CENTRE FOR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

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| **LLC 103 FOUNDATIONS of ADULT LEARNING** |
| **HONEY AND MUMFORD’S LEARNING STYLE TEST BASED ON DAVID KOLB’S LEARNING STYLES** |
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| Loretta Brennan, csb5-9-2016 |

KOLB LEARNING STYLES

**(This interpretation was amended and revised March 2006)**

Kolb explains that different people naturally prefer a certain single different learning style. Various factors influence a person's preferred style: notably in his experiential learning theory model (ELT) Kolb defined three stages of a person's development, and suggests that our propensity to reconcile and successfully integrate the four different learning styles improves as we mature through our development stages. The development stages that Kolb identified are:

1. Acquisition - birth to adolescence - development of basic abilities and 'cognitive structures'
2. Specialization - schooling, early work and personal experiences of adulthood - the development of a particular 'specialized learning style' shaped by 'social, educational, and organizational socialization'
3. Integration - mid-career through to later life - expression of non-dominant learning style in work and personal life.

Whatever influences the choice of style, the learning style preference itself is actually the product of two pairs of variables, or two separate 'choices' that we make, which Kolb presented as lines of axis, each with 'conflicting' modes at either end:

**Concrete Experience - CE** (feeling)**-----V-----Abstract Conceptualization - AC** (thinking)

**Active Experimentation - AE**(doing)**-----V----- Reflective Observation - RO** (watching)

A typical presentation of Kolb's two continuums is that the east-west axis is called the Processing Continuum (how we approach a task), and the north-south axis is called the Perception Continuum (our emotional response, or how we think or feel about it).

These learning styles are the combination of two lines of axis (continuums) each formed between what Kolb calls 'dialectically related modes' of 'grasping experience' (doing or watching), and 'transforming experience' (feeling or thinking):



The word 'dialectically' is not widely understood, and yet carries an essential meaning, namely 'conflicting' (its ancient Greek root means 'debate' - and I thank P Stern for helping clarify this precise meaning). Kolb meant by this that we cannot do both at the same time, and to an extent our urge to want to do both creates conflict, which we resolve through choice when confronted with a new learning situation. We internally decide whether we wish to **do** or **watch**, and**at the same time** we decide whether to **think** or **feel**.

The result of these two decisions produces (and helps to form throughout our lives) the preferred learning style, hence the two-by-two matrix below. We choose a way of 'grasping the experience', which defines our approach to it, and we choose a way to 'transform the experience' into something meaningful and usable, which defines our emotional response to the experience. Our learning style is a product of these two choice decisions:

1. how to approach a task - ie., **'grasping experience'** - preferring to (a) **watch** or (b) **do** , and
2. our emotional response to the experience - ie.,**'transforming experience'** - preferring to (a) **think** or (b) **feel**.

In other words we choose our **approach to the task or experience** (**'grasping the experience'**) by opting for 1(a) or 1(b):

* 1(a) - though watching others involved in the experience and reflecting on what happens (**'reflective observation' - 'watching'**) or
* 1(b) - through 'jumping straight in' and just doing it (**'active experimentation' - 'doing'**)

And **at the same time** we choose how to **emotionally transform the experience** into something meaningful and useful by opting for 2(a) or 2(b):

* 2(a) - through gaining new information by thinking, analyzing, or planning (**'abstract conceptualization' - 'thinking'**) or
* 2(b) - through experiencing the 'concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world' (**'concrete experience' - 'feeling'**)

The combination of these two choices produces a preferred learning style. See the matrix below.

Kolb Learning Styles Definitions and Descriptions

Knowing a person's (and your own) learning style enables learning to be orientated according to the preferred method. That said, everyone responds to and needs the stimulus of all types of learning styles to one extent or another - it's a matter of using emphasis that fits best with the given situation and a person's learning style preferences.

