

Information Note

Learning Styles

Overview

When looking at the provision of training and development opportunities, the following elements are essential to ensuring the best end result:

- Identifying and taking account of the learners' own preferred learning styles
- Identifying the type of learning methodology most suited to the knowledge, skills or behaviours to be acquired or developed
- Identifying the type of learning methodology most suited to the learners' preferred learning styles or areas where learning style needs to develop
- Looking at the learning cycle and ensuring all stages are covered in the learning intervention

Learning Cycle

Kolb et al (1974) defined the following Learning Cycle



- **Concrete experience** – this can be planned or accidental
- **Reflective observation** – this involves actively thinking about the experience and its significance
- **Abstract conceptualising** – involves generalising from experience in order to develop various concepts and ideas that can be applied when similar situations are encountered
- **Active experimentation** – testing the concept or ideas in new situations. This gives rise to a new concrete experience and the cycle begins again.

Learning Styles

Learning styles is an overarching term covering a spectrum of modalities, preferences and strategies

by which individual absorb, process and respond to situations and input resulting in learning.

When looking at an individual's learning style a number of good tools exist that can be used. Three of the better known and most commonly used are:

- Honey & Mumford's Learning Styles (1986)
- Myers Briggs Type Indicator
- VAK Learning Styles model

Honey and Mumford

Questionnaires can be obtained from Peter Honey's website, www.peterhoney.com, or publications.

These help individual's to assess their learning styles (we all tend to have more than one) from the following classifications:

- **Activists** like to leap on a bike and have a go. They learn by doing. Like new challenges and experiences, will try anything once.
- **Reflectors** like to think about things before having a go, and to learn by watching other people try to ride bikes. Like to analyse, observe, think it through, and sleep on it.
- **Theorists** like to understand the theory and to have a clear grasp of the concept before having a go. Like to analyse, create frameworks, think conceptually.
- **Pragmatists** like to have some practical tips and techniques from someone with experience before having a go. Like to try out new theories and ideas and see how they work in practice.

The learning experience can be made more effective by tailoring it to the preferred style. A well designed training session with therefore include activities which utilise at range of learning styles to maximise the learning opportunity for the greatest number of participants.

Myers Briggs Type Indicator

If you and your staff are familiar with the MBTI, it can provide useful pointers to individuals' preferred learning style and methods.

For example, people with a preference for **introversion** will benefit from reflective space and good preparation materials to support their learning. Conversely people with a preference for **extroversion** will benefit from more interactive and experiential forms of learning.

Myers Briggs also identifies preferred styles of working – and understanding your team's preferred style can offer useful insights into developing high performing teams that collaborate well and utilise the range of styles effectively

For example, individuals with a preference towards the Sensing **indicator** tend to focus on the present and on concrete information gained from their senses. They may prefer to receive data primarily from the five senses. Alternatively, individuals with a preference towards the **Intuition indicator** tend to focus on the future, with a view toward patterns and possibilities. These people prefer to receive data from the subconscious, or seeing relationships via insights.

VAK Learning Styles

The VAK learning style model sometimes known as sensory learning styles is based on the work of neuro-linguistic programming experts Bandler, Grinder and Grinder and focuses on three main sensory and communication and learning styles:

- **Visual:** learning through seeing. Visual learners enjoy pictures and diagrams rather than lots of words. They respond to demonstrations, reading and watching video/TV.
- **Auditory:** learning through hearing. Auditory learners like audio tapes, lectures, debates, discussions, listening to radio, and taking verbal instructions.
- **Kinesthetic:** learning through physical activities and direct involvement. Kinesthetic learners enjoy being hands-on, moving around, touching, and experiencing.

Using Learning Styles to Support Learning

Mumford (1994) identifies the following stages to self-managed learning:

- Identify individual's learning style
- Review how their learning is encouraged or restricted by their learning style
- Review their core learning skills of observation, reflection, analysis, creativity, decision-making and evaluation and consider how to use them more effectively
- Review the work and other experiences in which they are involved in terms of the kind of learning opportunities they offer
- Look for potential helpers in the self-development process: managers, colleagues, trainers or mentors
- Draw up learning objectives and a plan of action (a Personal Development Plan or Learning Contract)
- Set aside some time each day to answer the question 'what did you learn today?'

Linking Learning Styles to Organisational Culture

It is possible that the predominant culture within your organisation may be reflected in the preferred learning styles of your managers or staff.

For example, if your culture is analytical, reflective and theoretical you may have managers and staff that share these qualities and therefore their learning style may fit most closely with Honey & Mumford's Reflectors and Theorists or MBTI preferences for Introversion and Thinking.

Alternatively, if your culture is practical, pragmatic and hands-on, the predominant learning style in your organisation might be Honey & Mumford's Activists and Pragmatists or MBTI preferences for Extroversion and Sensing.

Equally, if an organisational environment is biased towards one or more type of style then staff may begin to use this style more at the expense of others.

The Cultural Dimension

Studies have identified that culture and learning are connected in important ways. Early life experiences and the values of a person's culture affect both the expectations and the processes of learning.

Having said that, however, research into multicultural education indicates that:

"Reports about culture and learning style consistently agree that within a group, variations among individuals are as great as commonalities. Even as we acknowledge that culture affects learning styles, we know that distinct learning style patterns don't fit a specific cultural group. "Researchers have clearly established that there is no single or dual learning style for the members of any cultural, national, racial, or religious group" (Dunn, 1997, pp. 74- 75). "

The message here seems to be that whilst an understanding of cultural difference and sensitivity towards cultural norms and expectations is required when considering learning interventions; it is equally important not to fall into the trap of stereotyping different groups.

"The concept of learning styles offers a value- neutral approach for understanding individual differences among ethnically

different students The assumption is that everyone can learn, provided teachers respond appropriately to individual learning needs. "Bennett

Useful Resources

Publications

The Learning Style Inventory, Kolb DA (1981), Boston, MA:McBer

The Manual of Learning Styles, Honey P and Mumford A (1986), Maidenhead, Horney

Websites

www.opp.co.uk

MBTI

www.myers-briggs.me.uk

MBTI

www.peterhoney.com

Peter Honey

http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/front_strategies.html

is aimed at teachers but contains information on approaches to learning and teaching strategies.

<http://www.businessballs.com/vaklearningstylestest.htm> for more information on VAK learning styles and multiple intelligence.

Disclaimer: People in Aid does not recommend specific websites, publications or organisations offering services or support. Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material offered, however, we cannot be held responsible for any adverse outcome of using it or engaging the services external agencies. All contact details are correct as of June 2007