



How to...make every lesson outstanding

How can teachers make their teaching more creative and inspiring? [Marcella McCarthy](#) gives practical guidance on how they can overcome doubt and reticence to make every lesson special.

The theory of learning styles and multiple intelligences is well-established in educational circles, and embedded in the dictates of good practice is the mantra that teachers should be able to personalise learning by using such strategies.¹ However, for many teachers the idea of personalised learning styles remains a theory which is of little practical use in everyday teaching. There seem to be two main reasons for this. The first is to do with anxieties concerning the practicality of using a variety of different learning styles in lessons, and the second concerns their perceived value as practical educational tools. In short, either it's too much hard work, or conversely, it doesn't work anyway.

Lessons which are kinaesthetic or highly visual or aural are often perceived to be more trouble to prepare and resource than 'ordinary' lessons, and are therefore seen as something to be saved for special occasions. Many teachers will further consider that a class difficult to manage in behavioural terms do not 'deserve' such a lesson, as though interesting tasks might be seen as an inappropriate reward for being restless. Managing students who are doing something physical in a traditional academic subject can also be seen as much more challenging than teaching from the front, working from textbooks or—for instance—giving them a video to watch, a form of learning which is all too often seen as innovative in itself. So trying to cater for every student's preferred learning style can seem to be an impossible task, given the other priorities that face a teacher in the classroom. As teachers so often (and truthfully) say: 'You can't do everything'.

On the other hand, because they do not often use such strategies in their own learning, teachers can also be doubtful about their ultimate usefulness, making them a low priority. Many teachers are profoundly literate, as opposed to oral, learners—having been through a long academic education

which prioritises and rewards listening, writing and reading². Most PGCE courses still rely on lectures and seminars to disseminate new ideas, which means that new teachers can consciously or unconsciously regard note-taking and essay-writing as the most effective way to learn, and also as somehow more 'proper' or appropriate. Having successfully learned ourselves in a traditional style, it is easy to think, as Professor Guy Claxton from the University of Bristol puts it, that some learning-style theory is just 'neuro-babble and phoney science' and give up on it entirely.³

■ Different kinds of Deprivation

Yet students in modern schools often suffer from very limited experiences of the tactile world around them. Those who live in cities may never see things which former generations took for granted. Some have never been read to at home or been to a museum or art gallery because that is simply not a priority for their parents. Even those privileged in terms of this kind of experience are limited in other ways, protected by anxious parents from exploring the streets of their neighbourhood or walking in the woods alone. I have met teenage 'sleeping beauty' children whose parents have never given them something sharp like a sewing needle or a knife for cutting vegetables in case they might harm themselves. For such students more passive, protected lessons are the last thing that they need to become independent learners.

Catered for by wonderfully filmed DVDs and ever-more imaginative computer learning, which focuses them on an indoor life, some students can become so used to aural and visual input of a certain type that they find it hard to make connections and learn in any other way. Considerable work is often put into creating ways of learning which will provide for these students' existing preferences. Their habitual preferences then become not so much a

preferred learning style, as a learned style, which tends to be reinforced by teachers who while trying to cater for what they imagine students want, are inadvertently following in the well-worn track of their existing experiences—showing videos as a treat. Many students I have spoken to report ‘PowerPoint fatigue’, where over-use of new technology ceases to be entertaining and instead becomes boring⁴.

But trying new things is part of teaching and learning. We know from personal experience how some people prefer to tackle the challenge of a new mobile phone by reading through the instructions first, while others ask a friend who has one to show them, and others just work it out through trial and error. It can be quite liberating for someone more comfortable with written instructions to just have a go, or someone who normally teaches standing at the front of the lesson to turn it over to group work, supervised from the back of the classroom. By introducing different activities into your classroom you can revitalise and energise your teaching. For students, to have a lesson that overturns their expectations of what ordinary lessons are like can make them genuinely eager to learn.

