

This paper is written in response to a CACE workshop I attended entitled, ‘Understanding and Working with Learning Styles’, which is part of the Leadership Through Learning Program offered by Marilyn Herasymowych. The workshop utilizes Action Learning, which is a term coined by Reg Revans in the 1940s and defined as “an experience-based approach to developing people that uses work on meaningful problems as a way to learn” (12manage, website). Whether we deal with problems in our professional or personal lives, we need to learn highly effective ways of dealing with these challenges in the smartest and most efficient way possible. Action learning “offers an intelligent and creative way to act and learn at the same time...and can help to transform corporate culture, and to create learning organizations” (12manage, website).

Having spent the majority of my career as a civilian-member within the law enforcement field, I have been governed by its paramilitary environment, which is highly regimented, pragmatic, and reactive in nature. By the very nature of its function in our society, it is a complex and negative culture in which to work, and not one that could be described as a “learning organization”, which is defined by Peter Senge as an organization “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together” (Senge, website). In this paper, I will describe my learning style profile, examine my learning style, and utilize action learning principles to learn more about myself as a ‘learner’ and discover my own learning zone.

The Learning Cycle is a diagram that details four specific behaviours and each of their associated learning orientations, and is based on the work of David Kolb and his Experiential Learning Cycle. Each orientation leads to the next one, and in doing so creates a circular dynamic known as the Learning Spiral, which involves the movement between

reflection and action (Herasymowych). In the action part of the cycle, people spend their time acting more than thinking. In the reflection part of the cycle, people spend their time thinking rather than acting. The four learning orientations are Reflective (reflection-based), Theoretical (reflection-based), Practical (action-based), and Active (action-based).

According to Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, the authors of the “Revving Up Thinking and Learning Course Design Guide”, the reflective learning orientation requires an individual to “gather data on the action, and critically analyze the data”; the theoretical orientation involves “making sense out of the data by finding patterns and drawing conclusions”; the practical orientation involves making decisions “that produce the desired results, and plan the next steps”; and the active orientation involves taking “action on the plan” (p. 27). They “have found that people learn most deeply when they have a whole learning experience that causes them to experience all four orientations” (p. 39). Two key components in that learning process are making mistakes and allowing room for failure. However, “for people to make mistakes and fail, they need to cross over from their preferred state to their non-preferred state” (p. 7). The act of crossing over moves a person into the Learning Zone, which is also referred to as your ‘place of learning’. The authors believe that we need to create the conditions that allow people to feel psychologically safe so they can cross over from their preferred to their non-preferred zones.

In order to determine our learning style profile, class participants completed the Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ), which was developed by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford. The results were plotted on our unique “kite”, with the kite illustrating how the orientations work in different combinations, and show how an individual learns, makes decisions and solves problems (p. 36). By analyzing our kite, we begin to discover our learning style from the unique blend of characteristics of the four learning orientations. An examination of my kite reveals a triple-dominant learning style profile, with scores of 18 in Reflective, 15 in Theoretical, 16 in Practical, and 8 in Active. The numbers reflect a very

strong score in the Reflective learning orientation; a strong score in the Theoretical learning orientation; a strong score in the Practical learning orientation; and a moderate score in the Active learning orientation. Since the greater area is below the diagonal line, which delineates between Action and Reflection, this indicates that my learning style is reflection-based rather than action-based.

Reflective Orientation (score of 18): The very strong score would indicate that this is my preferred way to learn. I like to gather as much information as possible and am not an impulsive person at all. I take my time when reflecting on information, and I do not like to rush into making a decision. I usually prefer to ‘sleep on it’ before making a final decision. I need to digest the information and satisfy myself that my decision is sound and that I am not rushing into anything. The ‘up side’ is that I am open-minded, analytical, methodical, and careful. The ‘down side’ is that I am sometimes afraid to commit to one decision, fearing that I might not have all the facts or that it might be the wrong decision, and by doing so I drive even myself crazy! I feel stressed when I am under strict time lines and I often fear that I will not get the task done on time.

