

References

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Learning Styles (Practice)

The notion that individual learners have a particular style in approaching a learning task appeals to educationalists, but is not always practical or desirable to use in teaching. This article explains some reasons why and, along with the paper Learning Styles (Theory), gives information for tutors to consider with learners or as part of their own continuous professional development.



We are all different

We all come to learning in different ways. How we learn depends on our ability and aptitude, our personality and what has come to be known as our 'learning styles'. In the past great store has been set on ability, intelligence or aptitude and how that affects learning. We are now coming to recognise that our personality and what is called our 'learning style' can be just as important. It's not only learners who have different personalities and preferred ways of learning. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that our own personalities and preferred ways of learning affect the way we teach or support others to learn.

How we learn depends on our ability and aptitude, our personality and what has come to be known as our 'learning styles'

This can make it difficult to help other people learn

The fact that we have different learning styles can be pretty inconvenient for those who help others learn! It begs a number of questions. What are these learning styles? How can we be more aware of our own and our learner's styles? What if our learning style is very different from someone we are helping to learn? Will that mean we will find it harder to help them? These are questions that people in the educational world have been discussing for some time now.

Many people claim they know all or most of the answers to these questions and there are lots of learning styles questionnaires around. Research has shown that most of these are not worth the paper they are written on and the advice they give is misleading. But we do know quite a lot about how we come to learning in different ways and there is some useful advice around that can help us to help other people to learn:

- don't try to match your teaching style to the style of your learners
- do become more self-aware - use the ideas here to reflect on how you come to learning
- be yourself: play to your strengths but recognise that your preferred ways of working may not suit all your learners
- use a variety of methods when you are helping others to learn not just the methods you yourself prefer



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Focus first on what has been good and then look at what can be improved

Look, listen or do?

'VAK' is by far the most popular current learning styles theory around, especially in schools, so younger learners might have come across it. It is not valid and the best advice is to ignore any information you might be given about people being 'visual' 'auditory' or 'kinaesthetic' learners. Instead:

- assume we all use all our senses to learn
- be aware that visuals are particularly important to all of us: make sure learners get the chance to see as well as listen
- build in movement and touch as much as possible, especially in learning tasks that do not necessarily require touch and movement: some learners definitely need the opportunity to be physically active more than others, particularly men

Extravert or introvert?

This is a personality difference that we are all familiar with. All of us are a mixture of both, but we tend to have a preference, however slight, for one or the other. Extraverts get their energy by being in the 'outside world' while introverts get their energy from being in the inside world. This affects what we like to do, how we relate to other people and, to some extent, how we learn. Most learning requires a mixture of extravert and introvert behaviour. Strong extraverts and introverts are easy to spot, particularly in groups and may need help:

- extraverts like to talk then think: they need to think aloud about what they are learning first and foremost – make sure they have a chance to do this but that they are also encouraged to reflect quietly and give the introverts in the group a chance to talk!
- introverts like to think then talk: they need some time to reflect quietly about what they are learning before they talk – make sure they have a chance to do this, but that they are also encouraged and feel safe to talk out in groups

Start with an overview of the topic, take your learners through it in a sequential way and then reinforce and summarise the 'big picture' at the end

Facts or theories?

Some of us when asked to work something out for ourselves or to explain something to someone else want to stick to the facts, focus in on details and learn in a step by step way at a steady pace. These people favour a 'practical' approach. Others want to formulate theories, speculate, go straight for the 'big picture' and want to jump about from one idea to another, sometimes quickly. These people favour a 'thoughtful' approach. These differences are harder to spot in groups or individuals. Try to take account of them when planning a learning experience and giving explanations:

- start with an overview of the topic, take your learners through it in a sequential way and then reinforce and summarise the 'big picture' at the end
- vary the pace of learning experiences with opportunities to work slowly at a steady pace and then at other times upping the pace and having bursts of energy
- make sure some of your learners don't skip over the facts and get them wrong and others do not get bogged down in the details

Criticism or sympathy?

Giving and receiving feedback is another way we are different. Some are quick to judge and evaluate, others quick to sympathise and support. When learning we all need both kinds of feedback, but we tend to give and want to receive the kind we prefer. Underlying this preference is what motivates us. Some people's basic need is to be competent and they tend to give and want to get evaluative feedback. Other people's basic need is to be appreciated for who they are and they tend to give and want to get supportive feedback. Again with individuals and groups it's a question of being yourself but trying to get a balance:

- give feedback that is clear, logical and fair
- focus first on what has been good and then look at what can be improved
- mix evaluative comments like 'good idea!' 'well done' and personal comments like 'I like the way you did that!' 'I appreciate the amount of effort you have put into this!'
- above all don't rush to criticism or sympathy

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