

3 Cannibals and 3 scientists river-crossing riddle with learning styles & sociology

The Riddle:

Three cannibals and three scientists need to cross a wide river using a row boat that can carry one or two people. Your job is to get all six people across the river by boat – but without ever having a situation where the cannibals outnumber the scientist – or else the scientist will be overwhelmed and eaten.

The Rules:



- The boat holds a maximum of two people.
- The boat cannot row itself across the river. It needs at least one cannibal or scientist.
- The cannibals eat only scientists - not other cannibals.
- The cannibals can never outnumber the scientists, even for an instant when the boat touches shore.
- The boat is the only option for getting across the river. No “thinking outside the boat”.

The Learning Question:

Assign individuals/groups to initially use one of the learning styles listed below. If unable to solve the riddle within 5 minutes, they may incorporate whatever other learning styles help them (not the web).

Technique	Associated learning style	Initial equipment*	Later equipment*
Think about it	Abstract / cognitive	Nothing	Quarter/pennies
Draw it	Visual / kinesthetic	Pen/paper	Quarter/pennies
Talk about it	Oratory / auditory	Nothing	Quarter/pennies
Manipulate proxies	Kinesthetic	Quarter/pennies	Nothing

*Discretely/secretly and without comment, distribute equipment to each individual/group.

Observe the techniques employed by each group working on the riddle. Do they:

The Societal Question:

Without discussion, have each person form a mental picture of: what the cannibals and scientists look like; what they are wearing; the river’s location on Earth; what language they speak; etc.

After “locking in”,

- Is the river in a city, suburb, or remote, mountains, plains, wilderness, woods, or jungle?
- Is the river in U.S., North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, or Australia?
- Are the cannibals/scientists short or tall, light or dark-skinned?
- Are the cannibals/scientists partially or fully clothed? What type of clothes and shoes (if any)?
- Are the cannibals/scientists young or old, weak or strong, male or female?

If they used the quarters and pennies and associated one of the coins with the scientist, did the group do it in a statistically significant way? Have group list reasons for making this association, with a understanding that there may be **no rationale** for choosing quarters vs. pennies and/or individuals may be less than forthcoming about their reasons for their choices.

Association	Possible reasons, perceptions, or value systems
Penny as cannibal Quarter as scientist	Perceived higher value of scientist to cannibal. Pennies are made from copper, mined in areas near cannibals. Copper and cannibal start with the letter “c” (auditory). Skin color, e.g., darker-skin cannibals and lighter-skin scientist (visual). Many others.
Quarter as cannibal Penny as scientist	Quarters are larger and overpower smaller pennies (power dynamics). Many others.