

Reflections of Two Pragmatists

A Critique of Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles

Jim Caple and Paul Martin

The work of Peter Honey and Alan Mumford in the area of learning styles has been widely acclaimed and applied in recent years. Articles of more or less unqualified praise have appeared in a number of professional journals[1,2] and it seems fashionable for trainers to assert that they design their programmes with Honey and Mumford's learning styles in mind.

Unquestionably, Honey and Mumford's approach has been salutary in emphasizing that we all do learn in different ways and that uniform approaches to education and training, whether they be based on talk and chalk, experiential exercises or, indeed, distance learning, will not be suitable for every individual.

Having used the learning styles questionnaire with many training groups, however, and having discussed the application of the associated theory with them, we have become increasingly sceptical about the model's meaning and significance. This is not to deny its usefulness as a stimulus to debate, or as a focus for exploring learning preferences, we would simply question the coherence and validity of aspects of the model.

The Theory

In essence, Honey and Mumford argue that people learn most usefully from experience. However, they suggest that simply having experiences does not guarantee effective learning. The experience should be reviewed, conclusions drawn from the review, and action taken to build upon the conclusions drawn. This sequence is

usually diagrammatically represented as shown in Figure 1.

Effective learning from experience is only ensured by going through this cycle in its entirety. It seems to be the case, moreover, that some people concentrate on, or are better at, some stages of the cycle to the exclusion of others and, consequently, to the detriment of learning. Learning styles correlate with the cycle as shown in Figure 2.

Thus, people with high Reflector and low Activist scores may avoid experiences and learn vicariously through observation. "High" Pragmatists and "low" Theorists may only learn and be interested in things that work practically, in the here and now, without understanding why they work or if they would work in a different context.

By using a questionnaire, one's preferred learning style(s) can be identified and action plans

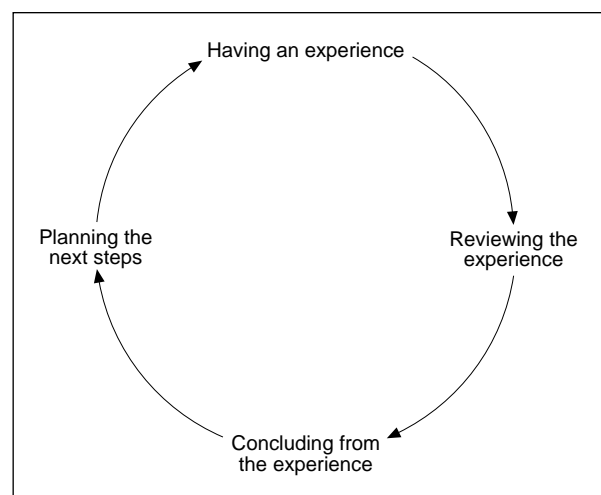


Figure 1.
Experiential Learning Sequence

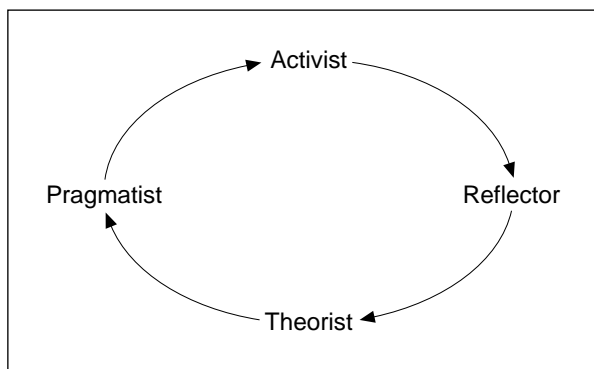


Figure 2.
The Cycle of Learning Styles

derived to strengthen weaknesses or ensure exposure to learning situations which will improve the chances of effective learning taking place.

Questions and Problems

The model has a superficial coherence and attraction but, in our view, some aspects of it require further examination and analysis. These are:

- What is meant precisely by “experience” in Honey and Mumford’s model?
- How accurate is the learning cycle in describing how people actually learn from experience?
- To what extent do situations, circumstances and abilities determine the appropriateness of learning from experience or, indeed, the adoption of learning styles?
- How realistic and meaningful are the learning-style preferences depicted by Honey and Mumford?
- How valid is the questionnaire used to identify learning preferences?