Theoretical Orientation (score of 15): The strong score would indicate that this orientation is also preferred, although not to the same degree as the Reflective orientation. I need to make sense of the information I take in, and I need to understand *why* something is as it is. I need to be able to ‘connect the dots’ when processing information. I am a deep thinker and I can most certainly *think* something to death. I often waffle between conflicting ideas for quite some time before finally making a decision.

Practical Orientation (score of 16): This orientation is also one of my preferred learning styles. I have been described as a very practical, outspoken, ‘no-nonsense’ type of individual. I feel most in control when I have a plan in mind and I am able to stick to the plan for the most part. I usually have a list or two in my purse or on my desk at all times. I

do not like wasting time, and I prefer to 'cut to the chase' in conversations at work. I am undoubtedly perceived by some co-workers as being too honest and direct.

Active Orientation (score of 8): This orientation is my non-preferred learning style, although I admire others who score high in this area. They seem to exude a confidence in themselves that everything will work out just fine, and they appear to be very personable and outgoing. This is an area where I definitely need to stretch myself in order to learn and grow. Some of the excuses I use are a fear of failure, a fear of making mistakes, self-doubt, lack of confidence, and taking life too seriously. The short cut in this orientation suggests that I am too cautious and often reluctant to take action when necessary. I am perhaps too much of a thinker, and I strive for perfection when, sometimes, the job simply needs to be done quickly. This is my 'place of learning', which is the place where I meet my resistance, or non-preferred learning style. This is where the deepest learning takes place (Herasymowych).

Another instrument used was the Language System Diagnostic Instrument (LSDI), which measures three types of 'memory', and indicates whether you interpret the world around you by means of visual, auditory or kinesthetic sensory systems, or a combination thereof. Visual learners, who comprise 65% of the population, learn the fastest, are able to see the big picture, but seem to miss the details. Auditory learners process information the fastest, but learn the second fastest. Kinesthetic learners learn the slowest and process information the slowest, but have a much deeper, enduring type of memory. The deepest learning occurs when all three styles are used (Herasymowych). My scores revealed an even split between auditory and kinesthetic (40 points each), and a score of 20 in the visual mode. The higher scores in the auditory and kinesthetic styles help explain why, after the second day of the workshop, and with my brain overloaded with new information, I arrived home and began a whirlwind of housecleaning that evening. It also helps explain why I purchased

a package of gum to chew in class, even though I seldom chew gum. The chewing action was a means of processing the wealth of information my brain was attempting to process.

Yet another instrument used was the Trainer Type Inventory (TTI), which helps individuals identify their preferred training style, to enable trainers to share their skills, and discover the skills which need to be strengthened to enable them to teach to *all* learning styles. The four *facilitating* orientations each stem from a particular learning orientation which connect to the Learning Cycle. They are the Listener facilitating orientation (arises from the Reflective learning orientation), Interpreter orientation (arises from the Theoretical learning orientation), Director orientation (arises from the Practical learning orientation), and Coach orientation (arises from the Active learning orientation). Listener facilitators best teach Active learners; Coach facilitators best teach Practical learners; Director facilitators best teach Practical learners; while the Interpreter facilitating orientation best teaches Theoretical learners, which is the only trainer style that fits the learner style it is associated to (Herasymowych). The scores I obtained indicate that, being a Listener facilitator, I would teach the Coach/Activist the best.

The Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI) was utilized to determine which of the four quadrants we use to process information. Quadrant A is referred to as the Rational Self (focuses on gathering facts); Quadrant B is referred to as the Safe-Keeping Self (focuses on consistency); Quadrant C is referred to as the Feeling Self (focuses on feelings); and Quadrant D is referred to as the Experimental Self (focuses on the big picture). My scores revealed that I am very strong in Quadrant C (the humanitarians), strong in Quadrant B (the organizers), moderate in Quadrant A (the thinkers), and low in Quadrant D (the innovators). The descriptors used appear to reflect my processing and communication styles. Again, a facilitator needs to work with all four quadrants to be most effective.

