

Why All Students Need Visual-Spatial Methods

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The first child I observed with unusual visual-spatial abilities was profoundly gifted (above 175 IQ). So I assumed that visual-spatial learners were profoundly gifted. Then, I discovered that children who fit the characteristics of giftedness, but did not test in the gifted range due to hidden learning disabilities, were usually visual-spatial learners. So I thought that visual-spatial learners were either profoundly gifted or twice exceptional (gifted with learning disabilities).

In 1991, I was asked to create a video on visual-spatial learners for the state of Missouri; the Director of Curriculum was convinced that the information would be applicable in all subject areas and at all grade levels, from Kindergarten through 12th grade. I was uncertain at the time, but he turned out to be right.

When we developed *the Visual-Spatial Identifier*, a process that began in 1992 and took the better part of a decade, we still thought that a small percentage of the population would be visual-spatial learners. The results of the second validation study of our *Identifier*, in 2001, astounded us. Approximately one-third of the 750 students we had assessed in two schools were **strongly** visual-spatial and another 30% were moderately visual-spatial. That represented the majority of the school population!

As I was completing *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*, published at the end of 2002, I realized more clearly what Dr. Jerre Levy had said: “Unless the right hemisphere is activated and engaged, attention is low and learning is poor.” She was talking about every student in the classroom.

Throughout the book I hinted that the visual-spatial learner might soon have the edge in gaining employment. Tom West (1991), author of *In the Mind's Eye*, suggests that in the 21st century employees will require strong visual skills: “ready recognition of larger patterns, intuition, a sense of proportion, imaginative vision, the original and unexpected approach, and the apt connection between apparently unrelated things” (p. 88).

Daniel H. Pink (2005), author of *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, proposes that, now that information is readily available on the Internet, success in today's world is dependent on empathy, intuition, spirituality and right hemispheric-directed abilities.

“In the United States, the number of graphic designers has increased tenfold in a decade; graphic designers outnumber chemical engineers by four to one. Since 1970, the United States has 30% more people earning a living as writers and 50% more earning a living by composing or performing music. ... More Americans today work in arts, entertainment and design than work as lawyers, accountants and auditors.” (p. 55)

I began thinking about how schools are preparing students for success in their careers. It is very likely that until the modern age the skills emphasized in school were necessary for achievement in adult life. However, the world is changing very quickly and our educational systems are not keeping pace. Success in school still depends upon:

- ❑ Following directions
- ❑ Turning in assigned work on time
- ❑ Memorization of facts
- ❑ Fast recall
- ❑ Showing steps of work
- ❑ Neat, legible handwriting
- ❑ Accurate spelling
- ❑ Punctuality
- ❑ Good organization; tidiness

What positions require the skills so heavily prized in school? These auditory-sequential skills are actually limiting the potential of all students to gain employment in today's world. Citizens of the 21st century are rewarded beyond school for:

- ❑ Ability to predict trends
- ❑ Grasping the big picture
- ❑ Thinking outside the box
- ❑ Risk-taking
- ❑ Problem-finding and problem-solving skills
- ❑ Combining one's strengths with others' to build a strong team
- ❑ Computer literacy
- ❑ Dealing with complexity
- ❑ Ability to read people well

Isn't it time we recognize the importance of right-hemispheric abilities and provide *all* students the opportunity to develop their visual-spatial skills? These skills are essential to their success in adult life. To continue to prepare students for jobs in the 1950s is limiting their potential instead of enhancing it. One of the central functions of school has always been to prepare the citizenry for gainful employment.

Are we missing the mark?

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