Learning from Experience

Fundamentally, Honey and Mumford and their adherents argue that learning from experience[3] is critical to effective learning. But, in our view, what they mean by experience and what constitutes experience, is not clear or is assumed. Kolb[4], for example (to whom Honey and Mumford acknowledge a considerable debt), is a little clearer on this point. He suggests that experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience ... the learner is directly in touch

with the reality being studied, rather than purely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something with it”. However, even this extended definition of experiential learning raises a number of questions:

- (1) Are some forms of experience more valuable or useful to learn from than others and, if so, which?
- (2) What precisely can we learn from experience?
- (3) Are skills, knowledge and changed behaviours/attitudes all equally acquirable experientially?
- (4) Can activities that would commonly be associated with Reflector or Theorist learning styles – e.g. observing a process or event or reading a stimulating book – be regarded as a significant experience, as defined by Kolb, or does the experience have to be concrete?

We believe that these questions are not semantic cavilling but are fundamental to any consideration of the virtues of learning from experience. After all, if we are not clear about what experience is, or what we can learn from it, why should we choose experience as a means of meeting our learning objectives?

The Learning Cycle

It may at this point be instructive to identify some common ways by which individuals may learn and contrast these with Honey and Mumford’s theory. Buckley and Caple[5] suggest that individuals may learn through five basic activities:

Trial and Error

The learner “searches” for acts or behaviours that lead to some desired outcome. The acts or behaviours, perceived as leading towards this desired outcome, are reinforced and, all things being equal, will be repeated on subsequent occasions.

Perceptual Organization

The learner perceives the total stimulus situation, cues conditions, rewards, etc., and then organizes it or “maps it out” into an understandable pattern that guides or directs his or her behaviour.

Behaviour Modelling

This involves the learner first observing how others have behaved, and have been rewarded or punished in particular situations, and then by attempting to imitate the correct or most appropriate performance or series of behaviours.

Mediation

The learner uses language in written or oral form as an intermediary mediational process to acquire knowledge or skill.

Reflection

This way of learning is akin to perceptual organization and may, in many cases, follow on with trial and error, behaviour modelling or mediation. It is, as Boot and Boxer[6] point out, “a process of thinking back on, reworking, searching for meanings in experience” or, as Boud, *et al.*[7] suggest, “an active process of explanation and discovery” which involves “thinking quietly, mulling over and making something from experience”.

These ways of learning are likely to be employed in differing combinations for a great deal of what we learn, including learning through experience.

In contrast, Peter Honey[8] has a more mechanistic view, observing that:

I have always accepted the notion that learning from experience is a four-stage process:

- (1) Having an experience.
- (2) Reviewing the experience.
- (3) Reaching conclusions from the experience.
- (4) Planning the next steps.

Again, we would question the sequence implied by this statement and the integrity of the learning cycle as commonly depicted. If experience is literally the starting-point, then this assumes that experience just happens to an individual when often, in reality, we choose to have experiences on the basis of anticipation and conceptualization, i.e. we may decide to expose ourselves to certain activities/circumstances which we *believe* may be beneficial to us in some way.

Even in those learning situations, such as sensitivity training, where trainees are directly in touch with “here and now” experience, there is a reliance upon the observations and reflections of facilitators, who are themselves steeped in particular theoretical approaches.

A more valid way of representing a learning cycle incorporating experience therefore might be as shown in Figure 3.

This cycle reflects more accurately, for instance, how scientific knowledge is actually acquired. For, as Chalmers[9] has argued, in this context, beginning an enquiry with data collection or experimentation undirected by theory would constitute a “naïve inductivist approach to the acquisition of knowledge”. By the same token, it is our contention that learning from experience is “theory” dependent.

Another quote from Kolb might be instructive at this point: “It is in this interplay between

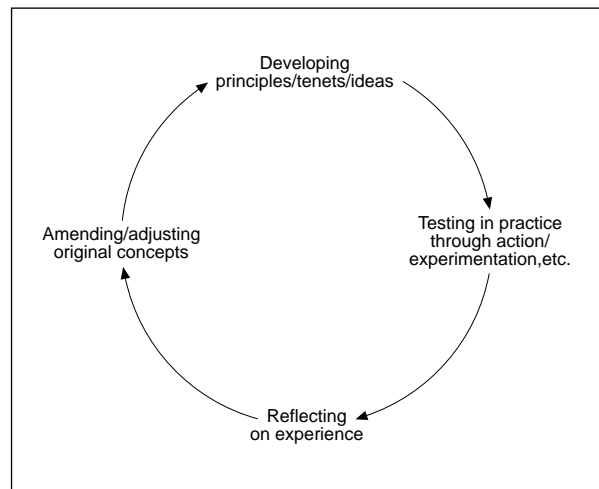


Figure 3.
A Learning Cycle Incorporating Experience

expectation and experience that learning occurs.” This clearly implies the important role played by reflection and theory in the expectation phase, thus contradicting the immutable cycle of experiential learning set out by Honey.

