

Evaluating an Existing Activity
Orientation to Company Y: Vision and Values

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Understanding and Working with Learning Styles

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Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere – Chinese proverb

Understanding how people learn is a key component of being an effective adult educator. One cannot create learning experiences without understanding how people learn. The concept of the learning cycle taught in the course “Understanding and Working with Learning Styles” is the framework I will be using to examine an existing course module from Company Ys’ New Hire Orientation course. I will be critically examining this practical course’s design. Does it follow good course design as related to the 4 different learning styles? Is there a need for a re-design or an additional learning element to the existing course?

Context: Defining the Learning Cycle

The learning cycle is a visual representation to explain how people learn. It examines the internal and external processes and behaviours that learners demonstrate when in the act of learning. Kolb provided the basis for the learning cycle. (Herasymowych, pg 27) Kolb examined learning and learning styles to create fundamental concepts towards our understanding and explaining human learning behaviour and towards helping others to learn (Chapman). Herasymowych and Senko expanded on Kolb’s ideas. Their definition of the Learning Cycle is visually represented as such:

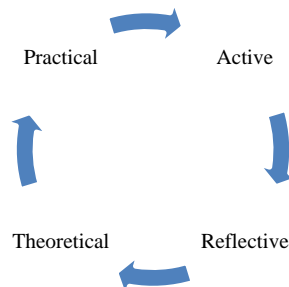


Figure 1: Learning Cycle

Active, Reflective, Theoretical and Practical are orientations within the learning cycle. Most people show a preference for 1 or more of these orientations towards learning. The structure of the learning cycle is key – it implies that one can start anywhere in the cycle and that all learners are capable of moving through the cycle. It also demonstrates that learning is a cyclical process – ever moving with no beginning and no ending – and implies that learning is an action. In fact, each of us must move through the entire cycle (or circle) to effectively learn.

The learning cycle has 2 distinct parts – Action and Reflection. These represent what the learner is actively doing while in the learning orientations – Acting (doing) or Reflecting (thinking). In the reflective half of the cycle, we find the orientations Reflective and Theoretical. In the Action half of the learning cycle we find the orientations of Practical and Active. Each of these orientations is described more specifically below:

Reflective Orientation: People with this preferred learning style are data collectors. These learners gather data on actions taken and then critically analyze the data. (Herasymowych, pg 27) They need information to think about – to either assimilate or reject the gathered information to allow them to formulate new thoughts and thus learn new concepts. The reflective learner often procrastinates, citing a need for more information, more data to think about. This type of learner is open to new ideas and concepts but is slow to put those new ideas to practical applications. In the classroom, these are the learners who are quiet, good listeners, and often taking notes and asking questions related to gathering more information. These types of learners do not work well under time limitations and may often need to be pushed to participate in activities such as role playing.

