

# How do you learn?

Sim Goldblum looks at different learning styles.

Well, I was only trying to be helpful? I was trying to understand the most efficient way in which you learned something new, so I could adapt my teaching style to your learning style.

'Oh, I hadn't realised there was such a thing as a learning style.'

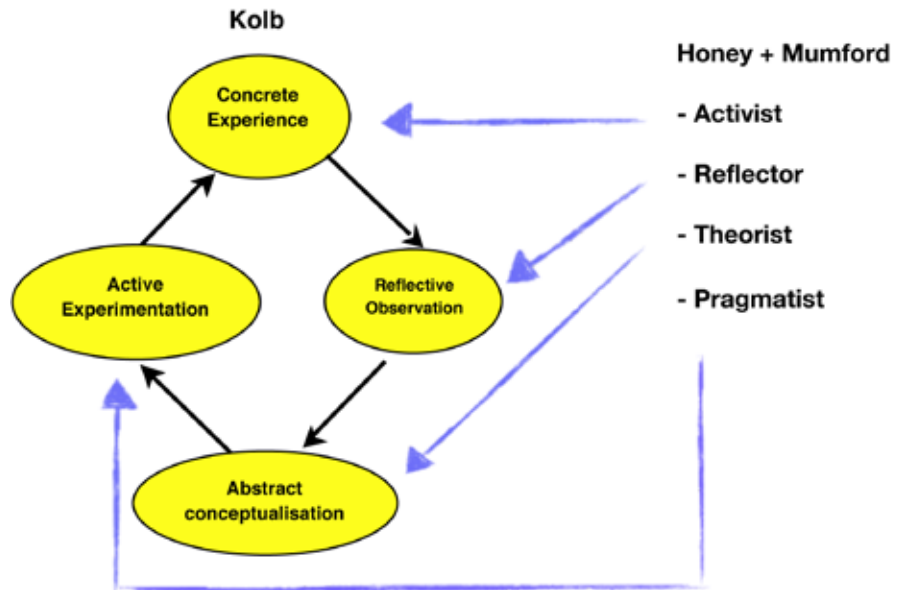
And so began a recent conversation with a client who was interested in one of our courses. That prompted me to think more about learning styles and how the way different people learn affects how we teach in a group context. But it does not just apply to group workshops; it's relevant to our

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day-to-day work in practice and how we ensure new team members get up to speed as quickly as possible.

Academics have studied how we learn, so we have variations on learning styles. This is not a comprehensive review, that would take too long, but I hope it will provide some insights into what happens when we show someone something new; if we give them a written manual with many protocols and they prefer to learn by doing, will we get their full attention and rapid absorption of the new required procedure?

Google 'adult learning styles' and you will get 3m answers in less than



● Target your potential customers in a way they recognise.

a second. You will find references to Honey and Mumford (1982), and David Kolb (1984), among others. David Kolb described adult learning as a four-part circle. Honey and Mumford created four different learners, corresponding to Kolb's four actions. Richard Felder and Phil Race both offer improvements to help us to understand these concepts in less academic terms. Let's have a look at some of the ideas.

All seem to start with Aristotle or Einstein! Einstein is reported as saying that 'knowledge is experience, everything else is just information'. If that's true, then we acquire knowledge

by taking other people's information and doing something with it, so that it becomes our knowledge. If I want to learn to prepare an impression tray, I can either read a book about it or watch somebody else do it and try to do it myself. When I make my first attempt, the result may range from 'too thin' to 'too thick'; if I get good feedback on what I've done, then future attempts should be more successful. The key questions are: do I learn better by reading or watching, by learning the facts or just having a go, by looking at diagrams or listening, by learning step by step or by just 'getting it'? A learning styles



**Sim Goldblum**  
is a partner in The Dentistry Business.

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assessment is available online at <http://agelesslearner.com/assess/learningstyle.html>

David Kolb says when we experience an event, we learn by reflecting on it – what happened? How did we feel about it? And how could we make it better? He suggests we create rules to repeat the process successfully. He calls this conceptualization, so when we repeat the experience, we will react differently because we have thought about the process and created our rules. For example, when we arrive at work and a member of staff calls in sick, the first time this happens we have no process to follow. Using his model, we have to think about how we ensure the practice continued operating; we may have a spare member of staff available, we may have to phone someone who is on holiday or have to cancel patients. As we reflect more on these alternatives, we can decide which would be the most effective and put a process in place that will allow the practice to continue operating effectively the next time we receive such a call.

How well we do at each of those four stages reflects our own learning approach. According to Honey and Mumford, the 'activist' prefers doing and experiencing, the 'reflector'

observes and reflects, the 'theorist' wants to understand the underlying reasons and relationships and the 'pragmatist' likes to have a go, try things and see if they work. Which one are you?

Richard Felder is a professor of engineering and he thinks about learners as active or reflective, sensing or intuitive, visual or verbal and sequential or global. He has a questionnaire which you can complete online and receive the analysis of your learning style by return – [www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html](http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html)

The active learner tends to learn best by doing something active with it;

#### When we experience an event, we learn by reflecting on it.

by discussing it, trying it or explaining it to somebody else. Just as obviously, the reflective learner prefers to think about it. We will each be active and reflective from time to time.

The sensing learner likes learning facts and solves problems using known solutions, whereas the intuitive learner is more interested in discovering new ways of solving the problem and can be very quick and more innovative to learn and to solve problems.

Visual learners like to see pictures

or diagrams or charts or watch films or have things shown to them, whereas the verbal learner prefers the written and spoken word.

Finally, sequential learners prefer a step-by-step approach to the explanation of a new topic, while the global learner can create a big picture and come to a more rapid conclusion as to what needs to be learned.

Each of us will exhibit these characteristics at various times; what distinguishes us is that the dominant balance of the four types will be different for each individual.

#### Conclusion

We are each different and we learn most effectively in different ways; the challenge for us as principals, managers and teachers is to understand how people learn best and to adjust our teaching as much as possible to their learning style. What is perhaps more important is to ensure that we give the right feedback at the right time in the right way, so that our teams acquire a new skill or new knowledge as quickly as possible. ■

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