

How to Teach Your Platypus

Carol Barnier

“My boy’s a platypus!” she gushed enthusiastically.

“He’s a what?” I was certain I must have misunderstood her.

“He’s a right brained, quasi-lateral, confrontational platypus!”

“Oh,” was all I could muster. I was really hoping my cynicism wasn’t showing. “Well that *is* great.”

My friend had recently purchased the latest learning styles program and clearly, she had just completed the what-type-is-he questionnaire. This also explained why I had heard her walking around muttering questions to herself like, “Is he happier alone or in a group?” “Does he prefer throwing stones across a quiet lake or leaping through a fast moving stream?” “If he could be an ice cream flavor, would he be vanilla or pistachio ripple with chunks of dried corn?” She’d been at it for almost a week. But now her efforts had paid off.

She had a name for him.

The problem, it seemed to me, is that the name didn’t tell her anything she didn’t already know. And of greater importance, if this program was like many others, it wasn’t going to give her a whole lot of information from this point forward. I mean, I want to know how to teach my little platypus when he doesn’t understand why the denominators of fractions need to match before adding. I want to know what do you do when a platypus can’t remember how to spell “familiar” even though he tested perfectly on it just yesterday? And I want this fancy program to tell me why he is upside down in his seat just as often as he’s right side up. Frankly, I was growing a little wearing of teaching to his tookis (just how *does* one spell tookis?) more often than his adorable face.

But instead I often found information that I didn’t quite know what to do with. “Be proactive in teaching this child.” “Get him more involved physically with the lesson.” Much of it seemed like valuable advice, but I usually came away saying, “Okay . . . how?” When Monday morning would roll around and I faced my struggling learner once again, I usually had no idea what to change in order to accommodate his new name. Where was the book on *platypus math*?

Eventually I came to the conclusion that it was time to experiment. So I went on a hunt for unique ways of teaching every academic subject. I found every different teaching method that I could and then . . . are you ready for the really complex system I put into place? I simply tried it with my child. I found ways to teach that were unfamiliar. I found ways to teach that were surprising. I found ways to teach that were downright odd. I passed no judgment on any possible idea until I had given it a try. And that’s when I began to discover some wonderful things about my own dear little platypus. He could learn. He could learn well and fast and with enthusiasm,

once I found ways in which he *did* learn. And along the way, there were many surprises that most learning style programs would never have predicted.

For example, I one day discovered my son repeating his spelling words over and over until a natural rhythm developed. This one really surprised me as I had been absolutely certain, at least up to that moment that he was completely without musical ability. Thus, rhythm as a learning vehicle had been completely ignored by me. I tested this idea and set several things to either rhyme or to a beat. Wow! It burst open a new avenue for learning. The result was that we now have a simply daily recitations section to our schooling. During the years, he (and all my children) learned the names of the Presidents in order, many different rules of math, the books of the Bible, the elements of the periodic table, parts of speech, the planets in order from the sun, and a gazillion dates and events from history.

I learned that this child, who most definitely is *not* a visual learner, was, nonetheless, able to work through material better that was color coded. Go figure.

- If he struggled to remember the “gh” in right or fight, he practiced it and then boxed in the “gh” with a bright green marker. This additional step, plus the bold reminder in green, made it easier to remember the otherwise forgotten silent letters.
- If he often adds when he should subtract, have him start by boxing in all plus signs with a bright blue color and circling all subtraction signs with a yellow marker. This extra step will help his eye to catch the symbol’s required action before he plunges ahead.
- Keep a red pen nearby, and whenever you give him an assignment, have him write it in red. It will always call out to him as something with some urgency attached to it.

Additionally, I learned that each new success was cross-useful. In other words, once I found a method that worked well in teaching him spelling, I soon tried it in geography. If a new idea worked well in math, we found it worth a try in history. Successes were crossing over at a rapid rate.

So now I’m always on the lookout for new ideas to teach an otherwise struggling learner. In fact, I’ve come to find myself at odds with the word choice of “struggling learner”. If he isn’t learning because I’ve been teaching him with methods that don’t sync up with his learning style, then he’s not a struggling learner, I’m a struggling teacher. I’m not doing the job of finding what he needs to unlock his understanding of a particular concept. It would be easy to see this as a burden. But I’ve come to find the fun in this part of my job; the joy of the hunt. I now have my “radar” out all the time, looking for something different to try. So what was the oddest learning activity we ever did? My children might pick some of the history re-creations we’ve done. Then there was when we practiced spelling on the bathroom wall by writing through smeared shaving cream. But I still place my vote on the crawl-through digestive tract my son created. We just need to open our minds to all the different ways there are in which material could be presented, find the oddest, strangest, most unlikely of possible methods of teaching and then . . . give it a whirl. It’s in such whirls that learning takes flight.

Biographical Information

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Carol Barnier is the author of three books about working with non-traditional minds (which includes her own), the latest of which is entitled The Big WHAT NOW Book of Learning Styles. Her organization, Open Gifts, is dedicated to helping others to rejoice in the unique ways we've each been created and to see that these differences are the gifts. You're sure to leave her workshops laughing and excited about the many ideas you've taken away. Check her out at www.OpenGifts.org or www.SizzleBop.com