

Chapter 5 DESCRIBING LEARNERS

B. Learner Differences

The moment we realised that a composed of individuals (rather than being some kind of unified whole), we have to start thinking about how to respond to these students individually so that while we may frequently teach the group as a whole, we will also, in different ways, pay attention to the different identities we are faced with.

B3: Learner styles and strategies

A preoccupation with learners' personalities and styles has been a major factor in psycholinguistic research. Are there different kinds of behaviour in a group? How can we tailor our teaching to match the personalities in front of us?

The methodologist Tony Wright described four different styles within a group (1987: 117-118)

1. The “enthusiast” looks to the teacher as a point of reference and is concerned with the goals of the learning group.
2. The “oracular” also focuses on the teacher but is more oriented towards the satisfaction of personal goals.
3. The “participator” tends to concentrate on group goals and group solidarity.
4. The “rabel”, which refers to the learning group for his or her point of reference, is mainly concerned with the satisfaction of his or her own goals.

Keith Willing, working with adult students in Australia, suggested four learner categories:

Convergers: these are students who are by nature solitary, prefer to avoid groups, and who are independent and confident in their own abilities. Most importantly they are analytic and can impose their own structures on learning. They tend to be cool and pragmatic.

Conformists: these are students who prefer to emphasise learning ‘about language’ over learning to use it. They tend to be dependent on those in authority and are perfectly happy to work in non-communicative classrooms, doing what they are told. A classroom of conformists is one which prefers to see well-organised teachers.

Concrete learners: though they are like conformists, they also enjoy the social aspects of learning and like to learn from direct experience. They are interested in language use and language as communication rather than language as a system. They enjoy games and group work in class.

Communicative learners: these are language use oriented. They are comfortable out of class and show a degree of confidence and a willingness to take risks which their colleagues may lack. They are much more interested in social interaction with other speakers of the language than they are with analysis of how the language works. They are perfectly happy to operate without the guidance of a teacher.

Table 1. Learning styles based on Willing (1987)

B4 Individual variations

If some people are better at something than others- better at analyzing, for example- this would indicate that there are differences in the ways individual brains work. It also suggests that people respond differently to the same stimuli. How might such variation determine the ways in which individual students learn more readily? How might it affect the ways in which we teach? There are two models in particular which have tried to account for such perceived individual variation, and which teachers have attempted to use for the benefit of their learners.

Non-Linguistic Programming: according to partitioners of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), we use a number of 'primary representational systems' to experience the world. These systems are described in the acronym "VAKOG" which stands for Visual (we look and see), Auditory (we hear and listen), Kinaesthetic (we feel externally, internally or through movement), Olfactory (we smell things) and Gustatory (we taste things).

Most people, while using all these systems to experience the world, nevertheless have one 'preferred primary system' (Revell and Norman 1977: 31). Some people are particularly stimulated by music when their preferred primary system is auditory, whereas others, whose primary preferred system is visual, respond most powerfully to images. An extension of this is when a visual person 'see' music, or has a strong sense of different colours for different sounds. The VAKOG formulation, while somewhat problematic in the distinctions it attempts to make, offers a framework to analyse different student responses to stimuli and environments.

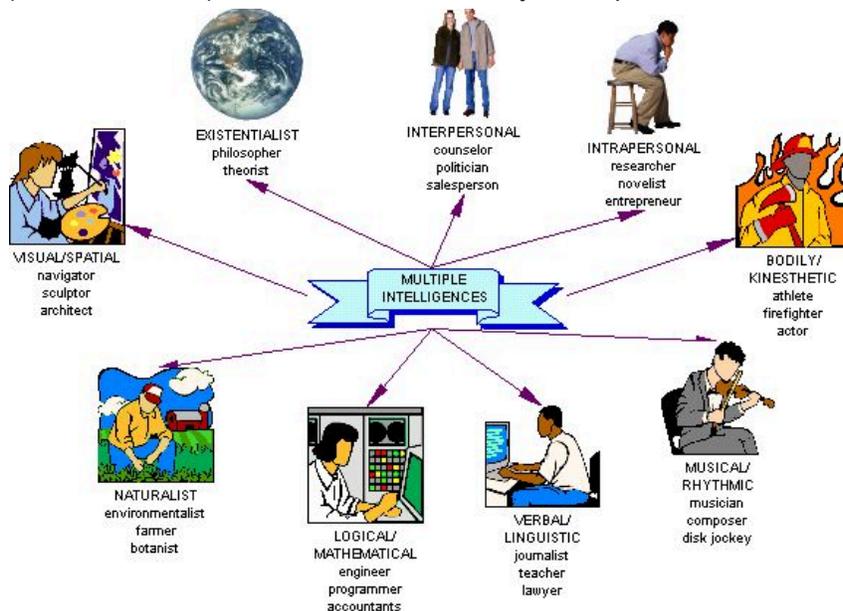
NLP gives teachers the chance to offer students activities which suit their primary preferred systems. According to Radislav Millrood, it shows how teachers can operate in the C-Zone - the zone of congruence, where teachers and students interact effectively- rather than in the R-Zone-the zone of students resistance, where students do not appreciate how the teacher tries to make them behave (Millrood 2004). NLP practitioners also use techniques such as "three-position thinking' (Baker and Rinvoluceri 2005a) to get teachers and students to see things from other people's point of view so that they can be more effective communicators.