■ Synaesthetic learning

The practice I term synaesthetic learning is based on the principle that although we all have preferred learning styles, we should not simply cater to these and reinforce our prejudices. Instead we should seek to develop our ability to access information in different ways. In synaesthetic learning the use of several different activities in a single lesson gives students the chance to learn in the way which they prefer—but also gives them the opportunity to learn in new ways as well.

Although OFSTED singles out for praise innovative teaching strategies, teachers can remain sceptical about their everyday utility because of deep-seated and unconscious expectations of student behaviour. One young teacher recounted to me his embarrassment when his HOD walked into the room ‘and everyone was talking’, and I know even experienced teachers who feel uncomfortable when a class is too chatty—as though the ideal lesson is one where all the students listen silently to the teacher, except when they put up their hands to ask or answer a question. Thus, lessons can become a battle between teachers trying to impose their preferred learning styles on a class, and students who are simply unable to focus on the ways in which the information is presented.

The strategies behind synaesthetic learning can help change this. Because in a synaesthetically planned lesson students should be always presented with learning opportunities in a variety of different forms, planning such a lesson will automatically mean that you tend to focus on the learning objectives very clearly. Different tasks also have the inbuilt advantage of tending to break the lesson down into shorter, more engaging sections, allowing for frequent ‘mini plenaries’, and allowing teachers to move around a class, checking learning in an individual way. The strategy takes the stress off a teacher trying to control a class from the front, because it puts the emphasis for learning and understanding on to the students, yet keeps the students engaged through frequently shifting yet connected tasks. Behaviour management becomes less of an issue, because you are not trying to force the students into acting in one consistent way for an entire lesson, but offering them a natural outlet for discussion.

■ Two kinds of lesson on the same topic

Perhaps the easiest way to explain the difference between a ‘synaesthetic’ lesson and an ordinary one is to describe it.

Imagine an English lesson directed at a new year 7 group who have just started secondary school. The teacher has to evaluate the class, not knowing exactly where they already are in terms of understanding, and knowing that the group will not already know each other. The chosen poem for them to work on is ‘The Eagle’ by Tennyson.

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

The teacher has to make sure that by the end of the class all students understand the key concepts of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, personification and so on. This is the sort of lesson which can be especially difficult to make engaging for all students. The gifted & talented students who already know the poem will leap ahead while there will also be ones who cannot read it or access it at all. It is tempting to let this lesson fall into a pattern that is very teacher-led. Here are two examples of such a class. Each is 45 mins long.

1) The ordinary way	2) The synaesthetic class
<p>The teacher introduces the class, and explains that they are going to work on a poem by Tennyson (some of the class are lost already). She asks if any of the class have heard of him—a few brave hands go up. She asks the class if they have done poetry before—again some (not all) hands will go up. She knows that they have done poetry in primary school—they must have!—and starts to feel slightly annoyed at their unresponsiveness.</p>	<p>As the students come in the teacher has music playing, and the first slide of a PowerPoint display up on the screen. It says: 'Learning to think like a poet'. Name cards for the students show them where to sit, and place them in pairs that can fairly easily become groups of four or so. There's not an even number in the class so the TA becomes part of a group of four with the students that she knows will need help. As the students settle into place, the teacher turns the music up, and they grow quiet. She turns it down and they stay silent. She knows that they have all done poetry at primary school, and tells them this, saying that as they are all experts on poetry, she wants them to help her find out how poets think.</p>
<p>The teacher tells each student to write the title 'Poetry' in their books. What sort of things do you expect to see in poetry, she asks. The students look baffled. One sticks up a hand and suggests 'rhyme', and another interrupts and says that not all poems rhyme. They start to argue, and the teacher intervenes, and tells off the student who interrupted. She explains that students must always raise their hands before asking a question and wait for her to pick them.</p>	<p>The teacher asks each student to write 'Learning to think like a poet' into their books as a heading. The PowerPoint clicks forward to show a subheading which says 'What does a good poem do?' She announces that poets all have different ideas about poetry, and gives each group a set of sort-cards. The students are instructed to discuss in their groups what they think a good poem should be like.</p>
<p>The teacher then starts to ask the student about poetic terms—alliteration, assonance and the like, quizzing them about what they mean. Some students will be familiar with these, others won't. They won't all admit what they don't know. Some students are starting to feel resentful, others smug. The child who interrupted refuses to raise his hand again.</p>	<p>The sort-cards have on them statements such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It should use alliteration It should rhyme It should not rhyme It should tell a story It should be easy to understand It should be difficult to understand It should use beautiful words It should use onomatopoeia <p>And so on. The students are asked to discuss them and decide on an order of preference.</p> <p>All the groups quickly start to look at the cards and discuss them. They argue about which is most important, and the teacher takes the chance to move around the class and see which groups understand which terms. Because there are plenty of cards, all students have something they can discuss, but the teacher takes the opportunity to explain some of the terms to those students who do not know or have forgotten them.</p>



