

Adult Learning Styles

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Learning Styles Primer for Farmer Mentors

You are now considering the possibility of mentoring a future farmer; taking an intern under your wing; and inviting someone to come to your farm to observe, listen and do. There are many expectations on your side and also many on the part of the individual who is interested in this learning opportunity.

The Cultivating Success program is aimed at providing a successful learning and growing experience for both farmer and intern. Learning is emphasized because this internship is more than a job. Your intern will be a student of farming. The objective is to learn how to plant, water, build the soil, raise animals, market, etc. This puts you (the experienced farmer) in the position of the teacher. Not only are you a teacher but you will also be doing more one-on-one instruction than most school or university instructors ever experience. In addition, you will have a personal relationship with your student. More than likely your student will have a very different personality and learning style than you do.

Knowing something about different learning and teaching styles will ease the process between you and your intern. It does not mean that you will have the student take a test and then try to structure all your learning activities to meet the student's learning style. It is merely to give you a better sense of the different learning styles so you are more sensitive to your own style and others. In fact, no matter where we fall in our dominant or preferred learning style, we all learn in a number of ways. The most successful educational endeavors are those that provide a variety of different learning experiences.

There are numerous types of theories and methodologies regarding learning styles, personality characteristics and intelligence types. These evaluative models give us a general way to categorize people according to how they view the world and learn from it. As most of the literature on these learning styles points out, this is not to pigeonhole people. However, it may provide tendencies that are useful in helping the educational process. It may also provide new insight into the fact that we are all very different. Having this understanding might provide the necessary patience it takes to make this a win-win situation between teacher and student.

Another reason for you as a farmer mentor to look at different learning styles is for your own personal benefit. It might provide insight into the teaching/leading methods that are most comfortable for you. You might also find it useful information for improving communication skills or in working with teams.

How Do We Learn?

There are numerous theories of assessing learning tendencies or styles. One of the most recognized learning theories is based on the work of David Kolb. Kolb and others have looked at learning as a scientific process as well as a way to evaluate effective learning and teaching strategies.

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Kolb's Experimental Learning Theory

Kolb's four-stage theory of learning is based on a model with two dimensions (see Figure 1). The first dimension is represented by the horizontal line and is based on the "tasks." At one extreme is the Active Experimentation phase (doing) and at the other end is the reflective observation phase (watching). The second dimension is based on our thought and emotional processes and runs vertical. At the top of this dimension we have the concrete experience phase (feeling) and at the bottom we have the abstract conceptualization (thinking) phase. These four phases of the learning process are described below with information that relates to preferred educational activities for different learner types:

- ◆ Feeling or Sensing (Concrete Experience) - This dimension represents a receptive experience based approach to learning that relies on feeling based judgments. Learning is most effective from specific examples in which they can be involved. This phase of learning relies more on peers, not authority. Theoretical readings are not always helpful while group work and peer feedback often leads to success. Planned activities should apply learned skills. The instructor acts as coach/helper for this self-directed autonomous learner.
- ◆ Watching (Reflective Observation) – This phase is based on careful observation in making judgments. Preferred learning situations include lectures that allow the role of impartial objective observer. Lectures are helpful to this learner as they are often visual and auditory learners. This learner wants the instructor to provide expert interpretation. They look for an instructor who is both a taskmaster and a guide.
- ◆ Thinking (Abstract Conceptualization) - Oriented towards things and symbols, and less towards other people. Prefer to be in authority-directed, impersonal learning situations that emphasize theory and systematic analysis. Learners at this phase are frustrated by and gain little from unstructured "discovery learning" approaches such as exercises and simulations. Case studies, theoretical readings and reflective thinking exercises help this learner.
- ◆ Doing (Active Experimentation) - Individuals in this phase learn best when they can engage in such things as projects, homework, or group discussions. They dislike passive learning situations such as lectures. This learner wants to touch everything (kinesthetic or tactile). Problem solving, small group discussions or games, peer feedback, and self directed work assignments all help this learner. This learner likes to see everything and determine their own criteria for the relevance of the materials.

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Kolb's Learning Style Diagram

We learn through a combination of how we respond to the tasks and what we think or feel about the tasks. This combined learning style is represented by the four quadrants that form by the intersection of the two lines. These quadrants form the personal learning styles as identified in Figure 1 as reflectors, theorists, pragmatists and activists.

