

How Adults Learn Facilitating Learning

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Learning can be defined as the ability to demonstrate acquisition of new facts, insight, or skills. Both learning and learner were found to be of central importance in teaching-learning interaction¹. For learning process to be successful, learners have to go through a learning cycle². Understanding of learning styles preferences, which are derived from the learning cycle, is found to be a key element in improving individuals' performance and academic achievements².

Learning is a broad term, which refers to demonstrating something that was not known before (insights, realization as well as facts), or doing something that could not be done before (skills). It is a process of gaining, interpreting, and understanding knowledge, acquiring skills, memorizing information, and making sense or abstracting meanings. It can be formal, such as learning in educational institutes, or informal, obtained from the different stages and events of human life. Most people associate learning with the acquisition of new facts.

In the past twenty-five years, research has shown that adult learning and adult learners have become of central importance in the teaching/learning interaction. In other words, what the learner does has become more important for learning than what the teacher does. As a result of that concept, this has led to the redefinition of "teaching" as "facilitation of student learning", and the objectives as "learning outcomes" rather than "teaching inputs". With this shift from "teaching" to "learning" at all levels of education, a variety of learning strategies have been advocated to optimise learning¹.

One of the major concepts to emerge from this research was the idea of the US academic, David Kolb, which has been given further attention by the two British writers Peter Honey, and Alan Mumford². The concept is simple, to be successful, the learner should pass through a cycle of learning (Kolb's cycle). The cycle consists of the following four stages: activity (having experience), reflection (reviewing the experience), theory (concluding from the experience to fit into theoretical ideas), and pragmatism (applying learning to actual problems). Honey and Mumford in 1982, developed a model of learning styles by linking the four stages of Kolb's cycle to produce a model of four learning styles. A learning style questionnaire was developed by both Honey and Mumford to test for these styles. The four types are called: activist, reflector, theorist, and pragmatist. Learning styles are thought to represent the individual's unique approach to learning. Understanding of learning cycle and knowing that people tend to have natural preferences for different learning styles is very useful in designing effective instructional strategies to facilitate learning, and to capitalize on the individual's potential².

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Activists tend to involve themselves fully in doing and experiencing. They enjoy being dominated by immediate experiences. Their philosophy is "I'll try anything once". They tend to think quickly and effectively, but they consider consequences afterwards. They are open-minded and this makes them enthusiastic about anything new. They like to participate and have fun, and as soon as the excitement of one activity vanishes, they tend to be busy looking for the next. However, they like to centre all activities around themselves. In any learning activity they attend, they like to have short sessions, plenty of variety, and the opportunity to initiate^{2,3}.

Reflectors like to step back to think about experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They like to have a thorough preparation before coming to any conclusion. Their philosophy is to be "cautious". They usually research and evaluate this conclusion before making a move. They enjoy observing other people in action or listening to other people who passed through that action. They prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They are in general cautious, indecisive, and tend to adopt a low profile^{2,3}.

Theorists usually adapt and integrate ideas or information in a step by step logical presentation, so that it will fit into a sound theory. Their philosophy is "if it's logical, it's good". They have a propensity to be perfectionists and will not get satisfied until things are tidy and fit into a rationale scheme. They like to have concepts and models, clear structures and objectives, and to feel intellectually stretched. They prefer to maximize certainty and feel uncomfortable with subjective judgments, lateral thinking and anything flippant^{2,3}.

Pragmatists are interested in trying out ideas, theories, and techniques if they think it works in practice. They are essentially practical down to earth people, who like making practical decisions and solving problems. Pragmatists favor learning activities to be close as possible to direct work experience. Their philosophy is "there is always a better way", and "if it works it's good"^{2,3}.

Applying the learning styles questionnaire on myself, I found myself to have a dominant theorist style with some characteristics from the pragmatists group. Knowing my style as a learner should help me in designing my own learning strategy to maximize my learning potential; however, as a teacher or learning facilitator, it should remind me that many learners have different preferences and when designing learning, I should remember to touch on all four styles as far as possible, not just my own favourite.

What are the implications of these learning styles? A large percentage of adult learners have a dominant learning style and natural preferences compared to the other three. It is possible also to have a combination of more than one style. However, in real practice, no one uses one of the styles exclusively. Similarly, if tutors are in a learning situation, they should remember that they should adopt diverse learning styles of different individuals as far as possible, by using different learning approaches and teaching modalities. Also, the tutor should remember that different subjects and circumstances will have their own importance. For example, if a diabetes educator is teaching patient how to use an insulin pump, there is probably no place for theory as operating a pump does not need knowing how the internal parts works, rather, learning how to use a pump will require an activist approach. This approach

will help learners to involve themselves fully and without a bias in new experiences, and make them ready to tackle problems immediately whenever they arise. If on the other hand the subject is management development, the tutor may prefer a theoretical approach to elicit many rules and principles. However, learners may only want the pragmatic points and highlights where they can make use of them in their own work and job. They want only what really works, not what the books say²⁻⁴.

CONCLUSION

Although it is not possible to take into account all the learning styles of each individual student, tutors can make their approach more comprehensive during their learning activities by appealing to various learning styles. Certainly, this will lead to more effective learning that can facilitate attention, motivation, memory, and comprehension. A number of studies supported matching learning activities to learners learning styles; there is however no consistent agreement on labeling learners to their natural learning styles preferences. In contrast, exposing learners to a variety of learning styles may be a more practical approach to help them use their intelligences to the maximum potential and facilitate their learning⁴!

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