MI theory: MI stands for Multiple Intelligence, a concept introduced by the Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner. In his book *Frames of Mind*, he suggests that we do not possess a single intelligence, but a range of 'intelligences' (Gardner 1983). He listed seven of these intelligences:

Musical/rhythmical,
verbal/linguistic,
Visual/spatial
Bodily/Kinaesthetic,
Logical/mathematical
Intrapersonal

Interpersonal

All people have all of these intelligences, he said, but in each person one (or more) of them is more pronounced. This allowed him to predict that a typical occupation (or 'end state') for people with a strength in logical/ mathematical intelligence is that of the scientist, whereas a typical end state for people with strengths in visual/spatial intelligence might well be that of the navigator. The athlete might be the typical end state for people who are strong in bodily/kinaesthetic intelligence, and so on. Gardner has since added an eighth intelligence which he calls Naturalistic intelligence (Gardner 1993) to account for the ability to recognise and classify patterns in nature; Daniel Goleman has added a ninth 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman 1995). This includes the ability to empathise, control impulse and self-motivate.



If we accept that different intelligences predominate in different people, it suggests that the same learning task may not be appropriate for all of our students. While people with a strong logical/mathematical intelligence might respond well to a complex grammar explanation, a different student might need the comfort of diagrams and physical demonstration because their strength is in the visual/spatial area. Other students who have a strong interpersonal intelligence may require a more interactive climate if their learning is to be effective. Rosie Tanner (2001) has produced a chart (see Figure 2) to show what kind of activities might be suitable for people with special strengths in the different intelligences.

Armed with this information, teachers can see whether they have given their class a variety of activities to help the various types of learners described here. Although we cannot teach directly to each individual student in our class all of the time, we can ensure that we sometimes give opportunities for visualisation, for students to work on their own, for sharing and comparing and for physical movement. By keeping our eye on different individuals, we can direct them to learning activities which are best suited to their own proclivities.

Skill Intelligence	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Grammar	Vocabulary	Literature
Bodily Kinesthetic	Listeners listen to three sections of a tape in three different places then form groups to collaborate on their answers to a task.	Learners re-order a cut-up jumbled reading text.	Learners write stories in groups by writing the first sentence of a story on a piece of paper and passing it to another learner for communication.	Learners play a game where they obtain information from various places in the classroom and report back.	Learners play a board game with counters and dice to practice tenses.	Learners label objects in the classroom with names.	Learners create a similar scene to one they have read about and act it out (e.g. a conflict, a line you were let down).
Interpersonal	Learners check the answers to a listening task in pairs or groups before listening a second time.	Learners discuss answers to questions on a text in groups.	Learners write a dialogue in pairs.	Learners read problem-page letters and discuss responses.	Learners do a "find someone who..." activity related to a grammar point (e.g. present perfect: find someone who has been to Spain).	Learners test each other's vocabulary.	In groups, learners discuss their preferences for characters in a book.
Intrapersonal	Learners think individually about how they might have reacted, compared with someone on a video they have seen.	Learners reflect on characters in a text and how similar or different they are to them.	Learners write learning diaries.	Learners record a speech or talk on a cassette.	Learners complete sentences about themselves, practicing a grammar point (e.g. complete the sentence 'I am as ... as ...' five times).	Learners make their own vocabulary booklet which contains words they think are important to learn.	Learners write a diary for a few days in the life of a character in a book.
Linguistic	Learners write a letter after listening to a text.	Learners answer true/false questions about a text.	Learners write a short story.	In groups, learners discuss statements about a controversial topic.	The teacher provides a written worksheet on a grammar point.	Learners make mind maps of related words.	Learners rewrite part of a book as a film script, with instructions for the director and actors.
Logical-Mathematical	Learners listen to three pieces of text and decide what the correct sequence is.	Learners compare two characters or opinions in a text.	Learners write steps in a process. (e.g., a recipe).	Learners in a group each have a picture. They discuss and re-order them, without showing them, to create a story.	Learners learn grammar inductively, i.e., they work out how a grammar rule works by using discovery activities.	Learners discuss how many words they can think of related to another word (e.g., photograph, photographer).	Learners re-order a jumbled section of events in a chapter of a novel they have read.
Musical	Learners complete gaps in the lyrics of a pop song.	Learners listen to music extracts and decide how they relate to a text they have read.	Learners write the lyrics to an existing melody about a text or topic they have been dealing with in class.	Learners listen to a musical video clip (with the TV covered so) and discuss which images might accompany the music.	Learners create a mnemonic or rhyme to help them remember a grammar point.	Learners decide which new words they would like to learn from a pop song.	Learners find a piece of appropriate music to accompany a passage from a book.
Naturalist	Learners listen to sound inside and outside the classroom and discuss what they have heard.	Learners work with a text on environmental issues.	Learners write a text describing a natural scene.	Learners discuss an environmental issue.	Learners do an activity associated with nature (e.g., walk by the sea and write a story in the past tense about it).	Learners make a mind map with a work related to nature (e.g. bird, tree).	Learners read descriptions of nature in a novel and then write their own.
Spatial	Learners complete a chart or diagram while listening.	Learners predict the contents of a text using an accompanying picture or photo.	Learners make a collage with illustrations and text about a place in their country.	In pairs learners discover the differences between two pictures without showing them to each other.	The teacher illustrates a grammar point with a series of pictures (e.g. daily activities to show present simple).	Learners cut out a picture from a magazine and label it.	Learners draw a cartoon version of a story.

