How-to Guide

Developing learning content for different learning styles

This document describes how to create learning content to cater for the four main learning styles.

The process of learning is very similar for most people. But we all learn in a variety of ways. Imagine learning to play chess. Some people like to try it out and experience it. Others might want to read a book to understand the rules. Others like to observe contestant playing the game and figure it out like that.

Different ways of learning are called Learning Styles and have been around for a long time. Some recent research disputes the existence of these learning styles, but in my 20+ years' experience as a facilitator I have found that catering your learning content to speak to these styles makes for a better learning experience and a more effective learning solution.

1. The 4 learning styles

Based on the work of Peter Honey and Alan Mumford in 1983, 4 main learning styles were identified:

Activist:	Like the name suggests, Activists immerse themselves in new experiences, they learn by doing (action). They enjoy new experiences, they are open-minded, enthusiastic and flexible. They often act first and consider the consequences later.
Reflector:	These learners will stand back and observe. They are cautious and will take a back seat during demonstrations. They collect information, analyse it and are slower to reach conclusions because they weigh up the information. They use learnings from their past together with immediate observations to maintain a big picture perspective.
Theorist:	Theorists like to think through problems in a logical way. They value rationality and objectivity. They assimilate disparate facts and create coherent theories. They are disciplined and seek to fit things into a logical order. They are keen to know the basic assumptions, theories, models and systems.
Pragmatist:	Pragmatists are focused on how to apply their learning in the real world. They are keen to put the new learning to the test and try it out. They like to experiment and learn from the activity.

2. Which learning style is best?

The answer is: all of them! Most people have a dominant learning style that they prefer, but it's possible for any one person to learn from all the styles. In order to design an impactful learning solutions or programme, the designer of the programme should cater for all the learning styles.

However, be careful of not giving too much airtime to your own learning style. Because you're comfortable in that style, the temptation to just cater for that style is strong. Push yourself to try and apply other styles as well.

You can take a free questionnaire here to find out what your learning style preference is.

3. Using learning styles when designing learning

Here is how to choose learning activities when designing learning in order to cater for the particular styles:

Activist:	• Business games and simulations • Role plays • Giving presentations in class • Working in teams and sharing ideas
Reflector:	• Give time to think and reflect in the training • Observe a situation like a meeting, role play, video. • Conduct research and read background information and case studies • Exchange views with other members of a team.
Theorist:	• Put the learning in context of a model, process or system • Give time to explore how elements associate and relate • Allow time for questioning • Provide complex situations with time for probing and intellectual interface.
Pragmatist:	• Link the learning with the on-the-job application, make it real. • Show techniques that can be immediately applied • Have a chance to try out techniques with real information • Focus on practical issues like action plans

A good rule of thumb is to include all the learning styles when you are designing a course. Change the activities often to ensure that the learners are engaged, and that no-one becomes bored.