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The Science of Learning Styles: What Educators Need to Know

Wan Mardyatul Miza Wan Tahir & Ja'izah Abdul Jabar

Learning styles have been a widely discussed concept in education for decades. The idea that individuals learn best through specific modalities such as visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic (VARK) has influenced instructional strategies worldwide. As such the emergence of various learning style models has been studied, and the most distinguished model was developed by Kolb in 1984. According to Kolb, learning is a holistic process of knowledge creation which requires the interaction between social and personal knowledge. This model views learning as a circular process which involves four processes in the learning cycle:

1) Concrete Experience (CE) forms the basis for observation and reflection on experiences.
2) Reflective Observation (RO) which evaluates the situation to contribute to the solution of the problem.
3) Abstract Conceptualization (AC), which involves the generation of theories.
4) Active Experimentation (AE), where theories and concepts are put into practice.

This learning style model is the basis for the learning style model developed by Honey and Mumford in 1992. This model is represented by Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist learning styles which correspond to the AE, RO, AC and CE approaches of the Kolb cycle.

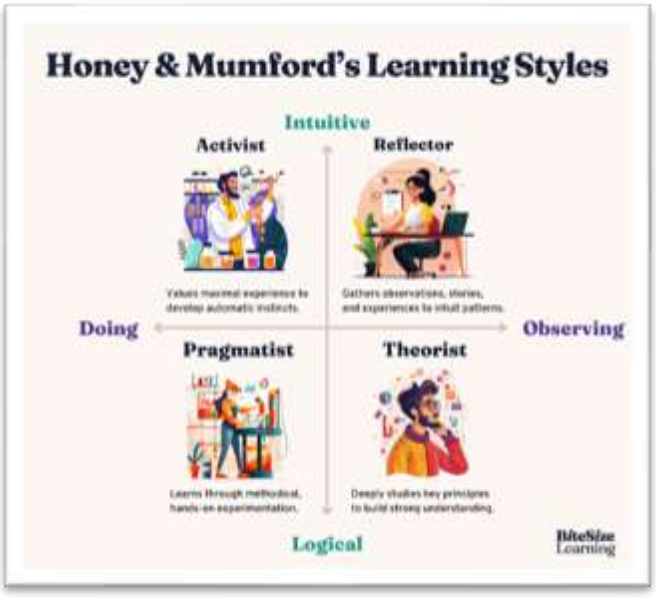

Figure 1: The Learning Style of Kolb and Honey and Mumford
(Source: https://www.bitesizelearning.co.uk/resources/honey-mumford-learning-styles)

Activist learners learn best in situations of concrete action, where experimentation, learning by making mistakes and being corrected is favored as they learn best by doing and experiencing new things. They enjoy hands-on activities, group work, and dynamic environments which thrive in scenarios involving excitement, challenges, and brainstorming. They are open-minded and consider acting first without thinking of the consequences. Some of their preferred learning activities involve group discussions, problem-solving, puzzles, and brainstorming. Teaching style should incorporate interactive and experiential activities, such as role-playing, simulations, and group discussions. Educators may use icebreakers, games, and problem-solving tasks which provide opportunities for active participation, such as debates or workshops. The course activities should keep lessons dynamic and varied to sustain engagement.

Reflectors share a style of learning that prefers a combination of observation and thinking to learn. They learn best by observing, reviewing, and analyzing before acting. Technically, they prefer to think things through and consider all perspectives while enjoying detailed feedback and ample preparation time. They are thoughtful and consider many possibilities and implications in an act before taking a decision. They observe, listen, investigate and review what happens before making their own point. They prefer to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant individual. Suggested teaching style for a reflector learner includes using observation-based tasks, such as watching a demonstration or reviewing peer work. Educators are to allow time for reflection after lessons, such as journaling or group debriefs and avoid rushing them; let them process information at their own pace. Another best approach is by providing them with detailed case studies or real-life scenarios for analysis.

Theorist learners are more comfortable with learning from explanatory models, theories, statistical data, analysis and synthesis. They learn best through logical reasoning, frameworks, and theoretical models. They prefer structured lessons with clear objectives and explanations while enjoying analyzing relationships and principles behind concepts. Theorists adapt and integrate observations into logical sound theories because they need to understand the logic behind the actions. Discussions, reading and case studies, along with stimuli that encourage reflection, theoretical exploration, model formulation and problem-solving are among the most suitable activities for these learners. As such, teaching style suits them best when educator presents structured lessons with clear objectives, frameworks, and logical progressions. While teaching, we use diagrams, flowcharts, and theoretical models to explain concepts. During lessons, provide opportunities for critical thinking by encouraging students to analyses data or solving complex problems through thought-provoking questions that explore "why" and "how".

Pragmatist learners apply to practice analytical knowledge to create new things and solve problems. They learn best by applying concepts to practical situations. Precisely, they prefer direct, hands-on activities and problem-solving during which they enjoy real-world applications of theoretical knowledge. They identify new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications. They are essentially practical, down-to-earth and they make practical decisions to solve problems. Teaching style for this learner includes designing lessons with practical applications, like projects or real-world case studies. We may use workshops, experiments, and practice-based tasks that relate the concepts to real-world scenarios and future applications. The lesson is more effective when we offer immediate feedback and practical solutions.

Honey and Mumford (1986) suggest that everyone tends to fall into one or two of the learning style categories. Meanwhile, Kolb and other psychologists suggest that an effective learning process should engage with each of the learning styles. As such, the blended teaching approach is preferred since most classrooms include a mix of learning styles, combine methods: Start with a theoretical framework (Theorists), demonstrate a practical application (Pragmatists), engage students in a hands-on activity (Activists), and conclude with reflection and discussion (Reflectors). Therefore, the use of diverse teaching tools like multimedia, group projects, individual assignments, and hands-on experiments are recommended. Educators may rotate activities to ensure all styles are catered to over time. This approach ensures every learner is supported while also challenging them to grow beyond their natural preferences.

References

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