Tanner, R. (2011) "Teaching Intelligently" in English Teaching Professional, Issue Twenty, July, London. Retrieved on 1/15/2011 from <http://www.learncol.com/colweb/articles/20110701a.html>

Another theory of learning styles developed by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford based upon the work of David Kolb, identifies four distinct learning styles:

Activists: prefer doing and experiencing,

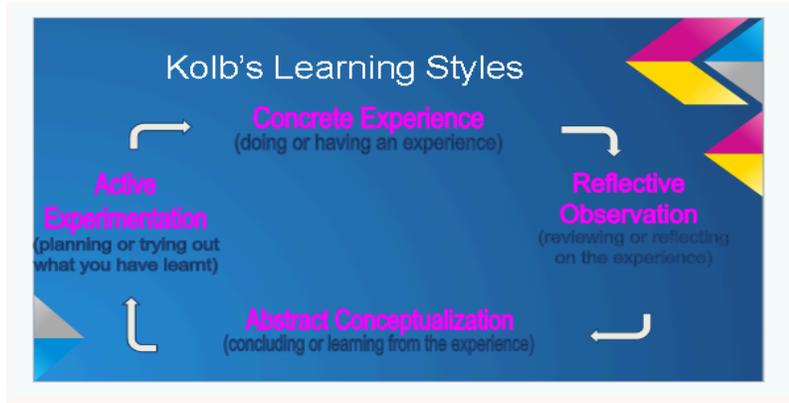
Reflectors: observe and reflect,

Theorists: want to understand underlying reasons, concepts, relationships, and

Pragmatists: like to "have a go" try things to see if they work.

Each style represents a different approach to learning, with its own strengths and weaknesses. By understanding the dominant learning style, we can tailor our learning experiences to suit our preferences and maximize our potential.

In order to understand the works of Honey and Mumford, one must understand the idea of David Kolb. Much of Kolb's theory is concerned with the learner's internal cognitive processes. Kolb stated that learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts that can be applied flexibly in a range of situations. In Kolb's theory, the impetus for the development of new concepts is provided by new experiences.



Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles

On this basis, is where Honey and Mumford developed their theory on learning styles.

Learning Style	Attributes	Activities
Activist	Activists are those people who learn by doing. Activists need to get their hands dirty. Have an open-minded approach to learning, involving themselves fully and without bias in new experiences.	brainstorming, problem solving, group discussion, puzzles, competitions, role-play
Pragmatist	These people need to be able to see how to put the learning into practice in the real world. Abstract concepts and games are of limited use unless they can see a way to put the ideas into action in their lives. Experimenters, trying out new ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work.	time to think about how to apply learning in reality, case studies, problem solving, discussion
Reflector	These people learn by observing and thinking about what happened. Prefer to stand back and view experiences from a number of different perspectives, collecting data and taking the time to work towards an appropriate conclusion.	paired discussions, self analysis questionnaires, personality questionnaires, timeout, observing activities, feedback from others, coaching, interviews
Theorist	These learners like to understand the theory behind the actions. They need models, concepts and facts in order to engage in the learning process. Prefer to analyse and synthesise, drawing new information into a systematic and logical 'theory'.	models, statistics, stories, quotes, background information, applying theories

