

# FIND OUT ABOUT LEARNING STYLES TO LEARN AND TEACH EFFECTIVELY

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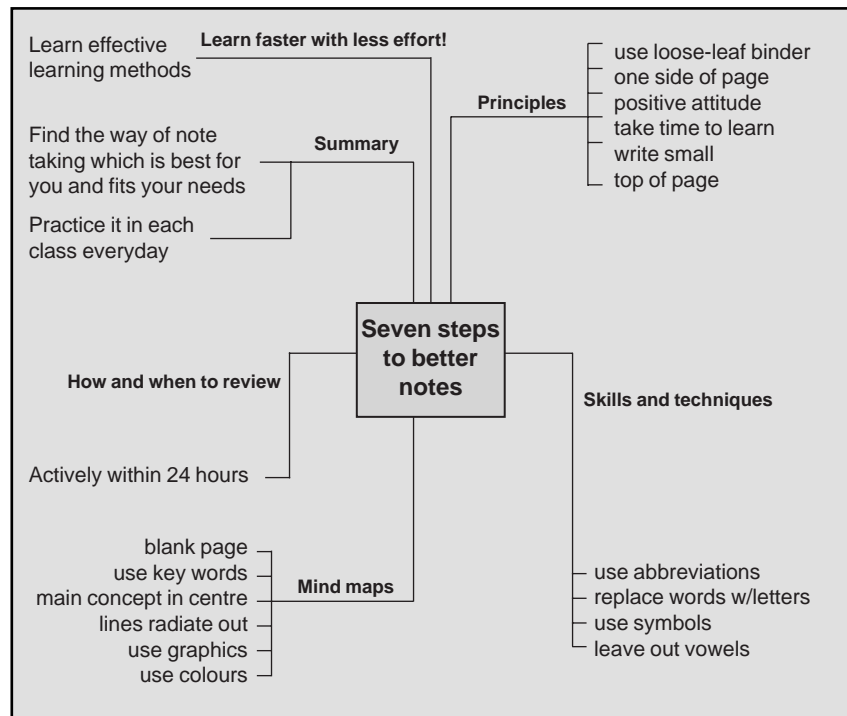
*The unprecedented advance of technology has forced many health professionals to analyse how best to learn new skills that have become an everyday part of the work environment. This continuing professional development article describes how to optimise training by adapting it to cater for the different ways in which people learn*

Learning how to learn is not a subject usually covered by school or university curricula. However, being able to learn effectively underpins any kind of education at any level and in any place, whether in the workplace or in schools, colleges and universities. It stands to reason that if diversity exists in the way that people are taught, there will be diversity in learning styles. If pharmacists identify their own predominant learning style, they will find that continuing professional development (CPD) seem less of a chore. It will also help to raise the value of training and development programmes. For pharmacists who are teacher-practitioners, being aware of the diversity of learning styles will be helpful when preparing classes. For owner-managers, it will help when identifying the learning and training needs of staff and when formulating personal development plans.

## DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

Although different learning styles are constantly being proposed, many trainers have taken their lead from the work of David Kolb<sup>1</sup> who separated the learning experience into two main categories — perception and processing. Building on the work of Kolb, Honey and Mumford<sup>2</sup> developed what is widely recognised as a model of learning styles that groups people into the following types:

- **Activists** Active learners or activists are people who want to do rather than to listen. They are the people most likely to say: "Let's try this and see what happens" or "I'll try anything once". Activists prefer to be involved in group work rather than to sit passively listening to a lecture; they also enjoy brainstorming. An activist prefers to learn from experience. As the name suggests, activists thrive on activity and are constantly seeking new challenges. They tend to be outgoing by nature and are not afraid of being in the spotlight.
- **Reflectors** Reflectors enjoy thinking and they like to ponder and reflect. They tend to collect and digest information before drawing conclusions, and prefer to learn from an experience or activity. Reflectors are likely to say: "I need time to think it through" and will take their time working through data and information before drawing a conclusion. They tend to look at problems from all angles before making a move and are often quiet during discussions and meetings.



*Mind map showing how ideas arising from a central theme can be formulated*

- **Theorists** People who fall into the category of theorists learn best when they can see things presented in terms of theories, concepts, principles and systems. They tend not to be interested in practical activities. Theorists seek to draw conclusions based on identified theory and tend to ask: "Is it logical?". These people take an objective and analytical approach to learning and enjoy intellectual challenges.
- **Pragmatists** Pragmatists prefer the immediacy and relevancy associated with being able to apply their learning. They are quite happy to experiment and to pursue ideas that they find attractive. Given an experience, they want to move on and start planning the "what next" after an activity. This category of learner will say: "Let's get on with it", and is interested in the application of learning, trying out new ideas and in getting involved in practical decision-making and problem-solving.

## MATCHING LEARNING ACTIVITIES TO LEARNING STYLES

**Responsibilities of teachers and trainers** Understanding the link between learning style and achievement helps teachers and trainers to appreciate that poor performance is not always evidence of a lack of ability or interest in a subject. Sometimes, poor performance is simply a consequence of a mismatch between learning and teaching styles. Therefore, teachers and trainers should try to appeal to all the different styles of learning (see Table). For example, when delivering classes and sessions, in addition to use of reason and logic, there should be some appeal to those who prefer to learn by feeling or experience. This means making better use of illustrations, examples, group work, scenarios, story-telling, images and role-play.