To counter some of the above objections, it is sometimes argued that learners could enter the cycle at any point and, provided that all four stages were gone through, effective learning would ensue.

If this is so, however, a number of further questions arise.

Why argue, as Honey does above, for the primacy of experience as the motor of learning? Is learning likely to be less or more effective if reflection or conceptualization is the starting-point? How is it possible, anyway, to start from a pragmatist mode, i.e. “Planning the next steps?”

It may also be true that, with some learning, it would be positively harmful to begin from an “Activist”, “having an experience” standpoint. We would hope, for instance, that the training of surgeons would preclude the application of an activist mode until after a very substantial amount of observation, review, theorizing and planning had preceded it! Again, this brings out the issue of what specifically are the objectives of experiential learning?

Situational Features/Influences and Abilities

Although learning situations may be flexible or diverse, in the sense that they may be approached through different learning styles, it may, or should, be the interpretation of the learning situation that dictates the form of “Action” that is experienced. In other words, some reflection/theorizing may need to be undertaken before the “Action” experience. Furthermore, it is possible

that the situations which learners imagine they are facing (including time constraints, perception of complexity, etc.) will influence the learning style they initially employ. Experiential learning, in this sense, results essentially from a transaction between the individual and the situation. An illustration of this form of transactional learning is set out in Figure 4.

The perception of our ability, or our actual inability, to do or learn things will also have an impact on our adherence to the learning cycle. Thus, if an individual is intellectually unable to grasp and/or apply a given concept or lacks, for example, the small motor capabilities required to attain certain manual skills, he or she will fail to learn, however purposefully the learning cycle is adhered to.

Indeed, a conscious application of the learning cycle by a trainee using a learning log (Honey and Mumford's tool for recording experiences) might be counterproductive, i.e. a misinterpretation of an experience may result in the wrong conclusions being drawn and flawed future actions being planned.

Learning Styles

Honey and Mumford attempt to describe the learning styles and activities commensurate with those who have marked preferences for any one stage of the cycle. With some imagination it is possible to visualize:

- *Extreme activists* as those who rush animatedly from experience to experience in the spirit of enquiry, trying things that are new and different.
- *Extreme reflectors* capable of dispassionate and insular analysis.
- *Extreme theorists* characterized by lofty conceptualizing and logical reasoning.

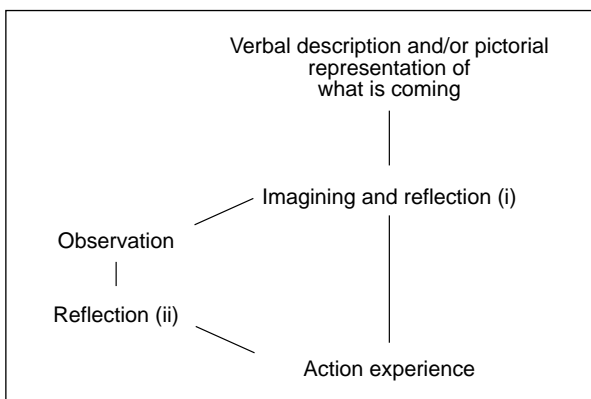


Figure 4.
Verbal Description and/or Pictorial Representation of What Is Coming

It is far less easy to visualize a Pragmatist in isolation. How plausible is it to depict an individual who learns simply by applying practical skills heedless of previous experiences, and who has no fundamental knowledge of the principles and theories underpinning the performance of a task? The Pragmatist, *in extremis*, would surely be no more than a robot. Suffice to say, therefore, that in our view Pragmatism can only be said to be the application of learning. It cannot constitute a learning style in itself.

This raises a quite fundamental question: what is meant by the term learning style? Is it, as Dixon[10] suggests, "... the unique way each individual gathers or processes information"? Or is it an attitude towards, or value placed on, a particular activity? Honey and Mumford do not seem to have made this distinction very clear. The Activist and Pragmatist styles come close to the latter and the Reflector or Theorist's styles to the former version of learning styles.