Here are brief descriptions of the four Kolb learning styles:

* **Diverging (feeling and watching - CE/RO)** - These people are able to look at things from different perspectives. They are sensitive. They prefer to watch rather than do, tending to gather information and use imagination to solve problems. They are best at viewing concrete situations several different viewpoints. Kolb called this style 'Diverging' because these people perform better in situations that require ideas-generation, for example, brainstorming. People with a Diverging learning style have broad cultural interests and like to gather information. They are interested in people, tend to be imaginative and emotional, and tend to be strong in the arts. People with the Diverging style prefer to work in groups, to listen with an open mind and to receive personal feedback.
* **Assimilating (watching and thinking - AC/RO)** - The Assimilating learning preference is for a concise, logical approach. Ideas and concepts are more important than people. These people require good clear explanation rather than practical opportunity. They excel at understanding wide-ranging information and organising it a clear logical format. People with an Assimilating learning style are less focused on people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts. People with this style are more attracted to logically sound theories than approaches based on practical value. These learning style people is important for effectiveness in information and science careers. In formal learning situations, people with this style prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think things through.
* **Converging (doing and thinking - AC/AE)** - People with a Converging learning style can solve problems and will use their learning to find solutions to practical issues. They prefer technical tasks, and are less concerned with people and interpersonal aspects. People with a Converging learning style are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. They can solve problems and make decisions by finding solutions to questions and problems. People with a Converging learning style are more attracted to technical tasks and problems than social or interpersonal issues. A Converging learning style enables specialist and technology abilities. People with a Converging style like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate, and to work with practical applications.
* **Accommodating (doing and feeling - CE/AE)** - The Accommodating learning style is 'hands-on', and relies on intuition rather than logic. These people use other people's analysis, and prefer to take a practical, experiential approach. They are attracted to new challenges and experiences, and to carrying out plans. They commonly act on 'gut' instinct rather than logical analysis. People with an Accommodating learning style will tend to rely on others for information than carry out their own analysis. This learning style is prevalent and useful in roles requiring action and initiative. People with an Accommodating learning style prefer to work in teams to complete tasks. They set targets and actively work in the field trying different ways to achieve an objective.

As with any behavioural model, this is a guide not a strict set of rules.

Honey and Mumford's variation on the Kolb system

Various resources (including this one in the past) refer to the terms 'activist', 'reflector', 'theorist', and 'pragmatist' (respectively representing the four key stages or learning steps) in seeking to explain Kolb's model. In fact, 'activist', 'reflector', 'theorist', and 'pragmatist' are from a learning styles model developed by Honey and Mumford, which although based on Kolb's work, is different. Arguably therefore the terms 'activist', 'reflector', 'theorist', and 'pragmatist' effectively 'belong' to the Honey and Mumford theory.

Peter Honey and Alan Mumford developed their learning styles system as a variation on the Kolb model while working on a project for the Chloride corporation in the 1970's. Honey and Mumford say of their system:

"Our description of the stages in the learning cycle originated from the work of David Kolb. Kolb uses different words to describe the stages of the learning cycle and four learning styles..."

And, "...The similarities between his model and ours are greater than the differences.." (Honey & Mumford)

In summary here are brief descriptions of the four H&M key stages/styles, which incidentally are directly mutually corresponding and overlaid, as distinct from the Kolb model in which the learning styles are a product of combinations of the learning cycle stages. The typical presentation of these H&M styles and stages would be respectively at north, east, south and west on a circle or four-stage cyclical flow diagram.

1. **'Having an Experience'** (stage 1), and **Activists** (style 1): 'here and now', gregarious, seek challenge and immediate experience, open-minded, bored with implementation.
2. **'Reviewing the Experience'** (stage 2) and **Reflectors** (style 2): 'stand back', gather data, ponder and analyse, delay reaching conclusions, listen before speaking, thoughtful.
3. **'Concluding from the Experience'** (stage 3) and **Theorists** (style 3): think things through in logical steps, assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories, rationally objective, reject subjectivity and flippancy.
4. **'Planning the next steps'** (stage 4) and **Pragmatists** (style 4): seek and try out new ideas, practical, down-to-earth, enjoy problem solving and decision-making quickly, bored with long discussions.

There is arguably a strong similarity between the Honey and Mumford styles/stages and the corresponding Kolb learning styles:

* Activist = Accommodating
* Reflector = Diverging
* Theorist = Assimilating
* Pragmatist = Converging

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