similar to yours. Research has confirmed that students learn most readily from teachers with similar learning preferences. We owe it to our students to teach in ways that suit *their* learning styles, not ours, and make learning to play the piano a comfortable and celebratory experience.

**EXAMPLE 1** Observation of student behavior can provide clues to a student’s sensory modality preference. The chart lists some characteristics of each type of learner.

	VISUAL	AUDITORY	KINESTHETIC	TACTUAL
<b>PHYSIOLOGY</b>	Limited body movement	Rhythmic movement Clicking sounds with mouth or tongue	Active body movement	Unpredictable
<b>SPEECH PATTERNS</b>	Rapid pace Concise language	Moderate pace Even flow	Slow pace	Moderate pace Uneven flow
<b>SPEECH PREDICATES</b>	Visual (“see”)	Aural (“hear” or “sounds good”)	Active (“I get it”)	Emotional (“feels great”)
<b>EYE MOVEMENTS</b>	Up to left or right	Lateral to left or right	Down	Random
<b>INFORMATION RETRIEVAL</b>	Able to recall information randomly and quickly	Clings to sequence Likes to start at the “beginning”	Prefers to recall information sequentially rather than randomly	Able to recall information randomly
<b>MUSIC READING</b>	Learns to read quickly	Learns to read more slowly than the visual learner	Learns to read more slowly than the visual learner	Able to read music with emotional connections more easily
<b>OTHER</b>	Likes variety in environment Attends to detail	Likes to sing along or “sub-vocalize” à la Glenn Gould	Wants to try out a new piece as soon as possible	Likes to play only pieces with which the student connects emotionally

**EXAMPLE 2**  
[Measures 1-4 of The Tempest, *Piano Adventures*®, Performance, Level 3B]

**The Tempest**  
Key of \_\_\_ major/minor (circle)  
N. Faber

Allegro furioso\* (♩ = 100 - 108)

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**EXAMPLE 3**  
The Tempest, *Piano Adventures*®, Performance Level 3B, measures 1 and 2

Play the first four A Minor triads in broken form, all others in blocked form.

Am (RH)	D	D	Am
	4th	4th	
	Dm6	Dm6	Am
	4	4	

Am (LH)  
Am (RH)  
Am (LH)

**Resources**

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- Dunn, Rita & Dunn, Kenneth. *Teaching students through their individual learning styles: A practical approach*. Reston, VA: Reston, 1978.
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- Wolfe, Patricia. *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2001. ■■■