Understanding and Working with Learning Styles
(Course Nr. 5963fa1)

Assignment 2: Evaluate an Existing Activity

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A. INTRODUCTION

As an adult educator, a critical part of my work is ensuring that my students are engaged in learning and that they reach their maximum learning potential. This is all the more so in light of the fact that the topic of my teaching is the law. Generally, when people choose to learn about the law, it is either because: their jobs require it; they are on the cusp of an important life-decision; or they have reached a point of personal crisis. It is, therefore, imperative that the participants acquire complete and correct knowledge, so that they may transfer what they have learned to the real world in which they live and work. In the course *Working With Learning Styles*, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko introduced the model of the "Learning Cycle", as described in their book, *Revving Up Thinking and Learning: Course Design Guide.*[1] The purpose of this model is to use individuals' learning styles to design courses that internally motivate participants to learn, encourage them to learn the content more deeply and broadly, and transfer that content to their everyday lives, all the while creating a pleasant, challenging and safe learning environment. In this paper, I will be examining one of the information sessions that I, as a public legal education lawyer with the Legal Resource of Alberta, offer to the public. In doing so, I will myself learn how to improve that particular lesson plan, and my teaching in general, in order to attain the goals espoused by the Learning Cycle.

B. THE LEARNING CYCLE

The Learning Cycle begins with the acknowledgment that each person has a unique learning style that determines how they learn best. Despite these differences in learning styles, however,

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[1]   Version C. (MHA Institute Inc.: Calgary, Alberta, 2003). Hereinafter referred to "Herasymowych and Senko". The Learning Cycle is originally based on David Kolb's "Experiential Learning Cycle", Reginald Revans' "Action Learning" and the works of Peter Honey, Alan Mumford, Peter Senge, Bernice McCarthy, Kristins Weinstein, John C. Redding and Ralph F. Catalanello. See Herasymowych and Senko, page 27.

there is one similarity. In order to best be able to learn, a learner must be in the "Learning Zone".

The Learning Zone is the area between comfort and discomfort. When people are comfortable doing something, they know what they are doing; it is automatic and natural. They are not learning to do it - they have already learned to do it. On the other hand, when they are not comfortable doing something, it feels incompetent, and unnatural. At this point, they have an opportunity to learn. They must still learn to do the activity, because they have not yet done so. In other words, in order for learning to occur, there has to be some discomfort.

However, too much discomfort is not conducive learning. If a person is either always or mostly uncomfortable, s/he cannot learn. Instead, s/he experiences something known as "learning anxiety" – a feeling of paralysis or unwillingness to learn something new because it appears too difficult or disruptive.[2] As a result, in order to maximize learning, learners should be put in a position of psychological safety. They must feel that it is safe to be uncomfortable (for a while), safe to experiment, and safe to fail – in short: safe enough to take a risk.[3]

The question that then arises, is, when are learners comfortable and uncomfortable? As noted, the Learning Cycle recognizes that each person has a unique learning style that determines how s/he learns best. Not everyone is comfortable, or uncomfortable, with the same things. Although each learning style is present to varying degrees in every individual, for each individual the area of most comfort is known as the "preferred" learning style and the area of lesser comfort is known as the "non-preferred" learning style.

According to Herasymowych and Senko, there are four such learning orientations (also called "styles"):[4] the reflective, the theoretical, the practical and the active. The first two are more thought and reflection based, the latter two are based more on action. Most people have two or three

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[2]   *Ibid,* page 8.
[3]   *Ibid,*pages 2 and 8.
[4]   This is based on the work of David Kolb and his *Experiential Learning Cycle*. *Ibid*, page 27.

preferred learning styles. This is not to say that they have *no* inclination to learn in their non-preferred learning syle(s), but only that the non-preferred styles are less intuitive and less comfortable for them. The four learning orientations can be summarized a follows.[5]

1. Active
   - in this state, people spend time acting, rather than thinking
   - they essentially ask the question: when?
   - it is an open orientation that is inventive, creative, and action – oriented; thinking takes place while acting
   - people with this learning style: have faith it will all work out; are verbal, fun, and the centre of attention; will try anything once; and have trouble taking the time to think.
   - people with this learning style can appear impatient and impulsive