Where possible, carrying out a learning style inventory before a course or class can help, because learning style preferences can be identified and the course structured to accommodate them. This could mean that groups are separated according to preferred learning style, so that all activists or all theorists could work together.

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**TABLE: RELATING LEARNING ACTIVITIES TO LEARNING STYLES**

Style	Prefers	Dislikes
Activist	Business games, team tasks, role play, chairing meetings, leading discussions and giving presentations	Lectures, explanations, watching, reading, observing without participating and solitary work
Reflector	Listening, observing, investigating, pondering reviewing, learning, analysing, reporting and keeping learning logs	Chairing meetings, role play, instant activities that allow no time for reflection and action without planning
Theorist	Being presented with models and concepts, exploring theories, question-and-answer sessions and complex activities	Lack of clear purpose or context, situations that place emphasis on feelings, unstructured activities, working with activists, and open-ended problems
Pragmatist	Problem-solving, being guided or led by experts, real problems and immediate opportunities to apply learning	Learning that is not immediately relevant, too much theory without obvious application and lack of opportunities for implementing new things learnt

**Responsibilities of learners** Learners can take responsibility for their training by compensating with other activities if a teaching or training session is structured to meet the needs of one learning style only. For example, an activist faced with a string of lectures could set up an informal discussion group to share learning with others. A reflector might decide that a training session or course is too action-packed and could keep a learning log or diary to use for reflecting on their learning. Being aware of a personal learning style can also inform decision-making about which training is most appropriate.

### LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

When trying to identify opportunities for learning, the natural assumption is to think about formal opportunities for learning, such as courses or other planned activities. However, in the workplace there are a range of opportunities that should be encouraged and not overlooked by either employers or their staff (see Panel below).

### ASSESSMENT

If there is diversity in teaching and learning, then there will also be diversity in measuring learning achievement. Examinations have traditionally been used as a means of assessment but they do not bring out the best in everyone and are not necessarily an accurate reflection of true learning. Examinations can be a reflection of superficial learning rather than of true, deep learning, in which real understanding of a subject has been achieved. An assessment strategy for any course should, where possible, be flexible enough to accommodate different learning styles. For example, learning logs might be an appropriate assessment tool for reflective learners. For activists, peer assessment might be more appropriate. Teachers and trainers should explore and try to use a range of assessment tools, including:

- observation of role play, simulations and practical activities
- discussion — both structured and unstructured
- open-ended or multiple choice questioning

- structured tasks, eg, projects, essays and assignments
- examination and testing
- use of portfolios containing evidence of achievement measured against given criteria

### STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE LEARNING

**Definition of outcomes** Traditionally, education and training has been seen as something that is given to people. Teachers and trainers have concentrated on content and on what they were going to teach, as opposed to what would be learnt. However, using clear and explicit objectives makes learning more transparent by highlighting what people are expected to understand, know or be able to do as a result of their learning. Learning outcomes or objectives should always be given out at the start of a class or training session. They help to motivate people, and also act as a self-assessment tool that can be used to measure achievement and progress. Learning outcomes give people ownership of their learning, and they become transformed from being passive recipients to being active participants.

**Mind-mapping** Tony Buzan proposed the mind map as a mechanism for learning that unleashed the full potential of the brain.<sup>3</sup> Mind-mapping, or making associations and links with ideas, follows the architecture of the brain, and mind maps have been used successfully with a range of people, from children with learning difficulties to company executives. The theory of mind-mapping suggests that people should make links and associations whenever they learn, whatever the source of the information. Learning is reinforced by making mind maps of new and existing information. Mind maps can be enhanced by visual images, which, it is believed, reinforce learning because such images reflect the fact that thinking and memorising is often improved when associations are made with colours and images. For teachers and training seeking ways of stimulating and motivating a class or group, mind-mapping is a simple technique that can be used to encourage learning, for teaching, preparing presentations and lectures, decision-making and planning.

### SUMMARY

Recognising that people learn in different ways is an important contribution to creating a culture of learning within organisations. However, effective learning involves more than just a recognition of learning styles. For managers and professionals particularly, learning is embraced more enthusiastically when it is specific and implementable rather than when it is hypothetical and abstract.<sup>4</sup> *More information about learning styles can be found in the resources panel on p48.*

### REFERENCES

1. Kolb D. *Experiential learning*. New York: Prentice Hall; 1984.
2. Honey P, Mumford A. *Manual of learning styles*. Maidenhead: Peter Honey; 1992.
3. Buzan T. *The mindmap book*. London: BBC Books; 1995.
4. Mumford A. *Effective learning*. London: IPD; 1995.

## Workplace-based learning

### Formal opportunities

Courses (internal or external)	Job rotation
Mentoring	Committee work
Task groups	Project work
Coaching	Counselling
Secondment	

### Informal opportunities

Giving presentations	Working with colleagues
Taking on new job responsibilities	Reading
Contributing to induction of new staff	Networking
Preparing for and participating in meetings	Negotiating
Attending conferences and seminars	Working with subordinates eg, shadowing their work