Learning Preference or Personality Profile?

It is apparent that Honey and Mumford's use of learning styles goes beyond identifying that A would gain most from a lecture while B would profit by reading a book. They clearly imply that consistent behavioural characteristics are attributable to certain learning styles over and above learning preferences. Thus, Activists are "flexible and open minded", "optimistic" and "unlikely to resist change". Reflectors in contrast, are "thoughtful", "thorough and methodical". Theorists are "rational and objective" and Pragmatists, "practical, down to earth and realistic"[11].

Is it reasonable, however, to draw general conclusions about quite specific learning preferences from what is essentially a wide-ranging personality questionnaire?

In what way can it be said, for example, that someone has a Theorist preference simply by agreeing that, "on balance I have strong views about what is right and wrong, good and bad"[11]. How would answers to this question reflect on an individual's ability to ask probing questions and to read something "heavy" and thought-provoking – a Theorist strength.

Elsewhere in the instrument, people who describe themselves as "insensitive to the feelings of others" apparently demonstrate some strength in terms of a "Pragmatist Style". This apparently makes them more able to acquire and apply practical skills like DIY, learning a foreign language or being able to type.

It does not seem to us, on the basis of these examples, that the relationship between personality and learning is obviously established.

It is also odd that none of the questions posed, deals in any way directly with an individual's experience of learning. Why not ask directly about activities from which individuals have learnt well or badly in the past? Why not simply ask whether lectures are preferred to role play?

Interpreting the results of the questionnaire can also be problematic. Not unusually, the authors have observed managerially and technically accomplished course participants achieving low preferences for all four learning styles. This is explicable only if one concludes that the participants did not understand the instrument or if one assumes that they are simply not good at learning from experience. Neither seems satisfactory, given the backgrounds of those commonly involved.

Conclusions

We began by arguing that Honey and Mumford's contribution in analysing learning styles has been productive in focusing educators' and trainers' attention on individual differences in learning situations. Beyond this, though, we feel that their theoretical approach is not altogether helpful and is at times confused and confusing. We also observe that their means of identifying individual styles may be flawed.

If measurements of personality are required, there are more valid and reliable instruments around (OPQ, 16PF, etc.). If we required to find out more about trainees' preferred ways of learning why not simply ask the trainees themselves to consider some key questions, such as:

- What is learning?
- What learning experiences have been beneficial to you? (i.e. when was learning valuable, enjoyable, interesting to you?)
- Do you tend to avoid certain ways or opportunities for learning?
- How can others best be of help to you in enabling you to enhance your learning and self-development?

By exploring these, and related, themes with facilitators it is likely that trainees will develop clarity in terms of what works for them. This approach may be seen to be sufficient and perhaps preferable to Honey and Mumford's approach which, for all its abstract interest, is quasi-scientific and unnecessarily complex.

References

1. Rae, L., "The Application of Learning Styles", *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 18 No. 2, April 1986.
2. Butler, J., "Learning More Effectively on a General Management Programme", *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 20 No. 4, August 1988, pp. 3-10.
3. Honey, P., "Learning from Experience", *Training Officer*, February 1992.
4. Kolb, D., *Experiential Learning*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1984.
5. Buckley, R. and Caple, J., *The Theory and Practice of Training*, Kogan Page, London, 1992.
6. Boot, R. and Boxer, P., "Reflective Learning", in Beck, J. and Cox, C. (Eds), *Advances in Management - Education*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1980.
7. Boud, D., Keogh, R. and Walker, D. (Eds), *Turning Experience into Learning*, Kogan Page, London, 1985.
8. Honey, P., "Learning Styles and Self-development", *Training & Development Journal*, January 1984.
9. Chalmers, A.F., *What Is this Thing Called Science?*, Open University, Milton Keynes, 1982.
10. Dixon, N., "Incorporating Learning Style into Training Design", *Training & Development Journal*, July 1982.
11. Honey, P. and Mumford, A., *The Manual of Learning Styles*, Honey, P., Maidenhead, Berkshire, 1982.

Jim Caple is an independent trainer and consultant and is the co-author, with Roger Buckley, of a number of books and articles concerned with training and personnel matters including, *One-to-one Training and Coaching Skills* (Kogan Page, 1991) and *The Theory and Practice of Training* (Kogan Page, 1992).

Paul Martin is a management trainer with private bankers, Coutts & Co. Previously he gained experience working in a number of UK organizations including the industrial, retail and financial sectors.