2. Reflective
   - in this state, people spend time thinking, rather than acting
   - they essentially ask the question: what?
   - it is an open orientation that involves: gathering data on an action taken; critically analyzing the experience; and verifying the accuracy and validity of the data
   - people with this learning style: integrate diverse perspectives to form a broader perspective; engage in systems thinking; and think in terms of the 'big picture'
   - people with this learning style: are good listeners; are tolerant; and have difficulty bringing closure as they have a tendency to always want more information

3. Theoretical
   - in this state, people spend time thinking, rather than acting
   - they essentially ask the question: why?
   - it is a more closed orientation that involves: making sense out the data by finding patterns and drawing conclusions; examining and validating new concepts and expert knowledge; and considering alternatives
   - people with this learning style: tend to be innovative; look for connections; engage in systems and creative thinking
   - people with this learning style: are articulate and skeptical; are able to synthesize complex ideas into simple models; and often question statements made, so as to ensure they are based on a solid theoretical foundation

4. Practical
   - in this state, people spend time acting, rather than thinking
   - they essentially ask the question: how?
   - it is a more closed orientation that involves: decisions that produce the desired results; planning the next steps; and applying new concepts to develop knowledge
   - people with this learning style: are able to plan, take action and make decisions; modify and adapt new knowledge to real life situations; and engage is creative and

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5 *Ibid,* pages 32-35.

strategic thinking
- people with this learning style: want tactical and useful things; seek relevance; and are busy, confident and outspoken

When the concepts of the Learning Zone and the four learning orientations are combined, the result is the "Learning Spiral". The Learning Spiral posits that each learning style leads to the next one, and in doing so creates a circular dynamic, which brings about movement between reflection and action. This circular motion results in each learning cycle covering all learning styles. More specifically, it depicts a spiral of learning that covers: gathering data, analyzing the data, making sense of and analyzing the data, making plans and decisions as a result of that analysis, and taking further action in keeping what was learned from that analysis (and the cycle then begins again).

In other words, learners find themselves moving from preferred learning styles into non-preferred learning styles in a continuous, circular motion. This ensures that learners are temporarily uncomfortable (as they pass through their non-preferred learning styles), without really noticing that they are uncomfortable (as they soon find themselves back in a preferred learning style). In each cycle, learners stay only briefly in the learning zone of discomfort. As a result, little or no learning anxiety is created – the learner is willing, and free, to experiment, and more learning can be added the next time the spiral is completed (as the learner once again passes through the zone of discomfort).With practice, as the Learning Cycle is repeated over and over again, the activity in question becomes a known activity and will move to the preferred side. Once a learner can repeat his/her competence with the activity, it becomes knowledge. In this fashion, the learner creates knowledge, and the learning experience is maximized.

C. MY LEARNING SYTLE ("ORIENTATION")

Determining one's own learning style involves completing the Learning Styles

Questionnaire (LSQ), as developed by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford.[6] One's results are then

plotted on a graph, creating a kind of 'kite' that illustrates the exact strength of each learning style in

that individual. By analyzing this kite, one can begin to understand one's unique combination of

learning, decision-making and problem-solving. The LSQ also includes 3 validations that help to

ensure the accuracy of the first set or raw scores.

Although one does not need to know one's own learning style to design according to the

Learning Cycle, knowing it is helpful, as one's learning style dictates teaching style and therefore,

helps to better understand how one has historically put together lesson plans and what might be

missing in one's lesson plans. In so doing, one is better prepared to apply the model to the

instructional setting, thereby better ensuring that each lesson covers all learning styles.

An examination of my initial raw scores indicate a very strong dual preferred learning style

of reflective and theoretical (with scores of 18 and 13, respectively). My practical orientation was

somewhat weaker at 10, and my active orientation was the lowest, showing a score of 6. I did find

these results somewhat surprising, as I would have expected a higher practical orientation. These

expectations were then confirmed in the three validations. By the end of the process, my "kite"

showed a triple preferred learning style of reflective/theoretical/practical, with scores of: Active: 6;

Reflective: 18; Theoretical; 15; and Practical: 13.

