

Cognitive Perspective

Learning Styles

There are various views on what learning involves. Some people perceive it as the retention of knowledge, others as the acquisition of skills and yet others see it as a process of interpreting and coming to grips with reality. It seems appropriate therefore to suppose that there are various kinds of learning as everyone's experience of it is not the same.

Learning style involves the way(s) in which a person goes about learning, the ways an individual achieves different learning objectives. Biggs (1987) clarifies this by distinguishing between 'learning styles' and 'learning strategies'. Whereas 'strategies' are the actual ways of handling a learning task, 'styles' are individual ways of approaching the tasks.

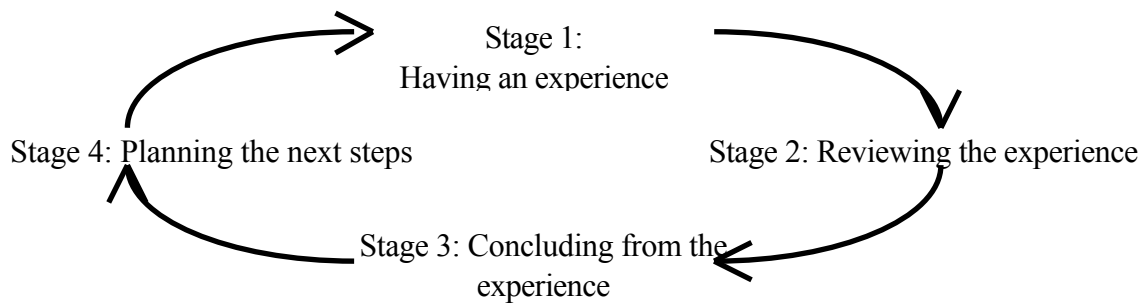
Based on experiential learning theory, David Kolb (1984) suggests that there are four learning modes:

learning mode	Focus of learning
concrete experience	feelings rather than thinking; intuition as opposed to systematic/scientific problem-solving; relationships with people are important
reflective observation	understanding ideas/situations rather than practical applications; emphasis on thinking about meanings
abstract conceptualisation	thinking as opposed to feeling; builds general theories, systematic planning, analysing ideas
active experimentation	actively influencing people and bringing about change; practical applications; risk taking and desire to get things done

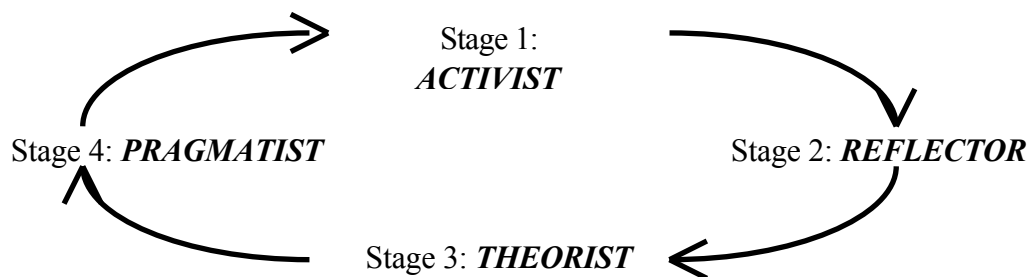
These learning modes can be represented as being mutually supporting:

Kolb (1984) suggests that learning is not the same for all people but he also states that the differences in learning modes should not be used for pigeonholing people as most people will use a mixture of modes during learning. He also suggests that early educational experiences shape learning styles and that we are taught how to learning. This teaching continues through out life and so people may develop specialized styles of learning such that they approach some tasks with one style and another style to suit a different kind of task.

Honey and Mumford (1992) have found that different people prefer different ways of learning and that most people are unaware of their preferences. They have adapted Kolb's learning cycle to indicate four stages of learning - experiencing, reviewing, concluding and planning.



They show how individuals tend to favour particular stages of the cycle and how these preferences can distort the learning process so that more emphasis is put on some stages to the detriment of others. These preferences for favouring particular stages of the learning cycle are translated into learning styles which relate to the stages of the cycle shown below:



These styles can be summarised as follows:

- activist *I'll try anything once*
- Reflector *I'd like time to think about this*
- Theorist *How does this fit with that?*
- Pragmatist *How can apply this in practice?*

Honey and Mumford investigated learning styles using questionnaires standardised on the particular age groups, one for 16 - 19 year olds and another for older students. They emphasised that this is not an intelligence test nor a test of ability. Instead it may show that two people think in similar ways to each other and highlight the different cognitive processing that different people may use.

Their findings suggest that each style equips the person to carry out a different stage in the learning cycle and that no one stage is superior to any other. Their research shows that only about 2% of people use all four styles equally and effectively and that 70% of people predominantly use only one or two styles.

When viewed in a wider context, learning styles can be viewed as reflecting different approaches in life. As Schmeck (1988) points out, 'learning can be seen as the creative development of a personal identity.' This view fits neatly with Kelly's (1955)

Personal Construct Theory that suggests that we all have unique, personal ways of seeing the world. People with similar construct systems might be expected to communicate more easily with each other and so get on better with each other. Similarly, perhaps people with similar learning styles get on well with each other.