**Matching Teaching with How Students Learn**

April 25, 2012 | [Ben Johnson](http://www.edutopia.org/user/65)

What is a learner? A learner naturally observes and mimics. From the time we are born to the age of two, we are what you would call a learning machine. All humans during that time period are learning prodigies. Think of what we learn during that time. We learn to manipulate and control our bodies to the extent that we can walk, and to recognize and respond to stimulus, using our senses (mainly our mouths) to explore and discover the world we live in.

The most amazing thing we learn is how to communicate. Research shows that babies from zero to 8 months old, though they are not able to communicate effectively, are busy cataloguing language cues. By the time they are 11 months old, they recognize their native language and are able to differentiate the native sounds and ignore the non-native ones. For example in English, *ra* and *la* are different sounds because English uses a lot of r's and l's. But in Japanese, these two sounds are identical because the Japanese don't really use either sounds. (Dr. Patricia Kuhl, from the University of Washington, describes [in this video (1)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRRiWg6wYXw&feature=list_related&playnext=1&list=SPED2FC89AE6EFE8F8) how children learn languages from six to eight months old).

Dr. Kuhl points out in the video that "natural" language learning skills drop off after seven years old. That doesn't mean we cannot learn other languages, it just means that our native language will get more and more in the way as we do. So, from birth, we are learning wizards that learn by observation and mimicry of the people in our lives.

**A learner remembers what he learns**

Could we say a learner is a *rememberer*? Yes, but that doesn't quite cover it, because I believe the learner wants to learn and not just remember. The act of learning is part of that desire. As we mature, we learn (and remember what we learn) more and more by exploration and discovery. We learn with hands-on and minds-on. We learn in the situation, in the moment and in the locale. Unsurprisingly, this type of memory is called locale memory and it is instant memory. For example, we all remember what we were doing on 9/11. So, we learn instantly by experiencing events that are important to us.

**A learner is a lover of stories**

We -- especially as children -- love to listen to and tell stories. Daniel Willingham, a cognitive scientist, and as it turns out, a Star Wars enthusiast, explains that we can easily remember complex storylines from movies or television shows that we have seen just one time. Using Star Wars as a story example, Willingham goes on to describe the four C's that serve as a foundation for any worthy story: *causality, conflict, complications,* and *character* -- all held together by action. So, we easily learn content in the action and adventure of the story structure.

**A learner is a student in my class**

As his teacher, I can tap into this natural ability and affinity to learn language by helping him to learn the scientific vocabulary, not forgetting that his mouth and ears are part of his natural language learning capacity (there is no way students can remember a word if they can't say the word, and they can't say the word unless they hear it used correctly). As her teacher I can augment her inclination to learn by creating learning situations that require her to discover the reason *pi* equals 3.14 -- all by herself; this is inquiry. As their teacher I can foment the incredible instant memory of stories by helping them to think about "meaning" by telling the story of Pearl Harbor using the four C's.

How do you help your learners?