

Learning style's importance in supervision

Learning style is not a measure of performance. Being familiar with learning styles helps students to deal better with their learning and gives a tool to clinical and academic teachers to individualize their teaching. This facilitates as well dialogue between learners and teachers and may bring a greater respect for differences. In administration, the concept of learning style help managers to build diversified and efficient work teams.

The main objective of the workshop presented to clinicians on March 30, 2001 at the University of Ottawa, was to master this concept in order to use it as a pedagogical tool. To attain this objective, it was necessary to get familiar with the experiential learning cycle from which the learning style concept emerges. As a second step, participants learned about the 4 learning styles, they identified their own style to finally reflect on the integration of this tool in their supervision activities.

In this article, we will briefly review the 4 learning styles while adding some concrete examples. For people who did not attend the workshop, it is possible to order the questionnaire LSQ to identify your preferred learning style (please refer to the bibliography).

Furthermore, additional information will be provided to facilitate experimentation with other styles. As seen in the workshop, no style is superior to another. Nevertheless, a style could be more appropriate to accomplish particular tasks and better fit with some situations. In brief, to improve our efficacy and flexibility, it may be useful to use other styles than the one we usually favor.

The 4 learning styles are: Activist (accommodator), Reflector (diverger), Theorist (assimilator) and Pragmatist (converger).

The activist, as indicated by his name, prefers action to meetings that last forever. Working alone, such as when sitting at the computer, does not fit well with him. He generates a lot of ideas without taking care if they are realistic or not. The perfect example would be the student who is anxious and in a hurry to get involved and to have his own caseload. He does not appreciate receiving precise instructions, which gives him little flexibility and room to maneuver.

The reflector, on the contrary, likes to thoroughly think about solutions. The typical student of this style will need to observe you first. He may even need some pressure to move to action. He will appreciate viewing videos or movies. He will seek and appreciate your feedback on the content of what he will say at the next team meeting. You can ask him to produce detailed and rigorous reports and analysis; he will do this task extremely well.

The theorist values objectivity. His strength is in his intellectual flexibility allowing him to explore different methods, interrelations, and/or concepts. This is the student your professional interventions. He likes to share his knowledge about recent research that he has read. He will take great interest in many ideas even if they do not have immediate applications.

The pragmatist likes to see concrete results. He shows interest in different techniques to improve performance correctly such as: how to manage your time properly, how to give a good impression... He wants to perform exercises, to practice and to receive feedback from an expert. He will favor the application of short-term plans with clear performance indicators. He will react strongly against political constraints and obstacles that will hinder project implementation. Students favoring this style will question you on perceived versus real impact of your actions. He needs some concrete recognition of his work or learning process. Detailed written instructions suit him perfectly.

As a clinical supervisor, it is important to be conscious of one's own and student's style. The student will indeed feel more at ease and less threatened in an environment adapted to his style. Honey & Mumford (1992) suggest that activities favoring strong styles and moving away from weaker styles permit the avoidance of exposing people to learning experiences in a format judged less helpful. These authors report that frustration will be reduced but they, nevertheless, underline that this strategy will not maximize opportunities or learning. That is why, they suggest instead to deliberately offer the learners, activities not congruent with learning style preferences. They feel this should be the favored strategy but only if the supervisor can offer explanations, encouragement and support to "learn how to learn".

Here are some examples of activities that you can suggest to your students (adapted from Honey & Mumford, 1992) to help them develop other styles.

Challenge the....

ACTIVISTS by asking him to:

- Play a more passive role or to engage in solitary work that will get him to slow down or stop to listen to explanations, to read, to write, to think, to observe;
- • Assimilate, analyze and interpret data;
- • Assess beforehand what they will learn, and to appraise afterwards what they have learned;
- • Repeat essentially the same activity over and over again, i.e. when practicing a particular technique;
- • Do a thorough job, i.e. attend to detail, tie up loose ends, dot the i's, and cross t's;
- • Establish a work structure, objectives and steps;
- • Prepare for a long time before moving to action.

REFLECTORS by getting him involved:

- Into the limelight i.e. to act as leader/chairperson, to role-play in front of on-lookers, to present to a group, to be in charge of a project;
- • In a team meeting by asking him, for example, to intervene once;
- • In situations which require action without planning
- • Into doing something without warning i.e. to produce instant reaction, to produce off-the-top-of-the-head ideas;
- • In situations where he is given insufficient data on which to base a conclusion;
- • In a project for which, in the interests of expediency, he has to make short cuts or need to focus on what is essential;
- • In short activities that are succeeding each other rapidly.

THEORIST by asking him to:

- Be pitch forked into doing something without a context or apparent purpose (for example, not telling him beforehand what type of patient he will meet);
- • Participate in situations emphasizing emotions and feelings;
- Get involved in unstructured activities where ambiguity and uncertainty are high (e.g.: case of differential diagnosis, difficult case discussion, etc.)

Addressing factors that impact learning

- • Decide or act without a basis in policy, principle or concept;
- • Face a hodgepodge of alternative/contradictory techniques/methods without exploring any in depth, i.e. as on a “once over lightly” course;
- • Find some practical implications;
- • Express his intuition and spontaneity.

PRAGMATIST by getting him involved in activities:

- Even if there is no pertinent, practical or immediate benefits (more long term projects);
- • Without practice or clear guidelines on how to do it
- • Where there are political, managerial or personal obstacles to implementation;
- • Where he has to consider more theory and general principles even if this will be perceived as distant from reality;
- • Where he needs to play a more passive role or to engage in solitary work that will get him to slow down or stop to listen to explanations, to read, to write, to think, to observe;
- • Where he has to consider several options (of treatment for example).

In conclusion:

Developing other styles may be revealed as a difficult experience for a trainee. He will need some guidance and help to overcome his nature style. This must be carried through with an eye to deeper learning and perceived as an opportunity for development. The student has to become conscious that experimenting will increase his flexibility and will allow him to develop new ways of doing things that could be more efficient. It is our hope, with these new tools, students will be better equipped to face the numerous and demanding requirements of the current work market.

If you are interested in learning more about learning style, here are some interesting readings:

Chevrier, J. et coll. (2000). Le style d'apprentissage, vol. XXVIII, printemps/été. Québec : ACELF.
(www.acef.ca/revue/) N.B. Pour accéder au formulaire LSQ-Fa, voir l'article 7

Honey, P. et Mumford, A. (1992). The Manual of Learning Styles, Berkshire: Peter Honey, Ardingly House, 88 p.
(ISBN: 0-95084447-0)

Adapted from original document:

Tremblay, M. et Paradis, J. L'importance du style d'apprentissage en supervision/Learning style's importance in supervision. Formation clinique express (bulletin de la formation clinique, École des sciences de la réadaptation, Université d'Ottawa). (2001) Septembre : 3-6.