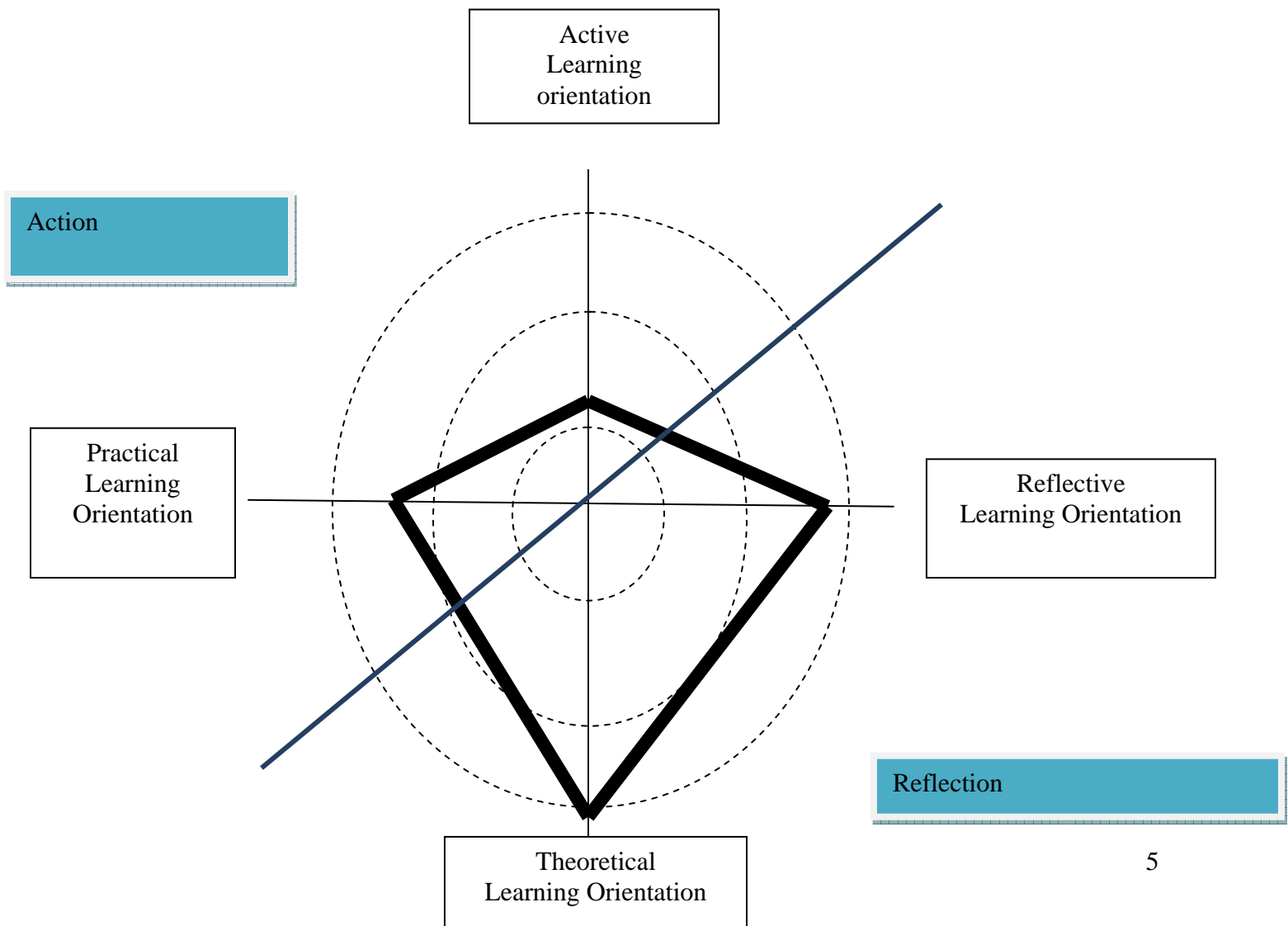
Theoretical Orientation: People with this preferred learning style prefer to spend their time thinking about the big picture and the meaning of new concepts presented. These learners ask questions to make sense of new concepts and ideas and relate those ideas to a larger context (Herasymowych, pg 33). Theoretical learners have difficulty being open to new ideas and often are only open to certain types of data. This orientation prefers lecture-style learning and respects the knowledge of experts (website reference). In the classroom, a facilitator will have to spend time establishing their credibility as a subject matter expert as this type of learner will challenge new ideas and requires a clear context and background to new concepts being taught.

Practical Orientation: People with this preferred learning style are action-orientated. This is indicated by their decision making abilities as well as their planning and list-making abilities. This learner style can also take action on those plans. Practical learners are usually to the point, they need to know what decision needs to be made and how we can take action once that decision is made or what actions need to be taken in order to make the decision (Herasymowych, pg 34). This type of learner struggles with irrelevant ideas and perspectives and can be seen as impatient at times (Herasymowych, pg 34). In the classroom, this is the learner who often “gets” new, practical concepts quickly and is often impatient with other learners’ questions or their inability to grasp a concept.

Active Orientation: The active learner simply learns by doing and through experimentation. Often seen as impulsive, learners with this preferred learning style are very verbal and will try anything at least once (Herasymowych, pg 35). There is a strong preference for doing rather than thinking. The active learner asks “why not” when others ask “why”. They are creative thinkers and can generate ideas that are new and innovative. A downfall of this learning style is

a difficulty in slowing down. In the classroom this is the person who loves role plays, large group interactions and games where the learner can be the centre of attention.

