

## Learning styles

*Prepared for the Course Team by Jon Rosewell*

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When we start to learn something new, our first concern is naturally with *what* we are learning. But have you stopped to consider *how* you learn? How will you approach your new subject? Do you know how effective that approach will be? Have you considered other methods?

Educational research has shown that by becoming more aware of *how* you learn, you can become a more efficient and effective learner. There is no one single method of learning; there are many, and what works best depends on the task, the context and your personality. You will be a more effective learner if you are aware of the range of possible learning methods, and know when to apply them and what works best for you.

Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1986a) identify four distinct styles or preferences that people use while learning. They suggest that most of us tend to follow only one or two of these styles, and that different learning activities may be better suited to particular styles. Knowing your predominant learning style will help you judge how likely an activity is to be helpful to you.

Honey and Mumford have produced a questionnaire (Honey and Mumford, 1986b) that can identify your preferred learning styles. But you may be able to decide yourself by reading the following descriptions; do you recognise yourself?

### Activists

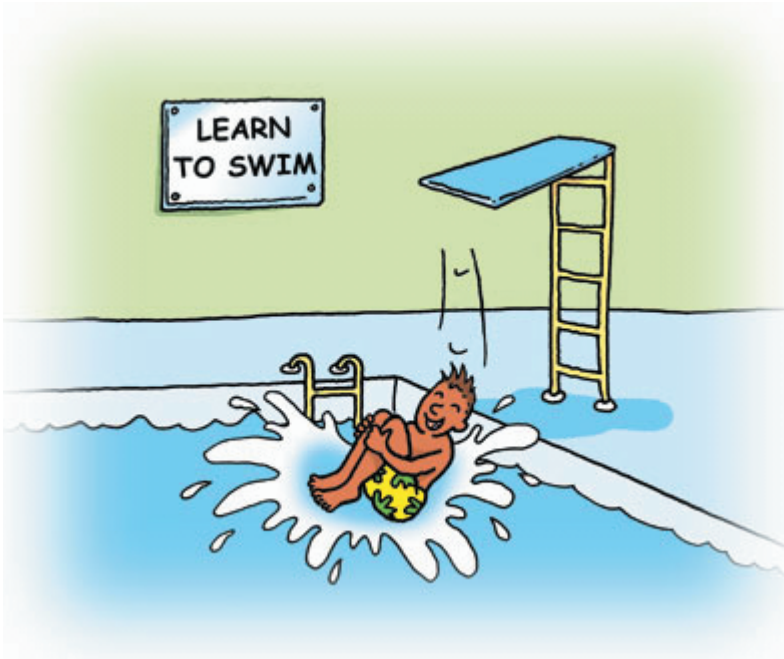
Activists are people who learn by doing. They like to involve themselves in new experiences, and will 'try anything once'. They tend to act first and consider the consequences afterwards.

Activists learn best when:

- involved in new experiences, problems and opportunities;
- thrown in at the deep end;
- working with others in problem solving, games, role-playing exercises;
- able to lead a group.

Activists learn least when:

- listening to lectures or reading long explanations;
- reading, writing and thinking on their own;



- analysing and interpreting lots of data;
- following precise instructions.

## Reflectors

Reflectors learn by observing and thinking about what happened. They like to consider all the possible angles and implications before coming to a considered opinion. They spend time listening and observing, and tend to be cautious and thoughtful.



Reflectors learn best when:

- able to stand back and observe first;
- given time to think and investigate before commenting or acting;
- given an opportunity to review what has happened;

- doing tasks without tight deadlines.

Reflectors learn least when:

- forced to take a lead in a group;
- doing things without preparation;
- rushed by deadlines.

## Theorists

Theorists like to understand the theory behind the actions. They need models, concepts and facts in order to learn. They like to analyse and synthesise, and feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements.



Theorists learn best when:

- an activity is backed up by ideas and concepts that form a model, system or theory;
- in a structured situation with a clear purpose;
- they have the chance to question and probe;
- required to understand a complex situation.

Theorists learn least:

- in situations that emphasise emotions and feelings;
- when activities are unstructured or ambiguous;
- when asked to act without knowing the principles or concepts involved.
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## Pragmatists

Pragmatists are keen on trying things out. They look for new ideas that can be applied to the problem in hand. They like to get on with things and tend to be impatient with open-ended discussions; they are practical, down-to-earth people.



Pragmatists learn best when:

- there is an obvious link between the topic and a current need;
- they are shown techniques with clear practical advantages;
- they can try things out with feedback from an expert;
- they can copy an example, or emulate a role model.

Pragmatists learn least when:

- there is no immediate practical benefit;
- there are no clear guidelines on how to do it;
- it appears to be 'all theory'.

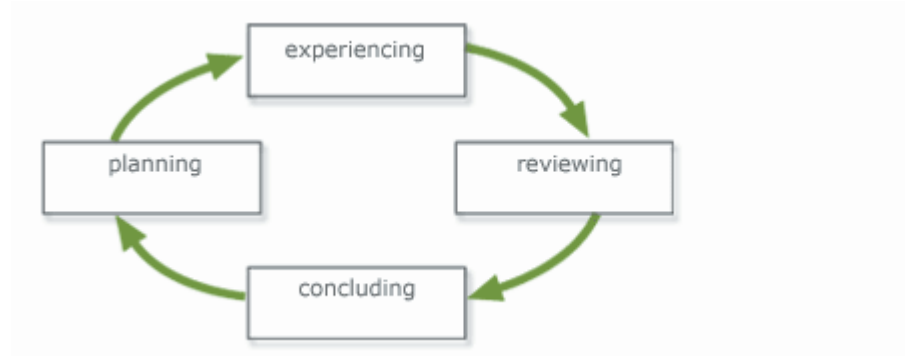
## Matching activities to learning style

People show preferences for particular learning styles, and different learning activities are suited to different styles of learning. You are most likely to learn when your learning style and the nature of the activity match. So if you can choose among activities to learn the same subject, you may be able to choose an activity to match your preferred style. But often you aren't given the luxury of a choice, so you will need to use a style that may not come naturally.

If you are prepared to use different styles on occasion, so that you strengthen styles that you currently don't often use, you can become an all-round learner, able to benefit from any learning opportunity.

## Kolb learning cycle

A slightly different perspective on learning also points up the importance of using a variety of learning styles. Kolb and other educational psychologists suggest that effective learning proceeds around a cycle, as shown below.



To learn effectively, you need to keep moving around this cycle:

- Experiencing – doing something;
- Reviewing – thinking about what has happened;
- Concluding – drawing some conclusions;
- Planning – deciding what to do in the future.

Completing each stage is important not just for itself, but because it improves learning in the next stage.

Honey and Mumford point out that there is an association between the learning cycle and learning styles:



So if you have a strong preference for the Activist learning style, for example, you may be providing plenty of new experiences but failing to reflect and conclude from them. To become a more effective learner you should engage with each stage of the cycle, and that can mean using activities and styles that you may not normally choose.

## References

Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1986a) *The Manual of Learning Styles*, Peter Honey Associates.

Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1986b) *Learning Styles Questionnaire*, Peter Honey Publications Ltd.

Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.