Honey & Mumford considered two drivers of learning style:

doing vs. observing, i.e: how much we like to learn from 'giving it a go' vs. learning outside of the task (whether by reflecting on our own activity, reading up on the subject, talking to others, or etc.)

thinking vs. feeling: i.e: how much we drive towards logical, structured solutions vs. embracing complexity and ambiguity

Putting four personas on this 2x2 matrix creates this easy-to-understand diagram:

Honey & Mumford's Learning Styles



A few core points about this model are:

No style is 'better' than any other, though they both have their advantages and disadvantages – depending, especially, on what it is that needs to be learned. Typically our 'default' style is where we like to *start*, but as we become more well-rounded in a topic, we'll learn in a variety of ways to deepen our understanding.

One easy illustration is if you're learning some new piece of technology...

- Do you read the entire user guide before you start? Theorist!
- Do you read about all the features, and maybe see what people are saying about it online before you start? Check the reviews? Perhaps watch a few YouTube videos? Reflector!
- Immediately start, closely following the step-by-step instructions as you go along? Pragmatist!
- Immediately start and only look at the instructions if something doesn't go right? Activist!
- Activists learn best from:
 - Student-centered teaching methods such as task groups, role play, games
 - Unstructured activities which give them the opportunity to take a lead.

Reflectors learn best from:

- Any activities which enable them to observe and think things over. They are usually happy to listen to lectures and watch demonstrations.

- Individual or group activities which involve collection and research of data.
- Group discussion and case studies.

Theorists learn best from

- Structured learning activities which follow a logical sequence
- Lectures, demonstrations, well prepared coaching and precision teaching.

Pragmatists learn best from

- Practical demonstration, coaching simulations, work experience, project work
- Any practical activity which provides the opportunity to try out what has been learnt
- Group or individual activities which involve action planning and project work.

By recognizing the unique ways in which each individual processes and retains information, can tailor management style to better support their growth and development.

For example:

when working with an Activist, provide opportunities for hands-on learning and allow them to take on new challenges

when managing a Reflector, offer time for independent research and analysis before making important decisions.

Theorists may appreciate structured brainstorming sessions and the chance to explore complex ideas

Pragmatists will thrive when given practical problems to solve and clear, tangible objectives.

We want to satisfy the many different students in front of us, teaching to their individual strengths with activities designed to produce the best results for each of them, yet we also want to address our teaching to the group as a whole.

Our task as teachers will be greatly helped if we can establish who the different students in our classes are and recognise how they are different. We can do this through observation or, through more formal devices. For example, we might ask our students what their learning preferences are in questionnaires with items (perhaps in the students' first language) such as the following:

When answering comprehension questions about reading passages I prefer to work

- a. On my own
- b. With another students
- c. With a group of students

Or we might try to find out which preferred sensory system our students respond to. Revell and Norman suggest the activity that can be used in class or given to students as homework. This 'Lead VAK Test' (VAK stands for visual, auditory and kinesthetic) involves imagining certain situations, then allowing a score to each exercise according to its level of difficulty. It has been reproduced here without amendment.

Lead VAK Test; Read and Imagine

Follow each instruction in your mind and give yourself a mark.

0=impossible, 1= difficult, 2=OK, 3=easy

- see a kangaroo
- See your front door
- see your toothbrush
- See a friend's face
- see plate of food
- See a TV show
- Watch the TV scene change
- HEAR a song
- HEAR rain
- HEAR a fire alarm
- HEAR a friend's voice
- HEAR your own voice
- HEAR birds singing
- HEAR the birdsong change to a call of alarm

- FEEL excited
- FEEL yourself swimming
- FEEL grass under your feet
- FEEL a cat on your lap
- FEEL hot
- FEEL your fingers on a piano keyboard
- FEEL your fingers playing a few notes

When you have done the test:

Add your scores for each sense: see_ hear_ feel_

Your highest score represents your lead system. (Revel and Norman 1997:36).

The whole area of learner difference is, as we have seen, complex and sometimes perplexing. As Frank Coffield and his colleagues write in their study of learner styles that we discussed above, teachers 'need to be knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of the model they are using, to be aware of the dangers of labelling and discrimination; and to be prepared to respect the views of students who may well resist any attempts to change their preferred learning style/ (2004:133).

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