

Learning Styles

Ellis (1985) described a learning style as the more or less consistent way in which a person perceives, conceptualises, organizes and recalls information. Your students' learning styles will be influenced by their genetic make-up, their previous learning experiences, their culture and the society they live in. As a teacher, you should be aware that your students have a range of learning styles. Appeal to this diversity by using a variety of presentation, activity and assignment formats.

What types of learning styles are there?

There are many ways of looking at learning styles. Here are some of the most widely used classification systems that have been developed.

Sensory input

Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic Learners

This originates from the work of Dr's Richard Bandler and John Grinder in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

Visual Learners

These learners need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They tend to prefer sitting at the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions (e.g. people's heads). They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays including: diagrams, illustrated handouts, whiteboard pictures, demonstrations, flipcharts and hand-outs. During a classroom discussion, visual learners often prefer to take detailed notes to absorb the information.

Auditory Learners

They learn best through verbal information delivery, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. Written information may have little meaning until it is heard.

Kinaesthetic Learners

They learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration.

Kolb's cycle – Learning from Experience

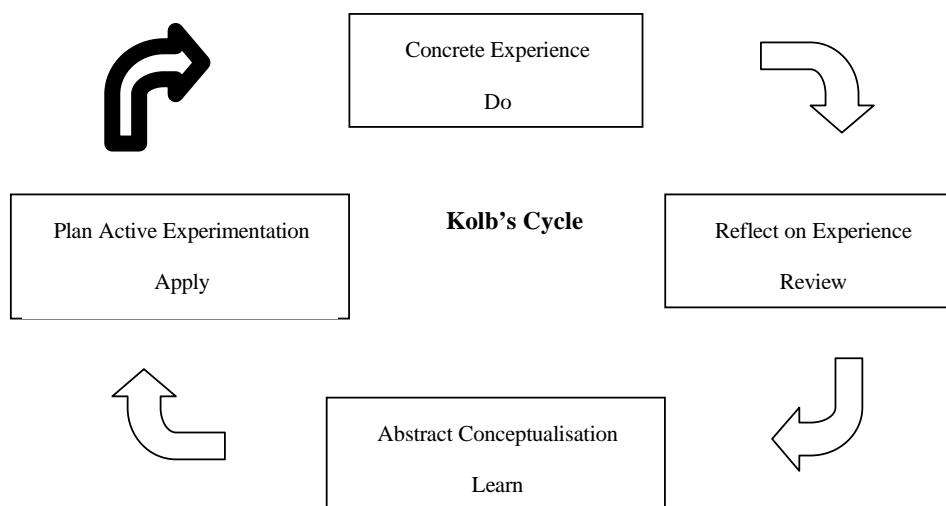
David Kolb developed this system and first published it in 1984.

Kolb's learning theory sets out four distinct learning styles (or preferences), which are based on a four-stage learning cycle. (which might also be interpreted as a 'training cycle'). In this respect Kolb's model is particularly elegant, since it offers both a way to understand individual people's different learning styles, and also an explanation of a cycle of experiential learning that applies to us all.

Kolb includes this 'cycle of learning' as a central principle for his experiential learning theory, typically expressed as a four-stage cycle of learning, in which 'immediate or concrete experiences' provide a basis for 'observations and reflections'. These 'observations and reflections' are assimilated and distilled into 'abstract concepts' producing new implications for action, which can be 'actively tested' in turn creating new experiences.

Kolb says that ideally (and by inference not always) this process represents a learning cycle or spiral where the learner 'touches all the bases', ie., a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Immediate or concrete experiences lead to observations and reflections. These reflections are then assimilated (absorbed and translated) into abstract concepts with implications for action, which the person can actively test and experiment with, which in turn enable the creation of new experiences.

- Do (Concrete experience – demonstration, talking to others, observation)
- Review (Reflect on experience – what do you already know? /teacher assessment/student self assessment of their work)
- Learn (Abstract conceptualisation – relate experience to theory)
- Apply (Active experimentation – how can I do it better next time)



There is a link between Kolb and the work of Peter Honey and Alan Mumford.

Honey and Mumford model – Reflector/ Theorist/ Pragmatist/ Activist

Honey and Mumford's approach is based on research. Their research with adult professionals working in business and management came to the following conclusions:-

- About 2% of people are fully equipped, ie able to make good use of any style.
- About 70% of people use only one or two styles.

It relates closely to the work of Kolb so the two are often applied together. The following explanations will give you some ideas for how to incorporate these models in your training.

- Do/Activists like action. They like being in control, being given the limelight and leadership opportunities. They like games and simulations, group work, practical work, creative action, discovering for themselves, being given choice.
- Review/Reflectors like thinking in retrospect. They like time to stand back, to think and decide. They like attention to detail and a chance to exchange views. They like demonstrations, self-assessment, learning from experience, reviewing, reading, discussion and examining evidence.
- Learn/Theorists like ideas. They like theories, models, concepts, systems and other abstract thinking. They like a logical, systematic and objective approach. They like explanations of ideas, expressing their own ideas, theoretical discussion, idea-based assignments, attention to detail, 'what if' type questions, structured worksheets.

- Apply/Pragmatists like to see the relevance. They like activities with clear vocational, academic or practical relevance for example simulations. They like case studies and examples, skill practice, practical projects, realistic problem solving, simulations and application of theories.

Most groups will have a mixture of styles and as the Kolb cycle shows, for an individual student, good learning requires that they go round the cycle and so use all the learning styles at appropriate times. This suggests that teachers should plan lessons that follow Kolb's cycle so that learning is well structured and so that all styles are visited. Being aware of the sensory elements and ensuring that these are also included in your teaching style will give your courses the most impact.

'Instead of trying to teach every learner in the dominant learning style, we must remember to offer our students both variety and choice. It's that simple. The human brain is a multi-processor. It learns in many ways, usually at the same time.' Eric Jensen, Super Teaching

Sources

Petty, G (2004) *Teaching Today 3rd Edition*, Nelson Thornes Cheltenham

www.businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm