Not all teachers require that their students take a learning style inventory or learning style test before the beginning of a new year or semester, although there is nothing wrong with this. While it might be best to get to know students' learning styles before the onset of the class so that lesson plans and other course elements can be tailored based on the learning style assessments, it is perfectly acceptable to become adept at simple pattern recognition to identify the "culture" of the class and what the dominant learning style seems to be.

To observant instructors (those who are in tune with their students versus speaking at them from a distance) pattern recognition becomes almost second nature with the arrival of a new set of students. Since no two people are alike, so too does it hold that no groups of students are similar. Teaching methods that worked with the learning style of the last semester group might completely fail with a new group—it is all about adapting teaching style based on patterns that can easily be recognized.

One of the best ways for instructors to engage in pattern recognition to determine the dominant learning style is to start the class with various teaching tools and methods to see what invokes the best response. While it is much easier to stay with the standard lecture format and it might have worked with other classes, this may not hold true for a new group.

For this exercise in pattern recognition to identify the dominant learning style for a class without the use of learning style inventories, begin with the standard—the traditional lecture and note-taking format, free from multimedia or other visual or auditory stimuli. For the first week or two (depending on the frequency of class meetings) spend one session with lecture only and make a few notes after the session ends about what level of interest seemed to be present. Make notes about the amount and frequency of voluntary class participation and also make note of how many students appeared to be drifting off or losing focus.

With the experience from the traditional lecture in mind and notes from this experience fresh in mind, begin the next phase of learning style identification by replacing the traditional lecture with PowerPoint presentations that couple text with images and gauge the response to this in the same way as before with detailed notes about class interest, participation, and other details.

For the last phase, try to have an all-out multimedia day, at least just once, and see what kind of involvement this creates. Watch part of a relevant film, listen to audio recordings of speakers on the class topic, create detailed concept maps in groups. Do anything you can think of to deviate from the traditional lecture, taking notes the whole time.

By the end of this process you will have two ends of the spectrum covered; the traditional versus the new media and you can then find a point that seems to work for most students. Most importantly, this will also have to work with your teaching style, after all, your style is important in this process as well.

By making these notes and being observant as an instructor to see where your students seem to be losing interest or cannot grasp a difficult topic you can better adapt to diverse learning styles and improve information retention, thus making your class rewarding for all involved.