<p>The teacher asks the children to write down these key terms in their books. She writes them on the board to help them with the spelling though several still ask her how to spell ‘onomatopoeia’, and she has to point out it is already on the board. She explains that they are going to see some of these techniques in the poem.</p>	<p>After a few minutes, the teacher sees that the discussion is dying down, and calls the class to listen. In turn she asks each group for their top three ideas. She explains that there is no one right answer to this discussion—that there is no one thing that all poems have to have, but that the exercise has helped her to find out what kinds of poem they most like. They have a mini plenary which shares their ideas about poetry, and the teacher then clicks to a slide which says ‘I think a good poem should...’ and asks the children to write this in their books, filling in the top three things that their group decided on.</p>
<p>She hands out a copy of ‘The Eagle’ to the students and reads it through aloud.</p>	<p>Next, the teacher clicks to a slide with a picture of Tennyson with his name and dates. She briefly explains that he is a very famous poet, and that they are going to study his poetry. She then tells the children that when he wrote poetry, like all poets, he often found it hard to decide what he would like to do—should he use alliteration? Should he rhyme? Which word should he choose? And she explains that the class is going to go back in time, and pretend that they are Tennyson—that (again) they are going to think like a poet. She hands out to each group a feather. This, she explains, could have been the inspiration behind the poem—can they guess what it is about?</p> <p>All the children guess that the poem is about a bird. Some of them think that it might be about flying. There is a buzz of interest as she hands out a cloze exercise based on ‘The Eagle’</p>
<p>The teacher now asks the class to highlight in the poem examples of the terms that she has discussed—alliteration and the like. They work in pairs, and pick out some details easily, though some students are still confused about what alliteration is and keep asking her although she has explained it before.</p> <p>The teacher puts a PowerPoint of the poem up on the board and starts to annotate it herself asking the class for suggestions. Some of the new students are really keen, she notes approvingly, and have their hands up all the time, but she is careful not to choose them all the time and sometimes picks on those who are sitting at the back instead. This slows things down a bit, as they are often rather unsure about what she wants them to say, but she manages to jolly them along.</p> <p>One child asks if they should write down the annotations, and she tells them that this is a good idea.</p>	<p>In this exercise, students have to make choices between three plausible words provided in each line. Only one, it is explained, is the one Tennyson chose. They have to make their own choice, and explain why they think it might be a good one, using a reason connected to the terms on the sort cards, for instance, ‘it uses alliteration’.</p> <p>He grips/clasps/holds/ the crag with crooked hands; Close to the sun in lonely/foreign/strange lands, Ringed with the cobalt/blue/ azure world he stands.</p> <p>The wrinkled/wavy/rippled sea beneath him crawls; He gazes/ looks/ watches from his mountain walls, And like a thunderbolt he dives/falls/swoops.</p> <p>As they move around the groups, the teacher and TA explain that ‘cobalt’ and ‘azure’ are different shades of blue, and illustrates each one by showing them or pointing out an item in that colour.</p>

