



## Resources for Online Learners

# A Look at Learning Style

Consider the thinking process you went through to enroll in a program such as the one you are about to begin. Do any of these steps sound familiar?

1. You heard about the program and read some literature to get an idea of what it was about. You enrolled in the program.
2. Before beginning the program, you thought about the impact your studies would have on the rest of your life, and made some decisions and plans to prepare the way.
3. You began to get involved. You ordered the course materials and reviewed them. Perhaps you contacted your instructor or other students.
4. After a while, you reflected on your experiences. You tried to analyze what was expected and what was unexpected. You discussed your conclusions with others to get their perspective.
5. You realize that the program expectations were a little different than you expected. You changed some of your ideas and priorities.
6. You made some decisions about what to do or how to do it. You begin to set deadlines and goals and make plans for accomplishing them.
7. You took new actions, creating new results and reactions from others.



In this example of the experiential learning process, you probably found that you were more effective or comfortable with some of these steps than with others. By the time we reach adulthood, most of us have become better at some of these skills of learning, and it is these strengths that characterize our particular learning style.

### What is Learning Style?

Simply stated, learning style is “the way in which each person absorbs and retains information and/or skills” (Dunn, 1984, p. 2). It refers to the way in which each individual collects, organizes and transforms information. Among other things, it influences the setting in which people learn best, the kind of subjects they want to learn about, and how they will approach the learning situation.

The concept of learning style can be best understood by taking a closer look at the process of learning itself. According to Kolb (1984), this process consists of four basic steps. These steps are outlined in Figure 1 below.

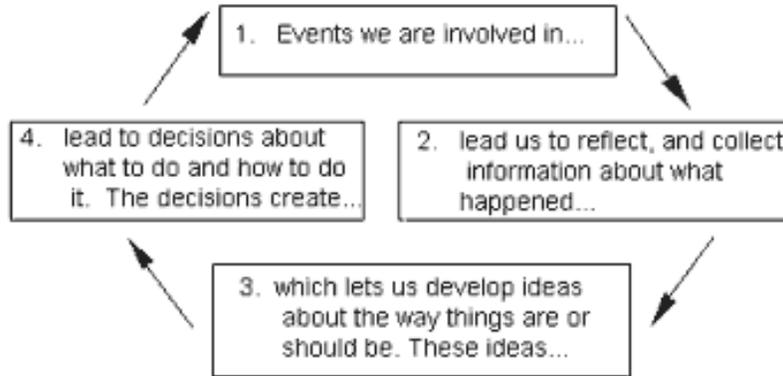


Figure 1



Learning can be difficult because each step in the learning process requires the use of different skills. For example, you have to shift from *getting involved* to *listening* to *creating an idea* to *making decisions*. Figure 2 shows two of the skills required at each step in the learning process.

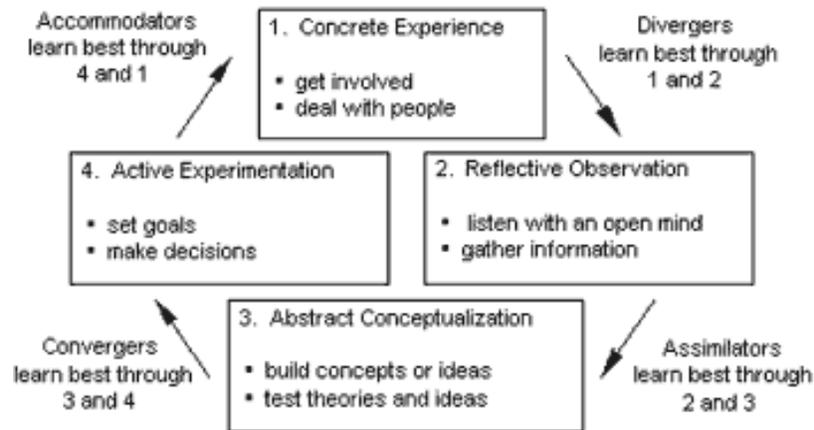


Figure 2

Different learners tend to exhibit different learning styles based on habits of partial learning developed over the life cycle. These styles manifest them-selves as preferences for specific kinds of learning activities that appeal to the individual's learning strengths.