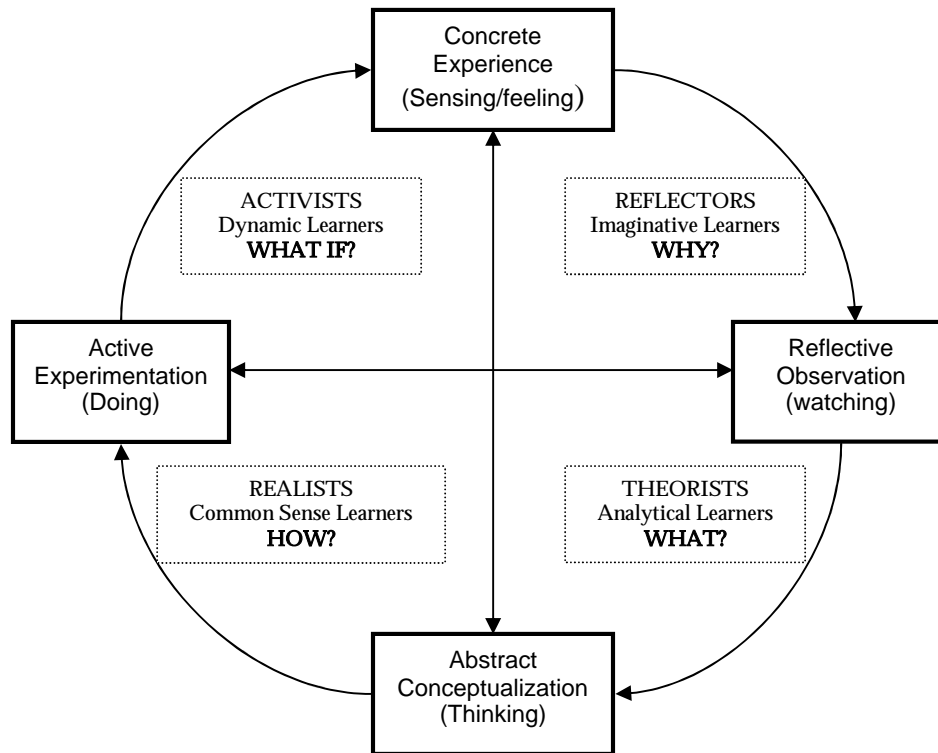


Figure 1 - The Kolb model is based on the intersection of the two lines representing the tasks (horizontal) and the thoughts/emotions (vertical). The lines divide into the four quadrants that represent the different learning styles.

Reflectors (Watchers) like to learn using reflective observation and concrete experience (logs, journals, and brainstorming). Training approach - lectures with plenty of reflection time; trainer should provide expert interpretation and be a taskmaster/guide. Their strengths lie in an imaginative ability. They tend to be interested in people and emotional elements.

Theorists (Thinkers) like to learn using abstract conceptualization and reflective observation (lecture, papers, analogies). Training should include: case studies, theory readings, and thinking alone. Their strengths lie in their ability to create theoretical models. This learning style is more characteristic of basic science and mathematics than applied sciences.

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Pragmatists (Feelers) like to learn using abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (laboratories, field work, observations). Training approach: peer feedback and activities that apply skills. They prefer to deal with things rather than people.

Activists (Doers) like to learn using concrete experience and active experimentation (simulations, case study, homework). Training approach: practicing the skill, problem solving, small group discussions, and peer feedback. They are called accommodators because they excel in adapting to specific immediate circumstances. They tend to solve problems intuitively, relying on others for information.

Taking and Evaluating the Learning Style Indicator Test

The test we will use to evaluate learning tendencies is the Learning Style Indicator test (from Don Clark's web site URL <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/learning/styles.html>). It is easy to complete and interpret and is the most appropriate test to provide a simplistic understanding of the different learning styles. As referenced on the site, it was developed by a combination of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and other similar instruments. Similar to Kolb's test, this test indicates an individual's favored learning style although we all learn in a mixture of styles. This isn't meant to pigeonhole anyone. We need to think of it as merely another useful "tool" that can be used to indicate some relative differences among people and how they learn.

Resources for learning more about learning styles:

Don Clark's Learning Styles site provides a great summary of learning styles and the associated survey instruments [<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/learning/styles.html>].

Kolb's Learning Style Inventory test is a popular and slightly more complex version for testing learning styles, however, David Kolb has proprietary rights to his testing instruments. They are available for purchase on line at <http://trgmcbcr.haygroup.com/Products/>.

Another interesting test indicating learning styles described on Don Clark's site is the VAK Learning Style. This test is based on measuring one's preference for learning through visual, audio, or kinesthetic (moving, touching) approaches.

A longer and slightly different approach for indicating learning styles is the Paragon Learning Style Inventory (PLSI) on the Learning Styles Resource Page at URL <http://www.oswego.edu/~shindler/lstyle.htm>. This method is an adaptation based on Keirse's four temperament types and the Briggs-Meyer Personality traits.

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SCORING PROCEDURES

Each preference (high score) from the two above sections are used to determine your learning style:

<p>If you are a AE and CE then you are a</p> <p>Doer</p> <p>Concrete Experience and Active Experimentation</p>	<p>If you are a RO and CE then you are a</p> <p>Watcher</p> <p>Reflective Observation and Concrete Experience</p>	<p>If you are a RO and AC then you are a</p> <p>Thinker</p> <p>Abstract Conceptualization and Reflective Observation</p>	<p>If you are a AE and AC then you are a</p> <p>Feeler</p> <p>Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation</p>
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Note that you learn in ALL four styles, but you normally learn best by starting in and using one style the most. This survey is based on:

- Two dimensional behavioral models (task and behavior)
- The Managerial Grid
- Kolb's Learning Style Inventory

Created May 28, 2000. Updated October 24, 2000
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<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/kolb.html>

