



*by Lee Ann Dalton*

Knitting is one of those wonderful skills that just begs to be passed along. It's a craft that's been handed down and handed over, from friend to friend, throughout families, in craft workshops, even over the cubicle walls. Knitting is undoubtedly contagious; at the very least, no one ever sits next to a knitter without forming an opinion about what that knitter is doing, and they often loudly covet something warm for their very own selves. It's almost magnetic, the clickity-click of needles, the flash of yarn, the fabric that just seems to magically grow in a knitter's hands.

In families, along with reading, writing, making ramen, and trying not to crash the family car, many a knitting parent has tried to pass on his or her skill to a child. If you're a serious knitter, you may have tried on more than one occasion to impart your valuable knowledge to your kids. Knitting is that important to you, and it's unthinkable to have any child of yours move into the world unable to throw Jack off the needle and pop the bunny through the hole. While it's entirely possible that you have kids who have then decided that whatever you do for fun is exactly the opposite of whatever they would like to do for all eternity—or at least until the next trip to the mall—the chances are very good that, in the early years, your child stood next to you as you knit, pondered the wool in your hands for a while, looked you in the eye, and uttered those precious words that every enthusiastic knitter waits to hear:

“You should totally teach me to knit.”

But teaching knitting is not easy. I can't be the only one who discovered that the moment I tried to pass on the art of the loop, that no matter how enthusiastic the learner, not every newbie knitter picks it up immediately, cooking right along, with zero panic at the unevenness and dropped stitches. There are those who hold the needles and yarn clenched in their fists and stare at you blankly, nay, angrily, as if you have told them to perform brain surgery on a hedgehog while doing a headstand.

Still, I wanted to pass on my beloved craft. I wanted to go beyond teaching friends and strangers: I

wanted to teach my own daughter. My kid should knit, right? I hoped it would help her to de-stress, and might even lead her to visualize numbers, her nemesis, better if she had to count stitches.

It should be noted that long ago, when my daughter asked me to teach her to knit at age 5, I heartily agreed and bought the smiley-faced needles that very day, letting her pick out some wince-worthy purple wool that would put Barney to shame before I sat her down to learn. There's nothing like live, hands-on instruction, with the teacher right there to help you, right? Well, the first time I tried to teach my daughter to knit, the needles ended up on the other side of the room in a fit of frustration, the yarn was cut up into one-inch pieces to serve as grape Barbie spaghetti, and I ended up wondering why knitting teachers don't drink more on the job. The second, third, and fourth times I did it (once every year) it was like story hour at the library, with plenty being knit, but not one stitch actually created by the child herself. She sat in my lap, quite happy to have her hands on the needles, ready to take possession of the three-row bracelet that was the result. It was a series of lovely mother-daughter moments, but nothing sunk in for the next time around. Blank stare. Hedgehog surgery. Needles hidden under the bed with the dust bunnies. No new knitters here.

Nearly ten years later, did I have another knitter in my family? No, dear reader, I did not. "Mom, you should totally teach me to knit." It had become almost a joke. It's not as if I can't teach at all—heck, I once taught a newscaster to knit on live TV—at 5:30 in the morning—and she did alright. My day job often involves "differentiation," recasting lessons for kids whose learning styles just don't fit with the rest of the crowd, so I know there has to be a way to help someone who really wants to "get" knitting to go beyond that first co-knit row. I just have to find it. And lately, I've been pulled into service to teach fiber arts history to kids my daughter's age and older, some of them struggling learners. It would be awful if I tried to teach them to knit and they all turned out to be exactly the same type of learner as my kid. Seriously, my lap is a somewhat limited classroom space. I had to find a way to get from point A to point Finished Product without them all piling onto me like wool-laden puppies who need their claws clipped.



Obviously, knitting, like any other teachable subject, is about as opposite from a muumuu as one can get: one lesson style definitely doesn't fit all. Operating on the learning style theory I've been using throughout most of my professional life, paired with the knowledge that knitting lessons today come in a huge variety of forms to which our predecessors didn't have access, I decided to run through the paces with my daughter, to see what would work. If I could teach her this one thing, I could teach it to anyone. Besides, the kid who tells me to "get on with it" in Latin really wanted a knitted bracelet, and she wanted to make it herself, panicked hedgehog surgery be damned.

