

## Understanding learning styles

*“My boss explains what to do, or he shows me – that’s OK. I can understand – but if I have to read it, I’ve got no idea!”*



Different people learn in very different ways. Some people find it impossible to learn by just listening to someone talk, no matter how well they do it. Others take in very little from reading. These preferences apply to people from all walks of life, not just vocational students. In every class you will have a mixture of different types: some will have a preference for learning by doing, others for listening or watching. This means that it is best to present material for learning in different ways via visuals, speaking, print based materials and also to encourage active learning experiences. Many types of learners, particularly active learners, find discussion or activity in groups or pairs a very useful part of learning. They benefit much more from involvement with others than from self-paced learning (reading modules) or from instructor led learning (listening to a speaker).

### What’s your learning preference?

There is much literature about learning styles looked at from different perspectives, for example, strengths in either left or right brain; or active, reflective, theoretical and pragmatist learners. There are also many instruments designed for people to self assess their own learning style or preference. A simple search of the web will locate a huge variety. However, one basic categorization of learner preferences that is useful to keep in mind when planning teaching and learning involves preferences for seeing, hearing or doing. These are usually called visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learning preferences.

Asking simple questions can begin to tune people in to their own preferences compared to others. For example:

- Can you focus if a speaker is talking but not using any visuals?
- Do you find you need to take notes or do something with your hands when you concentrate?
- Do you remember faces rather than names?
- When you get some new electronic equipment such as a mobile phone or a CD player is your first instinct to:
  - a) grab the instruction book and start reading
  - b) fiddle with it until you get it working
  - c) ask someone to show you how it works
  - d) ask someone to explain to you how it works?

*Seeing*

*Hearing*

*Doing*

*Different people learn in different ways*

Discussions around these questions usually indicate clearly that many people are very visual or kinaesthetic learners. This is a really important fact for VET teachers to keep in mind, since it means that many learners do not really take in information effectively when listening to someone talk.

## Learning styles



### Visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning preferences

#### Overview and learning tips

The following section provides a brief overview of the three learning preferences and accompanying strategies that can be helpful for learners once they have identified their own. These strategies can be used by teachers:

- a) as a consideration in planning lessons
- b) as a learning to learn strategy to assist students gain maximum benefit from their current and future courses.

#### Visual Learners

Visual learners attend to information most effectively when they see something, for example, pictures, diagrams, films and videos or demonstrations. For example these types of learners often forget names but remember faces, like to talk to people face to face, spell by visualizing the words and use phrases such as ‘see what I mean’ or ‘how does this look to you’.

#### *Visual learners*

- *diagrams*
- *pictures*
- *graphs*
- *maps*

#### Teaching tips for visual learners

- Use diagrams, pictures, flow charts, maps and the like to support text or teacher presentations
- Include stories in your teaching as they involve mental pictures and images that visual learners can identify with
- Model strategies to ‘deconstruct’ text or notes by using coloured highlighters and underlining to emphasize main or key points
- Provide students with session outlines that they can refer to during the session (eg on a corner of the whiteboard or as paper-based handouts).

#### *Auditory learners*

- *debating*
- *discussing*
- *re-telling*

#### Auditory learners

Auditory learners are more interested in learning through spoken words. They prefer to learn by listening to the teacher or other students and are attracted to and distracted by sounds. They tend to spell using phonetics and use phrases such as ‘how does it sound’ or ‘can you hear what I am saying?’

#### Teaching tips for auditory learners

- Involve students in debating and discussing (whole group, pairs, and small groups)
- Develop learning activities which involve ‘re telling’ for example summarising their reading, explaining a process or procedure that has been demonstrated or read about
- Encourage students to make audio tapes of classes
- Encourage students to read notes aloud when studying.

## Learning styles

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### *Kinaesthetic*

- *active*
- *problem solving*
- *constructing models*
- *drawing diagrams*

### **Kinaesthetic Learners**

Kinaesthetic learners engage with learning best by doing something active, using their hands or body somehow. They prefer to ‘learn by doing’. They need to apply the information and make it their own by constructing something or practising a technique or skill. Often they take notes or even draw pictures or doodle whilst listening as this helps them to concentrate. These learners remember best what they did, rather than what they listened to or observed. They tend to use phrases such as ‘How does it feel?’ or ‘I need to get more of a grasp of the subject’.

### **Teaching tips for kinaesthetic learners**

- Include active learning opportunities (see model activities)
- Provide opportunities to test their learning by applying it in new situations either through problem solving or practical or simulated activities, such as role plays
- Build in opportunities to transform the learning input in some way, for example, constructing models, drawing diagrams, explaining to others
- Encourage students to learn by teaching someone else a skill or technique.

### *VET students*

### *Visual*

### *“Hands on” learning styles*

### **Research into VET learners**

Recent research into VET students’ learning styles has found that VET students are more likely to prefer to observe rather than read or listen, tend to be more visual than verbal and favour active ‘hands on’ learning styles. The report suggests that VET students ‘generally like to learn through hands on experiences rather through listening or reading’. It therefore suggests that it is particularly important for VET teachers to include a variety of activities and modes of learning in each of their sessions.

The research also highlights the value students place on social interaction in their learning. In other words they like opportunities to interact on topic-focused tasks with other students during class. VET students expressed preference for learning settings that make use of social groupings like pairs and small groups as well as ‘guidance from their instructor in what they are to learn and how they might go about it’.<sup>1</sup>



### *Learning & social interaction*

### **Planning for diverse learning preferences: use a combination of strategies**

In any group of VET students there is bound to be more than one learning preference. So using the same teaching methods throughout a whole lesson may suit one style of learner, but not all. For example, if you are introducing new terminology make sure that you write the new words on the board to accommodate the visual learners or use diagrams and pictures or charts wherever possible to extend understandings of the spoken or written word. Sitting through talks and lectures is particularly hard for kinaesthetic learners, so break up or ‘chunk’ teacher talk with learner activities (see model activities ) or introduce teacher/ student anecdotal stories or discussions in groups or pairs. A session could start with a teacher led talk, which could then lead to an activity which might be done in small groups or pairs to facilitate active student ‘learning by doing’.

By using a combination of teaching strategies, as listed above, it is possible to cater for the range of learners in any one classroom. In the end everyone benefits when information is presented both visually, verbally and includes active learning experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith P, & Dalton, J. *Accommodating learning styles: relevance and good practice in VET*, Deakin University, NCVER 2005