**Designing Sessions in Response to Different Learning Styles**

In my teaching I have learned that when working with a group, you encounter a number of learning styles and practices, which are individual to students. Irrelevant of their chosen field of study, students adopt different approaches allowing them to assimilate the material effectively. As educators one of our tasks is to incorporate certain practices in our teaching encouraging students’ creativity and personal approach in learning. In this post I draw on the four basic learning styles recognised by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, and the ways one could design session tasks, appealing to all four types of learners.

**The Theory**

In their revised edition of their *The Manual of Learning Styles* (1992) Honey and Mumford distinguish four learning styles determined by the activities one undertakes when learning[[1]](#endnote-1). Although a certain learning style is not definitive for a person, it tends to become increasingly pronounced throughout the learning process or one’s chosen career. Honey and Mumford distinguish four main profiles: the Activist, the Theorist, the Reflector and the Pragmatist. They go on to outline the circumstances for each style, which allow them to learn most effectively.

The description of the Activist emphasises the importance of practical involvement in the topic about which they are learning. Activists benefit mostly from group discussions and projects, and teamwork situations where they can brainstorm ideas. Alternatively, when forced to analyse a case study according to a certain theory or follow precise instructions, the Activists would feel restricted and would not benefit from this learning situation.

Unlike the Activist, there are two learning styles, prioritising reflection and the research of theoretical backgrounds. These are the Reflector and the Theorist, mostly demonstrated by students who prefer individual study. Reflectors prioritise research, analysis and passive reflection. Similarly, Theorists are likely to carry out the necessary research to understand a case study but they will try and fit it into an already existing model or classification. Theorists are likely to create clear structures or case studies for the newly-acquired knowledge or activity. While Reflectors learn the least from being forced to produce instant results, Theorists benefit the least from activities without theoretical grounding or explanation.

The final basic learning style Honey and Mumford describe is the Pragmatist, who needs to find a practical application for what they are learning. They need to exercise the new activity or knowledge, or even see it as a chance for a new job. However, when taught abstract theory or presented with obstacles to practice what they have learned, Pragmatist are likely to react against the outline of the session or even the content of the new material.

In their *Using Your Learning Styles*, Honey and Mumford insist that one can tailor teaching sessions and activities according to the students’ learning style[[2]](#endnote-2). However, in a contemporary educational environment student groups may include a combination of all four profiles. In order to engage all students a group session needs to comprise of a variety of activities, incorporating the strengths of each learning type without neglecting the other three.

**Designing the Session**

Since I know that the students in my seminar group might take different approaches to the weekly topic, I try and design more than one type of activity. I find that a short Q&A session at the start of the seminar gives the Reflector and Theorist a good structure for the rest of the tasks while providing the Pragmatist and Activist with enough background before other activities. Additionally, it is also a good way to start a conversation between students with different personalities. Similarly, a discussion is an opportunity for the Activist and the Pragmatist to generate some ideas in order to understand the theoretical idea presented to them or assess its practicality outside the classroom. Presenting a case study or an experiment also can be included depending on the subject matter. While a specific example may be appropriate for the Pragmatist and Activist to apply the theory in reality, for the Theorist and the Reflector it may be a further illustration of the theoretical idea.

While it is increasingly common for audio-visual materials and online resources to be included in seminars, their contribution to the learning process is still disputed. Audio-visual resources can be used to record or exhibit examples to support the theory of the topic being taught, and will appeal to the Pragmatist who grasps the practical application of the theory and even to the Theorist because such an example provides a model for the theory. This will also allow the Reflector to distance himself and analyse the topic in solitude without having to participate in group activities or presentations.

Finally, providing additional materials and lists of resources prior or after the session may be beneficial for the Theorist and the Reflector, who both would carry painstaking amounts of research in order to understand the theoretical background of the problem. However, this may also benefit the Activist and Pragmatist as it gives them basic points, which they can use in their revision.

1. See Honey, Peter and Alan Mumford *The Manual of Learning Styles*, (Peter Honey: Berkshire, 1982) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Honey, Peter and Alan Mumford *Using Your Learning Styles* (Peter Honey Publications: Berkshire, 1995), pp. 9-14 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)