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We started with verbal/linguistic learning. I handed over a how-to book, some wool, and needles, and said, "Go to it, kid. See you in five." I had no illusions that this would work, but I had to eliminate the traditional methods first. Hey, it's how I learned about crochet and puberty. (I navigated neither process with any grace whatsoever, but your learner's mileage may vary.) This learning style is often paired with the solitary learning style. Some people can just pick up a book and learn a skill, and if you can produce a doily right out of the gate with a book, we kind of don't like you, but more power to you, and the books keep getting better and better, with pattern support that will take you far beyond the Barbie shrugs and cat dish coasters of old. But my former lap knitter wasn't going to fly this mission solo. She wanted company in her misery.

Next came the visual/spatial method, also known as the no-words picture book. There are whole series based on visually teaching yourself to do all sorts of things, knitting included. IKEA has based their entire business on this learning style, with that little guy who insists you have all the parts to make something beautiful, but you'd better have a partner to help you carry it without breaking it in two. We did not have all the parts, nor did we make the something beautiful. Breaking things in two, we got that down pat. (Note to self: no more bamboo needles for this kid.) Picture books work brilliantly for solitary spatial learners, but my learner found that she could not connect what was in her hands to what was in the pictures. Next learning style, please.



The logical/mathematical style gets its own special circle of knitting hell for many learners, but counting is something you can't avoid when teaching a new knitter. On row three, you likely want to have the same number of stitches you started with on row one. This style gets folded in with the verbal/linguistic learning style in books, but in DVDs and online, in-person classes, knitting math

gets a little less scary. My particular learner was not pleased to discover there would be math or logic involved, but if I promised not to call it that, she promised to keep counting. The knitting logic that works the best? Keep doing the same thing over and over again and your knitting will grow, guaranteed. I'm hoping that the predictability of numbers will make my surprise-averse learner love it more. Sticks, meet carrot.

The physical/kinesthetic learner is the lap learner turned loose. My learner needed my hands on the needles with hers, so that she could feel what the needles were supposed to do. This is where having a teacher right there is incredibly helpful. I eventually managed to spot her knitting, my hands hovering rather than actually touching the needles. When she discovered the movements were all hers, she was absolutely enthralled. And then she dropped a stitch and all hell broke loose, but for a moment, there, body learning was where it was at. Social learners often do well with this type of learning, as they can practice hands-on with other people around, and associate others' movements with what's happening physically in their own hands. But today's would-be knitter has options beyond finding a classroom: we found a DVD that showed basic stitches from the knitter's-eye-view perspective. So much easier for my learner than watching me and trying to create a mirror image action with her own hands. YouTube videos shot from the same perspective work quite well, too, and if you yell at them, they don't get upset. You can also make them go slowly and repeat ad nauseum what they just said. Ask me how I know.

Finally, there is the aural/musical style of learning. No, I will not sing for you. But hearing the instructions slowly, over and over again (see previous *ad nauseum* repetition suggestion), paired with watching a knitter's-eye-view demonstration and feeling how that matched what was going on with her hands, got my learner to produce her very first solo row.

So, do I have another knitter in the house now? Not exactly, but she has made me promise not to throw out her knitting, because she wants to try again. Perhaps she will be another Queen of Starts, but saving the knitting is a step in the right direction. I have watched the whole learning style thing crash and burn in practice for academics, because people often think they have to peg learners as one type and go with it, never to vary the lesson again. But I've discovered through trial and rather dramatic error that successful knitting lessons for struggling learners can be a changing cast of methods, and for every combo, there's a teaching tool or three that will fill the bill. Switch them out on an as-needed basis, and you may find the combination that will unlock your learner's zeal for wool. Just like the projects we're trying to help the new knitter create, this learning process is the very definition of work-in-progress.





*The author and her daughter*

*Lee Ann Dalton is a poet, fiber arts columnist, freelance writer, spinner, knitter, gardener, marathoner, late bloomer, and devotée of the serial comma. She lives in Exeter, New Hampshire, with her equally insomnia-driven husband, her Latin-obsessed daughter, and three cats, including the amazing one-eyed Shackleton. She blogs at [Knot Good](#).*