

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE SCENE FOR LEARNING STYLES

This Manual is for all trainers, educators and development advisers - in fact for anyone who has an interest in helping people learn. (For convenience we will use the term trainer throughout this Manual.) As in previous editions the focus is on learning styles; what they are, how they can be identified and how they help to make learning more effective.

There are two ways in which to use the Learning Styles Questionnaire. Firstly, at the back of the Manual you will find master copies of the Learning Styles Questionnaire, descriptions of the styles and two different versions of the score key. These are available for unlimited photocopying.

Secondly, you may well have purchased the software package of the Learning Styles Questionnaire which is now available for IBM PCs and 100% compatible machines. If so, you will find included within this package a disk of the Learning Styles Questionnaire and a pamphlet providing you with all the information necessary to run the system. Read the accompanying licence agreement before opening the envelope which contains the disk.

Learning is such a fundamental process that many people take it for granted, conveniently assuming that by the time they are adults they have learned how to learn and need no further assistance with the process. Thus lecturers concentrate on lecturing and assume students are skilled at such learning activities as listening, note taking, researching, essay writing and revising. Trainers too often assume that learners are empty buckets waiting to be filled up by the training method the trainer favours. The fact that the buckets are different sizes, and/or leak and/or are upside down is conveniently overlooked.

Yet it is patently clear that people vary not just in their learning skills but also in their learning styles. Why otherwise might two people, matched for age, intelligence and need, exposed to the **same** learning opportunity react so differently? One person emerges enthusiastic, able to articulate and implement what has been learned. The other claims it was a waste of time and that nothing has been learned. The question we all face is why, with other factors apparently constant, one person learns and the other does not? This Manual aims to show that the reason for the divergence stems from unspoken preferences about how to learn. Perhaps the learning opportunity involved 'having a go' by being pitched in at 'the deep end' with minimal guidance. It so happened that this suited one person's style but not the other who preferred to learn by being given some information and ideas on how to act before 'having a go'.

The term learning styles is used as a description of the attitudes and behaviours which determine an individual's preferred way of learning.

Most people are unaware of their learning style preferences. They just know vaguely that they feel more comfortable with, and learn more from, some activities than others. Trainers often realise people learn differently, but may not be sure how and why. In this Manual we show how learning styles can be identified and how this can help both trainer and learner.

The case for helping people to be more effective learners ought to be self evident, yet many trainers still give insufficient recognition to it. It is perhaps **the** most important of **all** the life skills since the way in which people learn affects everything else. We live in the post industrial 'information' age where data have a shorter shelf-life and where transformational changes are less predictable and occur more rapidly than ever before. Clearly learning is the key, not just to surviving but to thriving on all these changes. So this Manual gives help on the crucial issue of learning to learn, thus enabling people to continue to learn long after an event which a trainer has designed.

What is learning?

Learning has happened when people can demonstrate that they know something they didn't know before (insights and realisations as well as facts) and/or when they can do something they couldn't do before (skills). We learn in two substantially different ways. Sometimes we are 'taught' through formal structured activities such as lectures, case studies and books. We also learn from our experiences, often in an unconscious, ill defined way. Learning dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge is both more familiar and more straightforward than experiential learning. It is more familiar not because we necessarily do it more often, but because most people associate the word 'learning' with the acquisition of facts rather more than with the messier process of learning from day to day experiences. As we shall see, learning style preferences have implications for **all** types of learning.

The range of influences on learning

The history of the development of ways to help people learn how to be more effective is relatively short; perhaps fifty years in the UK and a little longer in the USA. One of the constant features in that history has been the discovery of a succession of what were claimed to be uniquely appropriate 'methods'. Lectures were abandoned and replaced by case studies. Books about human relations techniques were replaced by T Groups. Structured training need analyses gave way to individual commitment to self development. The problem of ineffective learning remains, because all these 'solutions' dealt too exclusively with teaching methods and not with differences in individual approaches to learning.

This Manual is about the contribution which can be made to effective learning by an understanding and use of individual styles of learning. We are, however, clear that we are describing one of several major aspects which must be 'right' before effective learning occurs. We are not adding another innovation and claiming that without it nothing useful will be

done; we are saying that with attention to individual learning styles, much more effective learning can take place.