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<p>The teacher talks the class through what the poem means, explaining the different poetic terms as she goes. It is nearly lunchtime and she can see some students starting to drift slightly, so she asks them questions to liven them up. They are not sure what she wants, and say they don't understand, whereupon one child turns around and tells them they're stupid. By the time she has dealt with this, the lesson is nearly over. Not all the students have copied down her annotations.</p>	<p>The teacher goes through the first line with all the students. She shows a slide of the line (and the three word-choices) with a picture of an eagle's talons gripping a rock, asking them to decide on which word should be used, and why. They come up with plenty of ideas, and in the process discuss the image of the hands for the eagle's claws. When they have finished, she explains for the first line the word Tennyson actually uses, and asks them why they think Tennyson made his choice. They suggest that he liked alliteration, and she tells them that this is true, and that they might find other examples of this in the poem as they work through the cloze.</p> <p>The students work at the task for a little while. It is fairly straightforward, and because all words are provided, they know that they have a one-in-three chance of getting it right, which reduces tension. Once they have decided on a word, the teacher and TA, who are walking around the class, encourage them to think about why they made the choice. Some come up with surprisingly sophisticated reasons, others say that they think they know what word Tennyson would have chosen, but they prefer another.</p> <p>When all have finished, the teacher moves on through her PowerPoint slides, which each have a line of the cloze with an appropriate illustration, and asks for votes for each word. Each time she asks for reasons, and the students gradually become more confident about their choices. Each time they discuss a choice they are reinforcing their understanding of the key poetic concepts.</p>
<p>The teacher asks the children to make sure that they have copied down all the annotation from the board, and gives them their homework—they have to write a poem of their own about an animal. She is glad to see some look pleased at this, but one child sticks her hand up and asks if it has to rhyme, which threatens to start the whole debate again, so she says not necessarily, then regrets it.</p>	<p>The class concludes by students, in threes, trying to create another stanza for 'The Eagle' in the same style, starting with the words 'His nest is...'. Each student in the group produces a line, trying to make it sound as similar as possible to the original, and they write their stanzas in their books. For homework they are asked to look at an animal or bird, and write a poem about it in the style of Tennyson, using the same kind of rhyme, alliteration and imagery that they have looked at in the lesson. If they wish, they can illustrate their poem for display.</p>
<p>The class finishes, and the teacher is tired. It was hard work, though the students were pretty good. She reflects that it's always hard to start off a new class, and that at least there are some bright students, who she'll have to take care to extend. She does wish, though, that they enjoyed the actual poem a bit more—and it was a bit teacher-led. Still, what can you expect in year 7, after all?</p>	<p>The teacher clears away the sort-cards and the feathers. She will use them with another group, so she keeps them. The blue scraps of material have been borrowed from another lesson she taught that morning, and the name cards she will keep for that class, as they give her an easy way of setting up new seating plans. She feels that the class went well, and that the students consolidated their understanding of poetry, and she looks forward to the display that she expects to get from their homework.</p>



■ Which strategies make a difference?

The difference between these two classes is not just that one is easier to teach, and less stressful for the teacher. It is also that the second is more engaging for the students, and more memorable. Those students who find it easy to learn in a traditional way have still had the opportunity to do so, but those who like to work kinaesthetically, or those who enjoy visual stimuli, have also had a chance to work in their preferred way. All students have also had to try learning styles with which they may be less comfortable.

If in every class there is a tactile activity, an activity that encourages discussion, some individual interaction with the teacher, a visual stimulus, a written stimulus and a creative stimulus, classes rarely get dull. They move faster for teacher and student alike.