D. SUMMARY OF LESSON TO BE ANALYZED

The course I am evaluating is the Legal Resource Centre's (LRC) *Introduction to the Law*

information session. This one of numerous such sessions that LRC offers to various audiences. It

can be delivered in about 1 hours' time, but is most often given in 1.5-2 hours (plus a ½-hour for the

exercise). It is very closely related to the underlying tenant of the organization, which is that it is the

right of every Canadian to know, and be able to obtain, information about the law.

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[6]   *Ibid*, starting at page 169.

The precise purpose of the session is to teach individuals how the law around them works, and to show just how much this structure of law can, and does, affect them. For individuals, it is hoped that the session will help them to identify their own legal needs (in the hope of a better ultimate outcome), and make the search for this information less intimidating. For some audiences, such as librarians and community service providers, it is hoped that the session will help participants to be able to identify the areas of law in which their patrons / clients may need help, thereby ensuring better, holistic service. As a result, the lesson teaches many related concepts, but it is quite short, concise, and it really only "touches the surface" of each of the concepts. It is, therefore, more of a focus on the framework of the law and how the concepts interact with, are related to, one another. No individual concept is explored in any great detail.

The main focus of the session is the structure of the Canadian legal system. Sub-concepts touched upon include: the governance of rule of law, jurisdictional issues; legislation and the legislation-making and enforcement process; and common law (court precedents) and its general making and enforcement process. For many, the concepts around written legislation will affirm knowledge already gained in high school. For many participants, there will, however, be a shift in thinking required for the concepts of: how the courts work; how the concept of "equity" works; the fallacy of "judge-made" law; and the fact that law is not always about "justice". Of particular surprise is the ensuing realization of just how complicated and intertwined the various components of the legal system actually are. Most people are accustomed to politicians and journalists reducing topics and events to very black-and-white sound-bites; the lesson will inject a great deal of gray, and that may disturb some people. Similarly, many people believe that the legal system is a coherent whole which will result in 'justice' being served. As a result, many participants are surprised by the over-arching themes of the presentation, which are: an emphasis on just how many differing – and at times conflicting --perspective there are (lawyers, judges, policy makers, governments; everyday

individuals), as well as just how far from perfect the system is.

E. LESSON PLAN TO BE ANALYZED

The exact lesson plan of the information session in question is as follows.

1. Introductory Comments
    (i) describe who the Legal Resource Centre is
    (ii) describe what we will be covering that day
    (iii)describe what we will *not* be doing (this is not legal advice, it is legal information only)

2. The Rule of Law
    (i) ask the general question – does anyone know what it is? What it means? Asked to think
         for themselves; write down; discuss briefly with person sitting next to them
    (ii) ask them to report conclusion (orally' volunteer basis)
    (iii)Repeat answers; add more if needed (some aspects of rule of law may not have been
         identified by the group)
    (iv)ask: how does this relate to your every day life? You may think – I'm not planning to be
         charged with a crime, so there is little relevance.
    (v) not so: give the example of trying to drive out of your driveway and off to work, school
         a friend's house. What side of car to sit on? Rules for driving? What side of the road to
         drive on? Who has right of way, you or the guy coming down the street? What happens
         at the first intersection? What happens when there is a crash – no need to call police,
         there is no police, because there are no laws to enforce. How to solve the current
         problem of the damaged cars? Etc.

3. Glossary
    (i) in law, terms can often have more than one meaning (often historical vs. modern). This is
         a clarification of terms to be used throughout the presentation including: indigenous
         law, civil law, common law, private law, public law, legislation, equity; in general "laws"
         vs. "law". Also covers ways in which law is categorized (helpful for research).
    (ii) this is done by first asking if anyone knows the definitions: participants can put up hand
         and offer ideas. Often someone does; or there is enough to start with – then I expand
         upon it.
    (iii)Participants are then encouraged to ask any questions that they may have at this time

4. Introduction of Flow Chart
    (i) flow chart maps out the concepts and terms we just defined, as well as what we are about
         to cover
    (ii) places us about half way down; show them were we will go to next; then come back to it
         after every completed section to show both where we just were and where we are going
         next.
    (iii)reason: to show links to greater whole, start introducing concept that it will all fit
         together
    (iv)also give as a handout

5. <u>Legislative law</u>
    (i) including regulations, by-laws, governmental interpretations
    (ii) who makes them (issue of "jurisdiction"; federal, provincial, municipal, international, *Charter*), how are they made (legislative process, including where to find records of this, such as Hansard); what kind of force do they have; how are they changed; how are they enforced
    (iii) includes slides of websites to provide context and reference material

6. <u>Common Law (non-written laws)</u>
    (i) use case study of: "snails & ginger beer" (*Donahue vs. Stevenson*). Story format.
    (ii) take story and show how it could make its way through courts (put on flip chart, if available); hierarchy; how decisions get made; concept of court precedence; how to then use these concepts to find current state of the law (importance of level of court and date)
    (iii) as part of this: take basic fact pattern and change one fact at a time: encourage participants to think about what affect this change would have in the court decision-making process
    (iv) so: who makes these precedents; how exactly are they made; what kind of force do they have; how are they changed; how are they enforced
    (v) refer back to flow chart

7. <u>Web Reference Information</u>
    (i) where to find info on these topics
    (ii) primary sites: government sites that show leg' court databases; databases such as *Quicklaw*(legal case database)
    (iii) secondary materials: textbooks, databases of articles; Public Legal Education Sites
    (iv) how to identify validity of site; applicable dates

8. <u>Exercise</u>
    (i) participants are divided into groups of 3 or 4. Each given a detailed fact scenario, with sub-questions that add more facts. For each question and sub-questions, they are asked to identify the types of law involved and where they might go for information on this
    (ii) facts are far-fetched and somewhat soap-opera-ish. This meant to inject humour and make participants comfortable. It is hoped that they will approach the fact scenario with an attitude of: "this is so crazy, how could anyone know what to do with this, so it is o.k. if I don't get it exactly right?
    (iii) participants are told to: (a) take some time to answer these questions alone (10 minutes); (b) discuss further as a group (another 10 minutes). Often they will learn and get ideas from each other: some people will have differing answers. Then the groups are to report class as a whole
    (iv) groups are told in advance that there is one really "tough" thing to find (a "trick") - not expected to find.. let's see how you do. Intention: make it o.k. not to get something
    (v) groups report. I add missing and additional information. Questions and answers. "Tricks" are revealed
    (vi) often leads to even more questions of :what if this fact were changed or added? I do it, but so do the participants (they often come up with even sillier, more far-fetched scenarios than I did). Often also leads to questions like: "but how does that make any

sense" / "how is that fair" kind of questions

F. ANALYIS IN TERMS OF THE LEARNING CYCLE

According to the Learning Cycle design system, as outlined in Herasymowych, and Senko, the current style of the session in question is, in general, that of an "interactive lecture".[7] The key question, however, is whether the activities in this interactive lecture touch upon all learning orientations. To answer this question the individual elements of the lesson plan must be examined in the context of the design system's the 'wheel' of activities that is to be used to both analyze existing, and create new, lesson plans. A copy of this wheel, as it appears on page 51 of Herasymowych, and Senko, is attached at Appendix A.

The kinds activities on the wheel, organized into "elements", can be summarized as follows:

I. Active Orientation
- **Element 1**: have an experience, tell a story, connect to a previous idea, complete a questionnaire (this is creating or selecting an experience)
- **Element 8**: apply to real life; home work

II. Reflexive Orientation
- **Element 2**: answer questions individually: can only be done by yourself (= more depth)
- **Element 3**: small group discussion of perspectives (= group critical thinking)

III. Theoretical Orientation
- **Element 4**:
  - interactive lecture
  - presenting concepts
  - case studies (pick one that is far enough away from most people for them to have to make a leap)
  - examining

- **Element 5:**
  - making meaning (can't really be designed formally – happens when you provoke thinking)
  - non-formal learning (emergent property that instructors hope for)
  - asking question, either in a large group or a small group
  - validating new concepts, drawing conclusions, considering alternatives

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[7]   *Ibid*, page 82

IV. Practical Orientation
- **Element 6:**
  - o low road transfer: application that is connected to classroom experience (participant can say: "I learned about myself, my work")
  - o apply new concepts to develop new knowledge

- **Element 7:**
  - o high road transfer: application that is connected to real life
  - o modify and adapt new knowledge to real-life situations

Using this design wheel, the *Introduction to the Law* lesson plan can be summarized as follows. In Appendix B, this same information is also shown directly on the activity wheel, with arrows to show the direction of movement between the various activities.

Lesson Activity	Element & Orientation	Analysis
(2i) ask the general question – does anyone know what it is? What it means? Told to think for themselves, discuss briefly with person sitting next to them	#1 connect: Active	creates an experience for the participants (thinking about the question asked of them / writing down their thoughts)
	#2 analyze: Reflective	participants must think and answer questions individually
	#5 test: Theoretical	questions are also for discussion in a small group
(2ii) ask participants to report conclusion (orally: volunteer basis)	#1 connect: Active	participants are required to talk aloud and report
	#4 examine: Theoretical	I lecture on additional facts that may have been missed
(2iv) driving scenario	#4 examine: Theoretical	it is a lecture and kind of case study that presents and expands new concepts
	#6 apply: Practical	low-road transfer: connecting to the classroom example
3. glossary	#4 lecture: Theoretical	presenting concepts
	#5 making meaning Theoretical	creates meaning for remainder of session
4. introduction of flow-chart	#1 connect: Active	connecting to a previous idea
	#5 making meaning Theoretical	makes meaning of past and future info; will continue to do so every time I refer back to it (puts into larger context)

5. legislative law	#4 lecture: Theoretical	presenting concepts
	#1 connect: Active	because I keep connecting it back to previous ideas (as well as the flowchart)
6. common law (non-written laws)	#4 lecture: Theoretical	lecture, presenting concepts; case study of *Donahue*
	#1 connect: Active	because I tell a story – far enough removed; and because I keep connecting it back to previous ideas (as well as the flowchart)
7. Web Reference Information	#4 lecture: Theoretical	lecture, presenting concepts
8. Exercise	#1 connect: Active	creates an experience for the participants
	#6 apply: Practical	participants apply new concepts to develop new knowledge; know that you have this new information, give the analysis a try. (low road transfer)
	#3 integrate Reflective	small group discussion of perspectives
	#7 Adapt Practical	high road transfer: when they themselves throw in new fact scenarios, that is adapting new knowledge to real-life situations. In many instances it shows that they have grasped the concepts and found weaknesses. Inconsistencies (which was the point: law not always clear, not always black and white, not always about justice)

As can be seen, the LRC course, *Introduction to the Law,* does indeed encompass all of the learning orientations. More specifically, the course flow tends to jump around the wheel quite a bit. I believe that, in general, this meets the needs of: (i) appealing to learners of all preferences, (ii) ensuring that all learners are forced into areas of discomfort (and, therefore, into the "learning zone") some of the time; and (iii) ensuring that no learner remains in discomfort for a very long

time. In that sense, I believe that the pattern that is created enhances whole thinking and whole learning.

That said, there is certainly room for improvement. For example: I think that I could provide more psychological safety by mentioning how the participants might feel confused and overwhelmed with the information at times. I could also indicate that this confusion is a good thing and need not be feared. In addition, I think that more Element 7 and Element 8 activities could be added. For example, when working with librarians or intermediaries, I could ask them to: (i) provide an example a questions asked by a patron/client; (ii) indicate how they answered at the time; and (iii) determine how they would answer now, after having attended the information session.

G. CONCLUSION

The course, Working with Learning Styles, as well as this associated assignment has provided me with great insight into both how complicated learning can be, and how difficult it can be to determine how effective one's teaching really is. I found the information particularly applicable, as it confirmed things which I seemed instinctively to know, but had no name for. Now that I do have a name for it, I understand it far better, and my teaching will improve vastly. Of particular interest to me will be to take these concepts and apply them to other information sessions that I know currently do not provide such a whole learning pattern. In addition, I believe that complete analysis will help to inject more interest in, and connection to, what can often be very dry topics, thereby increasing the participants' internal motivation to learn.

I look forward to taking what I have learned about learning orientations and creating a consistent and systematic approach, both for myself and other instructors, to design new and better information sessions that will then, by definition, result in better meeting the LRC's goal of

providing the most legal information to the most people that we can. Furthermore, my new understanding of the learning styles will better allow me to both work with colleagues, and respond more effectively to participants, who are of a different learning orientation than I am. These combined changes cannot help but result in my becoming a better adult educator.

<u>Bibliography</u>

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