Armed with this wealth of information, I have been reading my Journal notes to reflect on the workshop and examine myself as a learner. I experienced a multitude of “a-ha”

moments in the workshop, and began to learn the difference between learning and knowledge the moment you asked us to write our name first with our preferred hand, and then with our non-preferred hand. The differences between the two signatures were startling – both in their physical appearance, and in the mechanics of performing the activity, and how the activity conjured up feelings of inadequacy when using our non-preferred hand. Signing our name with our preferred hand is an example of “knowledge”, which is a product of the learning process, and an unconscious activity, while signing with our non-preferred hand is an example of “learning”, which is a conscious activity. It is the movement from our preferred to our non-preferred into our Learning Zone that creates the greatest “opportunity for learning and for creating knowledge” (p. 4).

When we were attempting to juggle, I learned that it is difficult, and sometimes excruciating, to remain in your non-preferred zone for very long, but doing something in small amounts helps one develop the confidence to travel back to the non-preferred zone. It is normal to feel uncomfortable because you allow yourself to become open and vulnerable to a host of unpleasant thoughts and feelings. Learning to juggle was a huge lesson in humility and empathy for other learners. That was another “a-ha” moment.

The second day of the workshop was a very draining and confusing day for me. I experienced a low point in my learning because I became overloaded and confused by all the information and had difficulty trying to keep everything straight. I felt quite daft by the end of the day, especially when I could see that other people ‘got it’ and I clearly did not. I began to wonder what I was doing in the workshop, and I began to feel that I did not belong in the course. I was not smart enough, or I was too slow in processing the information. That was a very low point for me in the workshop, but it also provided me with a true understanding of the learning experience. It allowed me to experience the depths of the learning curve, to ‘wallow deeply’ in my feelings, and honour the difficulty that we all face at times (Herasymowych). As I mentioned earlier in this paper, I went home that night and started a

cleaning frenzy in my home. Little did I know at the time that that was my way of processing the volume of information. Another light bulb went on in my head when I discovered that I am a kinesthetic and auditory learner. Of course I cleaned my house!

I have learned so much about the process of learning, and I have come to understand that even when I do not like a particular activity, I just need to take a deep breath and jump in with both feet. In the grand scheme of life, it is not so scary, and I will indeed survive. This workshop has reinforced that I am here to learn, which means having to walk over coals at times. The greatest insight I have gained about myself is that I have courage, and I am proud of the steps I am taking in learning to become an expert learner, even when I want to give up sometimes and return to the safety of my home. I believe that that understanding will help me to walk with others on our learning journey. I loved the example you gave of the 'leap of faith' in the Indiana Jones movie, *The Last Crusade*. That was a powerful point in both the movie and your workshop! It speaks of acceptance, grace, wisdom, faith, and the courage to let go.

Keeping a journal provided many benefits, and I wish now that I had made even more entries. It is enlightening to read the entries at this time, and my journal will serve as a reminder of the learning journey I took with you. Keeping a journal at work could prove beneficial when undertaking a new project or facilitating a course, because it would allow you to record any feedback you receive, and evaluate the stumbling blocks or success of the project.

Writing this paper has, at times, felt like walking on glass; mainly because I have been out of school for so long and I do not have the opportunity in my present career to work in a training or development field. My learning curve for the past few months has been very steep, but very insightful. Writing this paper has been helpful in that it provided the means to re-read the information we covered, and hopefully solidify the concepts I have learned. I think the experience of taking the workshop was extremely beneficial because I truly learned

so much about the learning process, and there was much wisdom in your words. The concepts we learned were fascinating, and with further reflection I can hopefully apply some of the concepts in my workplace. I know that I have begun to change as a learner, and I have a greater awareness of the different learning styles and how they can influence and direct our behaviour. I have learned that as a facilitator you do not have to make the learning journey 'easy' – you should just make the journey more comfortable and psychologically safe for the learner to cross over to their learning zone (Herasymowych).

References

Marilyn Herasymowych & Henry Senko (2003). *Revving Up Thinking and Learning: Course Design Guide*, MHA Institute Inc.

12Manage Management Communities (2007). *Action Learning (Revans)*. Retrieved December 14, 2007 from http://www.12manage.com/methods_revans_action_learning.html

Senge, Peter (2007). *Peter Senge and the Learning Organization*. Retrieved December 14, 2007 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_organization.

Smith, M.K. (2001). "Peter Senge and the learning organization", *the encyclopedia of information education*. Retrieved December 14, 2007 from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>