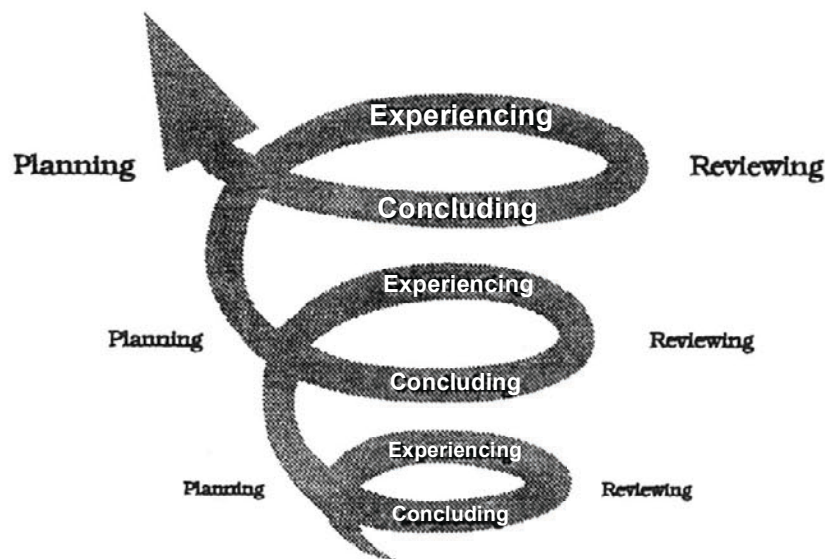
In order to emphasise the importance of placing learning styles in the total learning context, it is worth remembering the large number of factors which influence the extent of learning. The following diagram shows just some of the many influences on what is learned or not learned.



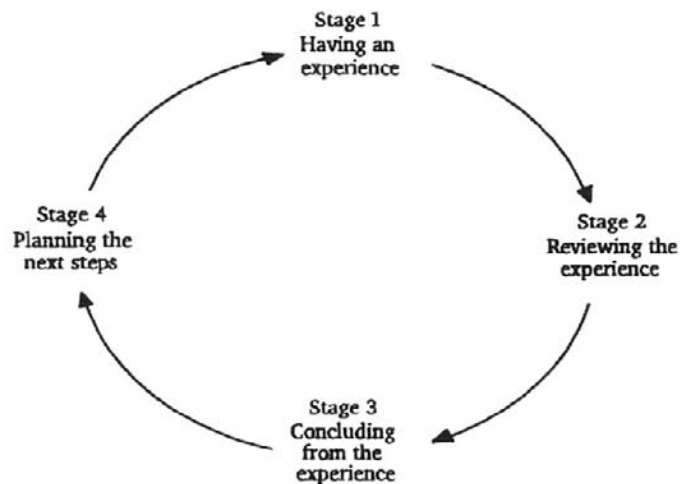
This helps to put this Manual into its proper perspective since it can be seen that it focuses on just one of the range of influences; personal learning style. However, the learning cycle and learning styles are particularly important for the trainer because they fall within an area that the trainer can directly influence.

Learning as a continuous process

Learning is a life-long process. It never makes sense to say we have learned all there is to learn or that our learning is complete.



The continuous process is rather like the coils in a spring or, as Professor John Morris has described it, a never-ending spiral. Each coil of the spring or loop in the spiral has four distinct stages on each cycle.



Our description of the stages in the learning cycle originated from the work of David Kolb (see references). Kolb uses different words to describe the stages of the cycle and four learning styles. The similarities between his model and ours are greater than the differences. However, since we first published the Learning Styles Questionnaire in 1982 many users have found it enjoys a greater face validity with learners mainly because, unlike Kolb, we refrain from asking direct questions about how people learn. We based it instead on what managers and professional people do.

A learner can start anywhere on the cycle because each stage feeds into the next. A person could for example, start at stage 2 by acquiring some information and pondering it before reaching some conclusions, stage 3, and deciding how to apply it, stage 4. On the other hand someone could start at stage 4 with a technique that they plan to incorporate into their *modus operandi*. Using the technique would then be at stage 1 in the cycle before reviewing how it worked out, stage 2, reaching conclusions stage 3, and modifying the technique in the light of the experience, stage 4.

This continuous, iterative process is so fundamental that it underpins many other approaches. The scientific method is one example. Many problem solving/decision making processes also map onto the stages in the learning cycle as do the methods of continuous improvement in Total Quality Management.