

**UNIT STUDIES**  
**THE ANSWER FOR LEARNING DIFFERENCES**

By Carol Krahn  
KONOS-CanadaWest

If you have more than one child, chances are that you will have more than one learning style in your home. Methods that worked so well for one child just don't seem to work at all for another. Not only do our children have different learning styles, our own learning style as parents, which is usually reflected in our teaching style, may be different than that of our children. Learning styles are very individualized – while there is not a right or wrong learning style, there certainly are teaching methods that do not work as effectively for all learning styles. Unit style teaching is the one teaching style that can be designed to accommodate all learning styles; by employing multi-dimensional teaching strategies that engage the auditory child as well as the visual and the participatory (kinaesthetic) child, unit style teaching balances right and left-brain learning activities. When unit studies are rich in multi-sensory hands-on learning experiences, relevant inter-related subject material, great literature, and opportunity to make discoveries, then individual learning needs can be met without sacrificing the lesson content or the teacher's sanity.

For some of our children school seems so easy, but there are also the children for whom school seems to be so much more difficult than it should be, often frustrating both the student and the teacher. The confusing part is that many times it is obvious that these children are bright, creative, curious and eager to learn, but what we want them to learn in school just doesn't come together for them when we want it to. Dr Jane Healy, author of *Endangered Minds*, informs us 30-50% of today's children are being given learning disabled labels of some form or another (some seventy-plus labels). She goes on to say that in many cases it is simply because their minds do not function best in the style of teaching most commonly used in classrooms. These students may, in fact, be struggling learners simply because as right-brain dominant learners, they do not learn well with our traditional left-brained method (teacher presenting verbally, much use of textbooks and workbooks) and all they really need is a teaching style that taps into their strengths, instead of attempting to force square pegs into round holes (see Jeffery Freed, *Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World*). As home educators, and our children's primary teachers, it is imperative for us to understand different learning styles and provide information (teach) in a manner that matches our child's dominant learning style.

Dr Roger Sperry won a Nobel Prize in 1981 for his work on the functional specialization of the brain hemispheres. Broadly speaking, the left hemisphere is the logical, analytical, conscious, sequential, detail-orientated, thinking part of your brain, which works well with symbols and verbal communication. In contrast, the right hemisphere is the intuitive, creative, holistic, simultaneous/random, visualizing part of your brain, working best with concrete experiences to create pictures and images. The hemispheric specialties are illustrated well by the following diagram from *Teaching for the Two-Sided Mind*, by Linda Verlee Williams; the flower parts representing the detail-orientated left brain and the full flower representing the holistic right brain. We are equipped with two sides of a

brain for a reason – we engage both hemispheres in nearly everything we do. The two hemispheres are interconnected, acting in concert, enhancing and complementing each other; information needs to be processed in both hemispheres in order for complete and efficient thought to occur. For example, when reading, the left brain decodes the symbols (letters) on the page to make words and sentences, while the right brain is busy making pictures and meaning out of the words. This is an over-simplified statement as there is nothing simple about our brain processes, but the point is that both hemispheres are required in the thinking process for effective long-term learning to occur. When our teaching balances both left and right-brained activities, we have a winning combination for all students and their teachers.

**The problem that occurs in education is that approximately 90% of curriculum is predominantly left-brain orientated. If the majority of your instruction is language-based desk work, using textbooks and workbooks, you are for the most part teaching to the left-brain, and ignoring the vast learning potential of the right-brain, which prefers concrete, direct experience with which to create pictures and meaning for the mind to store. Ignoring the right brain learning potential is detrimental to all students, but can be devastating to the right-brain dominant learner who will learn best when given many opportunities to actively participate in the learning experience. It is important to understand that unless the right hemisphere is activated and engaged, attention and learning is poor for every student, not just for right-brain dominant students who tend to struggle in our traditional seated classrooms.**

So how do we teach so as to engage the right brain? There are endless ways to enhance teaching that capitalize on the right brain's strengths. The use of colourful visual props (graphs, charts, timelines), demonstrations, object lessons, experiments, costumes, dramatizations, role play, field trips, and projects will all activate the right brain, while your verbal instruction, dialogue and reading will provide the left-brain stimulation. Incorporating lots of hands-on, concrete learning opportunities – touch it, taste it, see it, smell it, hear it, do it, and talk about it - is the key to capturing the attention of the right brain. These concrete experiences are necessary for the right brain to form an image and for visualization to take place, giving a framework for understanding the meaning of the associated words, which is the left-brained part of the learning. *Doing* something with the information creates meaning and makes it memorable.

For example, to teach geography concepts in a manner that is both right and left-brain friendly, you could make a “living globe”. You could put an “N” on the top of your child's forehead, and a “S” on the tip of his shoe to represent the Poles; then you could put a bright ribbon, scarf or belt around his waist and label it “equator” on coloured paper, and a string of beads around his neck could be labelled the Arctic Circle. Next, cut out a map of the British Isles, then mark and label Greenwich, England. Now run a strip of masking tape (preferably bright coloured tape) down the front of his face, down his shirt and pants all the way to his toe, and label it the “Prime Meridian”, then attach your map of England to the line on his chest. Another strip of masking tape down his back can be labelled the “International Date Line”. You could add more horizontal ribbons for the

Topics of Capricorn and Cancer. If you have more than one child, you may have more than one “living globe” orbiting in your house. Now if you shine a flashlight on your rotating “globe” you can teach about time zones, days and nights, seasons and a number of other abstract geographical concepts that you have just made concrete by creating an active visual with your child. Finally, by asking and answering questions and by dialoguing about the activity, the information crystallizes for your child; the activity has meaning. (geography activities from KONOS Culture Series curriculum, Russia, the Land of Endurance).

This type of activity will cause some smiles and giggles, and it will be fun for everyone as humour and emotion are great right-brain stimulators and encourage long-term memory and recall. This easy, visual, participatory method of teaching these geography concepts balances both right and left-brained learning and allows the teacher to capture the attention of each learning style. The visual, the auditory, and the participatory child will understand the lesson and because it employs all the learning modalities, each will have a deeper understanding than if you had used only a one-dimensional teaching method.

**Carol Krahn and her husband have home-schooled three children through to graduation, using primarily KONOS curriculum. Carol's on-going desire is to support, encourage, affirm and equip home-educators with tools, and information to enable them to accomplish their own goals by sharing from her experience and research. Carol is the Western Canadian KONOS Rep.**

**KONOS hands-on, literature-rich, character-building elementary unit studies combine serious fun with challenging academics, effectively teaching all learning styles! KONOS high school is an integrated, classical study that allows parents to mentor their teens while developing independent learners.**

Contact Carol at **306 225-4355**

[carol@konos-canada.com](mailto:carol@konos-canada.com)

[www.konos-canada.com](http://www.konos-canada.com)