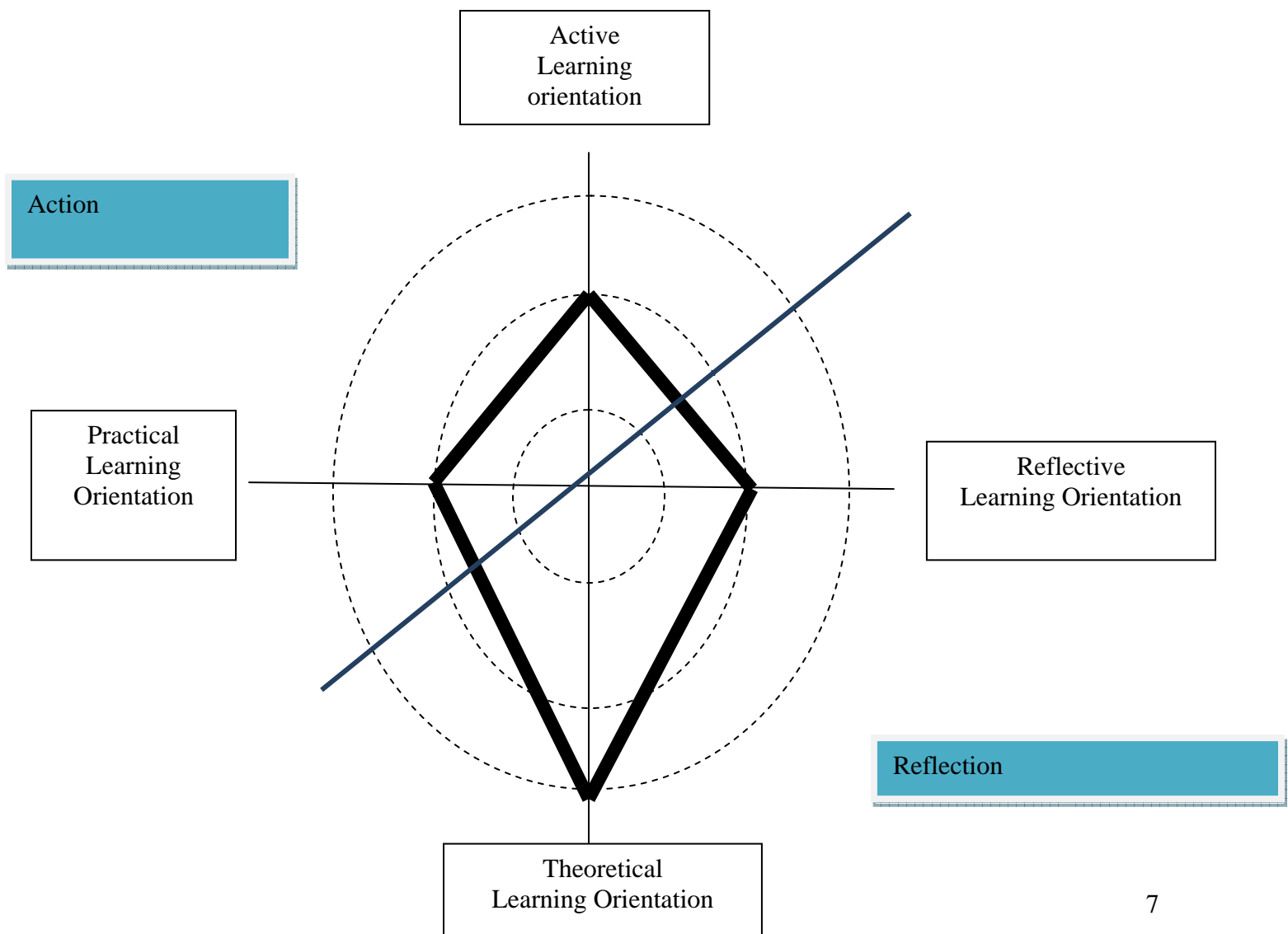
While taking this course I had the opportunity to examine my own learning style orientation preferences. This was an engaging journey to take. The initial analysis was the Peter Honey and Alan Mumford Learning styles questionnaire (LSQ) (Herasymowych, appendix). After carefully reflecting on the 80 statements and recalling that there are no right or wrong answers, I discovered that I am a triple dominate profile in the Practical, Reflective and Theoretical learning orientations. A learning style profile takes the form of a kite within the Learning Cycle. My learning style profile looks like:



My preferred learning orientations underwent 2 separate calibration exercises. The validations reveal that while I remain a triple dominate, I am considered strong in the practical orientation and very strong in the reflective and theoretical orientations. These combinations of learning preferences lie heavily on the reflective side of the learning cycle. Most often you will find me reading and gathering facts, examining case studies and observing others when engaging in learning. I like to think through things thoroughly before acting and I am a meticulous planner. In this course I took careful notes and spent time thinking about new concepts presented in a careful and logical way. I often ask myself “does this make sense?“, “can I use this concept as a framework to explain or understand past experiences?”, and “can I apply this concept in a practical way?”. I always strive to understand the whole picture and context when learning new concepts or ideas. In the workplace, when someone approaches me with a new way of doing things, I need to ask questions and carefully weigh all options before agreeing to action the new idea or change the way I typically do things.

