

# The Learning Process

People who go through school without knowledge of their learning styles can end up feeling isolated or unskilled. When we learn in a way that's noticeably different from those around us, we might feel inadequate or unsuccessful.

Discovering our individual learning styles can change this. With this knowledge we can do three things. One is to seek out experiences that draw on the strength of our styles. Another is to adapt our speaking, writing, thinking, and listening to the learning styles of other people. Doing so can enhance our effectiveness at school, home, and work. Third, we can make a conscious attempt to develop our skills at other learning styles.

## **TWO TASKS – Perceiving and Processing**

When we learn, two things happen. One is perceiving — our style of noticing stimuli, the way we “take in” reality. The second thing is processing — how we internalize this new experience and make it our own. The concept of learning styles takes into account different combinations of perceiving and processing.

Many learning theorists have noted the importance of styles in the way we learn. Among them are Carl Jung, David Kolb, Gordon Lawrence, Isabel Myers, David Keirse, Marilyn Bates, and Bernice McCarthy. These people have drawn our attention to two styles of perceiving:

- (1) Some people favor perceiving by concretely experimenting. Generally they prefer to deal with situations in a very personal way. They perceive by sensing and feeling, often taking an intuitive approach to solving problems. They function well in unstructured situations where they can take the initiative.
- (2) Other people like to perceive by abstractly conceptualizing. They like to think things through. They analyze, intellectualize, and build theories to understand their experiences. They take a scientific approach to problems and often excel in well-defined, structured situations.

As these theorists point out, people also have predominately two styles of processing:

- (1) Some people favor processing new information by actively experimenting. They prefer to “jump in” and start doing things. Immediately, they look for practical ways to apply what they have learned. They do not generally mind taking risks and are results-oriented.

- (2) Those who favor processing by reflectively observing prefer to watch and ponder what is going on. They understand a situation by carefully observing it. Often they see several different points of view and can generate many ideas about how something happens. They are likely to value patience and good judgment.

Keep in mind that none of us fall neatly into any of these categories. Rather, there are continuous lines between reflecting and experimenting. In their learning styles, people can fall onto any point along those lines. We combine these ways of processing and perceiving to emerge with four distinct learning styles.

Take a few minutes to read through the following descriptions of those styles. As you read, keep in mind that one style is not “better” than another. All four styles are equally valid ways of responding to learning from our environment.

### **STYLE 1 LEARNERS**

These people favor perceiving new information through concrete experience. Often they seek examples of how the information applies to their lives today. These people also tend to process new learning through reflective observation. They ponder its meaning, discuss the information, and watch what others say and do with the information. Following are some characteristics:

1. These people are skilled at viewing concrete situations from many viewpoints.
2. They approach events as observers and prefer to reflect on the situation rather than take action.
3. They enjoy situations that ask them to generate a wide range of ideas.
4. They are imaginative and confident about their own thinking.
5. They work for harmony and create support.
6. They demonstrate concern for people and build trust in relationships.
7. Their goals are to be involved in important issues and to bring harmony.
8. Their favorite question when learning new information is, “Why? Why do I need to learn this information? Why should I stay awake in his class? Why are these ideas important in my life?”

### **STYLE 2 LEARNERS**

These people favor perceiving through abstract conceptualization. They enjoy hearing lectures and listening to some explain the theory behind events. They also tend to process new learning through reflective observation. Often this leads to the following characteristics:

1. These people excel at understanding a wide range of information and putting it into concise, logical form.
2. They are more interested in abstract ideas and concepts and less focused on people.
3. They prefer that a theory have logical soundness more than practical value.

4. They are thorough, industrious, goal-oriented, and prefer principles and procedures to open-ended learning situations.
5. They excel in traditional learning situations since lectures and reading assignments suit them.
6. They excel in detailed work.
7. Their goals are to know things on an intellectual level.
8. A favorite question for style 2 learners is, "What? What do I need to learn from this class session? What facts do you want me to know?"

### **STYLE 3 LEARNERS**

These people favor perceiving through abstract conceptualization. Again, hearing lectures and listening to the theory appeals to them. They process this new learning through active experimentation. Usually that means working with the idea to see if it makes sense or has a practical application. The following are characteristics of style 3 learners:

1. These people are skilled at finding practical uses for ideas and theories.
2. They excel in solving problems and making decisions based on finding answers to questions.
3. They prefer technical tasks to working with social issues or "people problems."
4. They experiment and tinker with things. They want to know how things work.
5. They thrive on plans and schedules.
6. They believe "if it works, use it."
7. Their aim is to put new information to work in their lives.
8. For style 3 learners a favorite question is, "How? How does this work? How can I use what I'm learning to make my life more effective and productive?"

### **STYLE 4 LEARNERS**

These learners favor perceiving information through concrete experience, looking for ways to immediately apply concepts. They also tend to process new learning through active experimentation. They enjoy working with the idea to see if it makes sense or has practical application. This combination of preferences can lead to the following characteristics:

1. These people learn effectively from "hands-on" experience.
2. They usually enjoy carrying out plans and getting involved in new or challenging experiences.
3. They may also tend to rely more heavily on "gut" feelings than on logical analysis.
4. They are risk takers and feel at ease with new people and situations.
5. They encourage people to think for themselves.
6. They often reach conclusions in the absence of logical justification.
7. Their goals are to bring action to ideas and to foster the creative spirit.
8. A favored question for style 4 learners is, "What if? If all this information I'm learning is accurate, what else does it imply? How else does it play a role in my world?"

**One caution: Beware of labeling.**

Categories such as the four listed above are useful only for promoting self-awareness. No one style is any better or more effective than another. In reality, each of us draws upon all four styles. What's more, our preferred style may shift according to the context or environment.

**LEARNING STYLES AND PREFERRED SKILLS**

We all have unique ways of responding to learning environments. We also bring different skills to bear in everyday situations. Below is a list of skills and activities that draw on the characteristics of each learning style.

**Skills of Style 1 Learners:**

Valuing: Brainstorming, Listening, Speaking, Interacting,  
Feeling, Data gathering, Imaging

**Skills of Style 2 Learners:**

Thinking: Observing, Analyzing, Classifying, Theorizing,  
Organizing, Conceptualizing, Testing theories

**Skills of Style 3 Learners:**

Deciding: Manipulating, Tinkering, Improving, Applying,  
Experimenting, Goal setting, Deciding

**Skills of Style 4 Learners:**

Acting: Modifying, Adapting, Risking, Collaborating  
Committing, Influencing, Leading

In addition, people with these styles often have a preferred skill when it comes to problem solving. Style 1 learners often excel at identifying problems. Those with Style 2 like to identify possible solutions. Style 3 learners are skilled at choosing a workable solution from all the possibilities. And Style 4 learners enjoy implementing the chosen solution.

Adapted from Becoming A Master Student, Dave Ellis, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994, pp. 52-55.