### How Can Learning Style Information Help You?

By understanding your own learning style, you can begin to understand your own strengths and limitations as a learner. The exercise at the end of this topic will help you do this. **After completing the exercise, return here and follow the simple guidelines presented below to increase your learning power and get the most from your program of study.**

### The Divergent Learning Style



Best at using *concrete experience* and *reflective observation*. Enjoys brainstorming and small group discussions. Likes to gather information and has broad interests. Has a tendency to watch events rather than participate in them. Is able to empathize with others' feelings but may have difficulty drawing conclusions from quantitative or technical aspects of a situation.

*Needs to place emphasis on abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.* This means forming conclusions, planning the application of these conclusions and actually implementing them. Should take on a more active role by volunteering to participate in projects or lead discussions. Would find it helpful to work with someone with a convergent learning style. *Learning skills to develop include:*

- Making decisions
- Setting goals
- Taking Risks

### **The Assimilative Learning Style**



Best at using *reflective observation* and *abstract conceptualization*. Has a talent for creating theoretical models, and enjoys inductive reasoning and distilling varied observations into logical explanations. However, may be overly cautious about experimenting and miss opportunities for learning.

*Needs to strengthen active experimentation and concrete experience skills.* This means speeding up the learning process to move into action sooner. Learning would benefit from increased awareness of own feelings and feelings of others. Should put more effort into trying ideas, skills, or concepts, then watching what happens. Should also get involved in more interpersonal activities (role play, discussions, etc.). Would benefit from working with an Accommodator. *Skills to develop include:*

- Seeking/exploring opportunities
- Influencing others
- Being personally involved

### **The Convergent Learning Style**



Best at using *abstract conceptualization* and *active experimentation*. Has the ability to find practical applications for ideas, concepts and theories. Enjoys situations where there is a single or best answer to a problem. May prefer to deal with technical issues rather than people issues.

*Needs to emphasize concrete experience and reflective observation.* Needs to place a higher value on gathering and understanding non-quantitative information by looking at situations from different perspectives. While this may seem to slow the learning process down, it actually speeds it up by increasing long-term accuracy. Should push to take a more active role in the learning process, trying harder to listen and observe non-judgmentally. Would benefit from working with a Diverger. *Skills to develop include:*

- Listening with an open mind
- Gathering information
- Imagining the implications of situations

### **The Accommodative Learning Style**



Best at using *active experimentation* and *concrete experience*. Learns primarily from hands-on experience. Likely to be involved in planning and participating in new and challenging experiences. Tends to act on intuition rather than careful analysis. Quick to reject solutions that don't

work out and improvise. May concentrate on the urgent aspects of a situation, sacrificing long-term understanding.

*Needs to place emphasis on reflective observation and abstract conceptualization.* This means collecting and analyzing more information before and after learning efforts. Learning would benefit from less trial-and-error and less direct participation in favor of thoughtful observation and analysis. Would gain from working with someone with an Assimilative learning style. *Skills to develop include:*

- Organizing information
- Building conceptual models
- Testing theories and ideas

### **Suggestions for Increasing Your Learning Power**

Learning is a process, not an isolated event.

Learning is a very personal and individual process.

You are much more likely to learn if you have a learning goal.

Other people can help you learn and you can help them.

You can use your current learning strengths to develop new ones.

A Learning Journal can help you keep track of your progress.



### **Additional Resources**

Barsch, J. (1999). *Barsch learning style inventory*. Academic Therapy.

Jonassen, D. H. & Grabowski, B. L. (1993). *Handbook of individual differences, learning, and instruction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning : Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Rayner, R. R. & Rayner, S. R. (1998). *Cognitive styles and learning strategies : understanding style differences in learning behavior*. London: David Fulton.

Wood, G. (1998). *How to study : Use your personal learning style to help you succeed when it counts*. Learning Express.

[Personal Learning Style Inventory \(http://www.howtolearn.com/personal.html\)](http://www.howtolearn.com/personal.html)