Having a lower score of the Action learning orientation has a few disadvantages. Often I am seen as a “doubting Thomas” that never enjoys trying anything new. I need to be convinced to take an action before I actually take the action. I prefer not to be in the spotlight and am very quiet during meetings. I am however a good organizer and planner for projects. I often keep groups on task and have little time for distractions when there is a task at hand to be completed or a group decision to be made. I usually hesitate to take immediate action for fear of being wrong, ridiculed or failing. I often procrastinate when it comes to personal decision making. I often wait long enough until a problem resolves itself or until it is to the point a decision must be made and I am under stress.

My learning style under stress changes dramatically. My “kite” tends to get smaller with a stronger score on my most non-preferred style – Action. Under stress I push myself to complete tasks or make decisions I have been putting off. Not having time to think is a stressful situation for me. Once the stress is going and the decision made, I can spend time thinking and reflecting on the decision and plan for revisions to the actions that were taken. My stress learning preferences are a reflection of my impatience and impulsiveness under duress. I am also a little more balanced between the action and reflection halves of the learning cycle. But because this is me under stress, I do not enjoy acting/reacting in this manner. I will confess, however that I often learn more about myself under duress than at any other time.



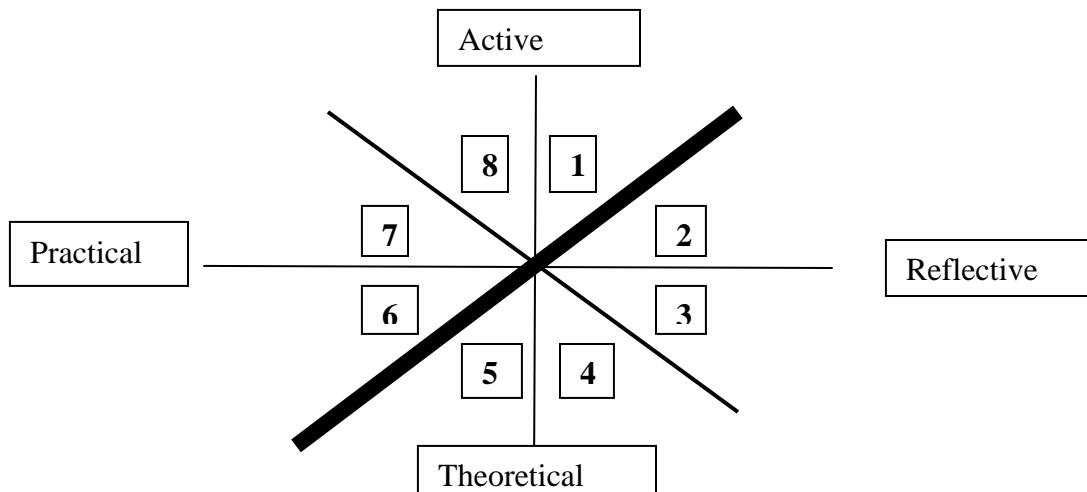
In conclusion, the learning cycle presents a framework for understanding how people learn. Learning is a never ending, cyclical process. Understanding my own learning preferences can help me to understand my own reactions and emotions when it comes to learning. I can also apply these concepts to my workplace. As a trainer and leader within the company I work for, I can examine and analyze training materials and other trainers in terms of their effectiveness within the context of the learning cycle.

Part II: Evaluate an existing activity

The lesson I am evaluating here is taken from Company Ys’ New Hire program. The first day of training is a module entitled “Orientation”. The intention of this module is to introduce newly hired customer care employees to Company Y’s history and philosophies as a company. The full day Orientation module includes topics such as: a brief history of Company Y, the companies and subsidiaries of Company Y, respect in the workplace, workplace safety and Company Y’s vision and values. I will examine the specific lesson plan for the introduction of Company Y’s visions and values for the purpose of this paper.

Context: Design System

Herasymowych and Senko have developed a design system model to integrate learning styles with course design (Herasymowych, pg 50)



The learning elements within the diagram labelled 1 through to 8 are defined as follows:

Reflective learning: 2) Analyze and 3) Integrate. Theoretical learning: 4) Examine and 5) Test.

Practical learning: 6) Apply and 7) Adapt. Active learning: 8) Use and 1) connect. Each of these elements gives us a framework for activities in the learning process. An example for the use of element 1: Connect in the classroom - one may ask the learner to share their experiences with a specific theme. In order to have an effectively designed lesson plan, one must include elements of both reflective and action activities.

