

The practice of identifying 'learning styles' has its roots in the work of Carl Jung's classification of personality types, which has generated a number of related methods including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire, Gardner's Multiple Intelligences and the VAK (visual/auditory/kinaesthetic) types originally devised by various psychologists in the 1920s.

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) developed over many years and reached a wider audience with the publication of his book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* in 1984. This seminal work has been acknowledged as a primary influence for later methods, most notably Honey and Mumford's.

The basis of the learning styles identified by Kolb lies in two continuums: how we think and feel about something versus how we watch or take action.



Kolb theorised that we cannot carry out both Perception and Processing at the same time, and our learning style is defined by how we resolve the conflict when a situation requires us to do both these things. What happens is that we choose a way of approaching the task in hand and a preference in our emotional response.

In simple terms, the first continuum runs from people who prefer to think and analyse data before engaging with a task, through to those who base their approach on an emotional response, gut feeling or intuition.

The second continuum ranges from people who like to observe before acting, to those who prefer to jump straight in.

Somewhere along these continuums lies everyone's preferred learning style.

The combination of the intersecting axes produces four types of learning style:



Kolb believed that the ideal learning process incorporated all of the styles, notwithstanding that some would be more pronounced than others.

Honey and Mumford have always credited Kolb as being the basis of their own work, which took the learning styles theory into more workplace-friendly use and terminology. Their Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) is widely used in business today and is described here by Amanda Bouch, who wrote this month's case history:

"The Honey and Mumford LSQ is available in either a 40-question or an 80-question version and is a forced-choice format. It can be downloaded from www.peterhoney.com and does not require any training to use though, for first-time users, I would recommend the 80-question booklet version as this includes detailed information on the Learning Styles model, explanations of the four types and a wealth of useful information about tapping into the learning capability.

"The results identify the individual's preferences across the four types, which are labelled as: →

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at Kolb's learning styles

 **Activist (Concrete Experience)**
 **Reflector (Reflective Observation)**
 **Theorist (Abstract Conceptualisation)**
 **Pragmatist (active Experimentation)**

“A discussion around the experience of completing the questionnaire, the results and any interpretations will draw out greater depth of understanding of these preferences and how the individual understands his best learning circumstances. This informs me of the kind of learning options he will naturally gravitate towards, as well as those he may avoid or not think about.”

Baroness Susan Greenfield is widely quoted, from an article in the *Times Educational Supplement*, that “from a neuroscientific point of view [the learning styles approach to teaching] is nonsense”.

It is worth bearing in mind that probably, out of all the tools and models we have covered in this series, none has been put to the test in a way that would satisfy scientific academics. Yet practitioners and clients who have benefited from them claim to see useful results.

This is particularly so in the field of education, where many teachers claim to have experienced improved academic results through paying attention to their pupils’ learning styles. To confuse matters, there have been scientific experiments that proved this to be true and others that proved it is not.

Some of these are quoted on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_styles, and there are robust replies to Greenfield’s comment, together with her original article, on www.tes.co.uk.

Thinking back to the effective teachers at my own school, it

was their teaching style that won the day and the popular ones gained great results across the board, with all types of people. It did not seem that some pupils fared better with one teacher and others with another.

Was it possible that the ‘good’ teachers were able to incorporate a variety of learning styles so that everyone’s interest was engaged? Or were they simply more encouraging, better at giving clear explanations and more ready to involve the pupils on an interactive level?

It is difficult to say from this distance in time.

So it seems the jury is out on this one and it may simply be that the scientific proof is not there *yet*. For me, and I have said this before, the biggest pitfall in any kind of typecasting is that people may become limited by their label. For example, if someone is told that he is, say, an Abstract Conceptualiser or an Introvert at a young enough age, he may modify his behaviour to live up to his label.

Adrian Gilpin quotes a perfect of example of this in his book *Unstoppable People*, with the story of his own children who, it seemed to him, were unnaturally clumsy and he never ceased telling them so. One day he resolved only to tell them what good children they were and, from then on, their clumsiness reduced.

A common pitfall for coaches to look out for is that a good deal of energy and focus, which ought to be on the client, may be diverted into attempts to provide an experience that matches the client’s identified styles. This is particularly likely if the client’s preferences do not align with the coach’s own, and the same may be said for a manager in a team-leading situation.

I have noticed that where people show a predilection towards, say, auditory communication, they often reply

in auditory terms no matter how the question was phrased.

Clearly there are some questions here, and I am raising them now because this is the last of the articles in our examination of ‘styles’.

The great benefit I have found in using such processes is that they encourage clients to turn their focus inwardly, ask themselves some productive questions and learn new information about themselves – which is what I would say coaching is all about. ■

References

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