It's not a new idea. The Victorian poet Robert Browning, in his poem 'Development' describes what is, in effect, a synaesthetic lesson. The poet recalls a day when he saw his father reading Homer in the original Greek. When the 5-year-old Browning asked him what he was reading, his

father's response was to explain the story—not in words but in deeds.

Browning recounts how his father 'piled up chairs and tables for a town, / Set me a-top for Priam, called our cat / --Helen... Towzer and Tray,—our dogs, the Atreidai,—' and in other ways thoroughly re-enacted the story for him, simply by using the props around the room. He credits his father with fostering his interest in learning, moving him on to reading Homer in translation, and finally to working it out in the original (with the help of a Greek lexicon) by the age of twelve. To teach a student to read Homer in the original at twelve would be an accomplishment of which many gifted and talented co-ordinators would be proud. Browning, an educated 19th century gentleman, did not think of it as quite so extraordinary, yet it is clear that he feels strongly that his passionate engagement with the classics would never have happened had it not been for the 'huge delight' that his father's re-enactment created.

It might seem impractical—not to mention a health and safety nightmare—to learn from such an experience. Piling

up tables and chairs, involving cats and dogs—hardly what we do in the classroom! Yet what Browning describes is, in effect, very similar to synaesthetic learning. His father's use of—for him—everyday objects, picking up on the things around him to explain something esoteric, is exactly the same as the strategies that we can use to enliven lessons for all kind of learners—not only teaching those who like to listen to learn, but teaching those who want to learn to listen.

Marcella McCarthy

**Advanced Skills Teacher for English (KS5) for
Oxfordshire LEA**

**Leading Teacher and AST for Gifted and Talented
Education,
Leading Practitioner for SEAL
The Cherwell School, Oxford**

Reference notes

1. For instance, in 'professional attributes' E3 for ASTs is the instruction that teachers should 'Have a critical understanding of the most effective teaching, learning and behaviour management strategies, including how to select and use approaches that personalise learning to provide opportunities for all learners to achieve their potential'.
2. See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New Accents. Ed. Terence Hawkes. (New York: Methuen, 1988) for some illuminating perspectives on how easy it is to be biased in favour of certain styles of learning.
3. Guy Claxton, quoted in 'Learning Styles' by Steven Hastings, TES magazine 4th November 2005. The article may be accessed online at <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2153773>
4. A phenomenon noticed also by many professional coaches. See for instance, *Real Leaders Don't Do PowerPoint* by Chris Witt (New York, Random House: 2009)

Five Key Strategies for Synaesthetic Learning

1. **Music** is a very powerful tool. Try playing music as students come into a class to instantly get their attention, or use it to create a change of mood. Quick-paced 'cartoon-style' music can make students work at a task more quickly. Turn music up to silence a chatty group, down to create silence.
2. **Sorting cards** are extremely useful in a number of ways. Few students can resist reading information on a sort card, when they might balk at the same information presented more formally. Asking students to arrange cards in order or priority or preference ensures that they internalise the information on the cards. Asking students to order quotations, or key terms, for instance, can help them to remember them. While cards are being worked with it is easy to subtly help a student who is struggling.
3. **An image** on a PowerPoint can be good at focusing student attention, but even an ordinary photograph can achieve a powerful effect. Try bringing in newspaper or magazine images as a starter for a particular topic.
4. **Ordinary objects** such as keys or cards become immensely interesting in a classroom context. To get students thinking about the changing role of women, for instance, bringing in ordinary objects and asking them which they think a Victorian woman might own and which a modern woman might own can focus attention on crucial areas for discussion. Something you can hold in your hand is an immediate tactile stimulus that will interest most children.
5. **Sensory stimuli** are very powerful and again can make students focus on detail. For a revision class on descriptive writing, for instance, try using different herbs, explain that they can all be described as 'small plants with green leaves' and get groups to describe them so well that other students can guess which plant they mean. Trying to describe the scent of lavender without using the word 'lavender' can be a real challenge for even a very able student.