The purpose of introducing Company Y's vision and values is to educate new employees on Company Y's culture, values and beliefs as a company. The desired outcome is to have employees to be able to relate these values to their own experiences and to understand these values as related to their expected workplace behaviours. The company's seven values are to be understood as a framework for expectation of behaviours in the workplace. At the end of this particular module, the learner will understand the vision statement and be able to define Company Y's 7 values. The lesson plan for this section is analyzed in the context of the design system as follows:

Activity Description	Time	Element	Orientation	Materials
Large group discussion: Has anyone worked for a company that had a vision statement? Do you remember it? What did it mean?	5 min	Element 1: Connect	Active learning orientation	Flip chart Flip chart pens
Lecture: Show Company Y's vision statement Say: Once reason we have a vision statement is to answer the question why? Why do we offer the products and services that we do?	5 min	Element 4: Examine	Theoretical learning orientation	Power point slide: Company Y's vision statement

Point out the enlarged “we”. Ask: what does this mean to you? Point out that that everything that what Company Y does for its customers is a group effort. We cannot sell services without having the technicians in the field, the IT people, payroll, HR, etc.				
Seven values small group activity: Say: Company Y subscribes to a specific set of values. Those values and their definitions can be found in your welcome booklets as well as on an internal website. In groups of 4-5 (depending on class size), take 1 or 2 of the values and define the value. Describe the specific actions in the workplace that demonstrate the value. For example: Integrity – arriving to work on time and being ready to assist customers as soon as a shift starts	30 min	Element 6: Apply and Element 4: Integrate	Active and theoretical learning orientations	Access to intranet Welcome booklets Flip charts Flip chart pens Each of the 7 values laminated to hand out
Conclusion: large group discussion Ask participants: how will understanding Company Y’s Values benefit you as an employee? Make the point that you are not expected to memorize this but you should know how to find this information when you need to apply it to your job.	5 min	Element 7: Adapt	Active learning orientation	Flip chart if needed to encourage discussion

This section of Company Y’s new hire program supports whole learning in that it is a design pattern that incorporates both reflective and active learning activities. This lesson plan spends more time in the reflective portion of the learning cycle. This is due to the goal of introducing a new concept to participants who are in day 1 of training and have little working knowledge of Company Y’s vision and values. This lesson starts by asking learners to reflect of their past experiences (element 1). This helps to bring context to the introductory lecture on the new concepts delivered by an expert (element 4: examine). The lesson then moves in to the action half of the learning cycle to apply the concepts just heard about to develop new knowledge (element 6: apply). This small group activity also includes a reflective element (3: integrate) as

the individuals within the smaller groups collaborate, share thought and ideas and finally present their conclusions to the larger group. The lesson plan is then concluded with a discussion on the reasons and benefits of practicing the actions behind the values taught (element 7: adapt).

This section of a larger lesson plan can be more effective if we add a stronger active element to the whole lesson. We can deepen the learning by adding a stronger active section and incorporating active learning throughout the total 2 week new hire program.

Activity Description	Time	Element	Orientation	Materials
Values nomination: At the end of each day, participants each nominate a fellow participant for demonstrating a value that day. Facilitator to review and then reward a nominated participant the next morning.	10 min at the end of each day	Element 8: Use	Active learning orientation	Nomination sheet

Conclusion:

Understanding the learning cycle and my own learning preferences has given me greater understanding of my own reactions and feelings when engaged in the learning process. An AHA(!) moment for me while taking this class was the concept that when I am uncomfortable doing an activity or thinking about a new concept, I am in the process of learning something new. Typically for me, being uncomfortable shuts down my learning process and closes my mind to any new ideas. If I am so uncomfortable I act without thinking, losing the opportunity to reflect on the situation and to integrate new concepts to have a real measurable change in behaviour. Now I am able to dive into action and embrace the embarrassment and fear that I experience when acting and doing and therefore creating new experiences for learning.

Having an appreciation on the advantages and limits of the 4 orientations within the learning cycle has allowed me to look at the materials I train with a different lens and more educated context. The concepts of the learning cycle and practical course design have some application in my workplace. In the context of what I do on a daily basis, I can use the understanding of my own learning styles as a way to develop my training staff. I am a firm believer that understanding your own actions and reactions is fundamental in understanding others. In my current role as the training supervisor for customer care, I know that I will be using the course design module and concepts studied in this course to create new 1 day or ½ day workshops on various soft skills. Having good design in my lesson plans mean that my training materials will be able to reach all preferred learning styles. Further, I can ensure that I take each learner through the reflective and active portions of the learning cycle to pull participants from “no-ing” to “know-ing”.

References

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