

Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty No. 13

The Top 10...

Engaging Different Input Preferences

Our first instinct is usually to teach something in way that makes sense to us. However, each of us has natural preferences for how we take in information, and many of our students' preferences are different from our own. One way to conceptualize input preferences is to consider visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic learning. Here are some tips for engaging these input preferences.

Visual – Learners who prefer to take in information that is presented visually.

- ✓ PowerPoint presentations do not engage visual learners if slides are mostly text. Just how “visual” are your presentation slides? Try incorporating images, graphs, charts, diagrams, cartoons, and video clips into your presentations.
- ✓ Incorporate short videos into your classes. Smart classroom technology combined with YouTube and libraries' video databases give you instant, free access to an enormous selection of short videos related to your course material. These engage students who prefer to take in information visually, and they are also fun, as learning should be.
- ✓ Put students in groups and task them with presenting a certain concept from your course to the rest of the class, except that they must communicate the concept entirely visually. Large sticky pads and markers help.

Aural – Learners who prefer to take in and make sense of information through listening and speaking.

- ✓ The more you can build conversation, not just full-group discussion, into your class, the more you will engage students with auditory learning input preferences. If you talk for more than 10-12 minutes straight, you will likely lose the attention of even your auditory learners (others may have stopped listening after just a few minutes of sustained talking).

- ✓ Have students interview each other about course content or “quiz” each other. Better yet, have students develop a technique for quizzing each other in pairs as a way of studying for an exam and have them practice and refine their techniques in class. Pairs then present to the entire class either what they’ve learned or the techniques that they’ve come up with for effective studying.
- ✓ Stage a mock trial class in which a group of students (“the jury”) listen to other students who try to convince them of something about the course material. Students can explain, argue, or debate different sides of a topic, concept, or argument. Do this activity a few times on different days and vary student roles so that everyone gets to both speak and listen.

Read/write: Learners who prefer text as the medium for taking in information.

- ✓ Even though most college faculty are fairly strong at taking in information through reading, comparatively few of our students prefer to take in information by reading text. Since so much college coursework integrates reading and writing and since we’ve already dedicated another Top 10 list to brief writing activities, we’re not counting this one as a tip!

Kinesthetic – Learners who prefer to take in information by physically doing and experimenting.

- ✓ For controversial issues, have students literally “take sides” (as in change their place in the room) or assign them physically to “sides” for debate. For key topics, ask students to pick the one they are most interested in, and then separate the class physically to discuss/debate/question.
- ✓ Ask your students to come up with 3 – 4 applications of a key concept and write briefly about it, or have them determine specific applications in their own life. The more kinesthetic learners consider practical applications and things they can *do* with concepts, the more engaged they will be.
- ✓ Many people mistakenly assume that kinesthetic learners must not have strengths in reading and writing. This is not true. Ask your kinesthetic learners to write about an experience *doing* something (especially a physical activity), and they will very likely surprise you.
- ✓ If you liked these ideas (and in case you don’t know already), these tips capture the essence of the VARK model of input preferences. More information and the free VARK questionnaire can be found here: <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp>