UNDERSTANDING LEARNING STYLES THROUGH EXAMINATION OF CURRENT
PRACTICE

Final Assignment – Choice # 1

Brenda Geil
Submitted: October 16, 2008

CACE - Faculty of Extension
Course # 5963fa1
Understanding and Working with Learning Styles

Instructor: Marilyn Herasymowych

When I was preparing for this paper, I knew that I wanted to apply the knowledge learned in class and evaluate an existing program that I am currently managing (Assignment Choice # 2). Upon reflection and further reading, I was uncomfortable completing this assignment choice because I am still in the process of understanding my own learning style, teaching style, the concept of learning in relation to other learning and teaching styles, and learning concepts. I cannot ask others to learn something new if I have not learned something new myself (Edgar Schein, 1993). In addition, I prefer to synthesize my prior learning with that acquired in class before I make a practical application. According to Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, "Knowing something is a product of a process called learning" (Revving Up and Thinking and Learning Course Design Guide, 2003). I consider writing this paper a process of learning, not a product of knowledge. The difference between knowing (preferred) and learning (non-preferred) is that knowing is an unconscious activity whereby the facilitator or manager feels comfortable, competent, and in control (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). Learning is a conscious activity whereby the facilitator or manager feels uncomfortable, incompetent, and out of control (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). I am a program manager for non-credit continuing education programs. I am not a facilitator within the classroom. My anxiety in not completing Assignment Choice #2 is due to the fact that I do not define myself as a classroom facilitator. However, I do believe that a manager is a facilitator. Therefore, the purpose of this assignment is to examine my own practice as a learner and facilitator (Assignment Choice # 1). In part one I will define learning, describe the learning cycle, and each of the four learning styles. I will also examine my identified learning style and stress score by referencing the inventories completed in class. In part two of this assignment, using the *Training Type Inventory (TTI)*, I will describe my most successful training experience as a facilitator, what I liked most, and

what I found most difficult. I will further discuss my top five strengths, how these strengths

can become weaknesses, and how to avoid these strengths from becoming weaknesses.

Finally, as indicated by the *TTI*, I will identify one area of improvement that I need to work

on over the next six to eight months and one area that is easy to improve upon.

PART ONE: Learning, the Learning Cycle, and my identified Learning Style

      I define learning as a natural process that is neither black nor white but a continuum

of grey. It is making sense out of chaos, day-to-day experiences, and giving meaning to

whatever makes sense (Mackeracher, 2004; Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). Learning is

also highly individualized. All learners start the learning process from their position of

knowledge (worldview) and experiences. Learning is also relational. In order to make sense

and achieve a deep understanding (transformation) of acquired knowledge and experiences,

learners need to relate new information to existing knowledge and experiences and then

integrate (practice) this knowledge into their everyday lives. In other words, learning is

synonymous with constant change. The key to facilitating this change is creating an

environment of psychological safety for the learners. This means that while learning, it is

okay for the learners to make mistakes, feel anxious and uncomfortable. Herasymowych

and Senko (2003) describe psychological safety as "an acceptance for people to experience

negative feelings associated with experimenting and taking risks". One way to create

psychological safety is to plan a course that encompasses all learning styles. In relation to

my job, and as stated in my introduction, I am uncomfortable with completing Assignment

Choice # 2 because I am not a classroom facilitator but rather a program manager. However,

I believe that managers are facilitators. It is my job to create psychological safety whereby I

provide a physical environment that is comfortable for the facilitator and students. It is also

my job to ensure that the facilitator and students have the support necessary for learning to take place. It is up to the classroom facilitator to deliver a course that encompasses all learning styles, and establish that differences are not the exception but the norm. On a personal level, writing this paper is a process of learning and not a product of knowledge (this has more to do with my preferred learning style, which I will explain later). I am currently in the midst of completing the learning cycle. The learning cycle is a model used to explain the incremental and relational nature of the learning process. This cycle is a movement between action and reflection. I am in the midst of this cycle because I have spent too much time gathering information, reflecting, and synthesizing this information. By the very nature of this assignment, I am "forced" into action, thereby focusing my new knowledge into a practical exercise. A learner must also complete and repeat the cycle in order for transformation or change to occur. The learning cycle is a made up of the four learning orientations: (1) reflective, (2) theoretical, (3) practical, and (4) active. Each orientation works in relation to each other.

The reflective orientation consists of learners who are open to new ideas, enjoy researching and gathering data, and prefer time to critically analyze abstract concepts. They tend to be tolerant of others and very polite (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003; Honey & Mumford, 1995).

The theoretical orientation consists of learners who tend to understand a wide range of information, and have an ability to synthesize complex ideas into simple models. They tend to be more closed-minded than reflectors and dismiss anything not grounded in theory (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003; Honey & Mumford, 1995).

The practical orientation consists of learners who enjoy planning, making decisions, and taking action on their planning. They tend to assume leadership roles. They are not

interested in anything irrelevant to their immediate goals. They also tend to be closed-minded and have difficulty changing their mind once they have made a decision (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003; Honey & Mumford, 1995).

The active orientation consists of learners who enjoy learning from others. They are open to new ideas and will try anything once. They often take action quickly and have faith that everything will work out (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003; Honey & Mumford, 1995).

All learners have characteristics in each orientation to varying degrees. Learning styles are determined by the measurement of these characteristics. According to Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1995) and further expanded by Herasymowych & Senko (2003), my learning style is triple dominant. I scored highest in theoretical orientation, followed closely by the reflective orientation, and then the active orientation. I scored lowest on the practical orientation. I find it surprising how accurately this describes my preferred learning process. I enjoy gathering information and I am open to all ideas and theories (reflective). I spend too much time synthesizing and linking the relationships between ideas and theories (theoretical), and at times I stall or become indecisive about making conclusions (reflective in relation to theoretical). As stated earlier, writing this paper is a process of learning, not a product of knowledge, and this is mirrored in my learning style. In other words, my reflective and theoretical tendencies require that I review and critically analyze many theories and concepts about learning before I reiterate them or put them into practice, thus my decision not to complete assignment choice # 2. I also scored high in the active orientation. This means that I enjoy taking action quickly and have faith that this action will work out.

I scored modestly in the practical orientation. This surprised me the most. Practical orientation indicates that a learner is organized, enjoys planning and making decisions. My

job as a program manager is all about organizing, planning, and making decisions. Although this is not my preferred method of learning, I am capable at planning and making decisions because my job requires it. Interestingly, my learning style changes when I am under stress. I am still triple dominant, but my practical orientation increases and my active orientation substantially decreases. In fact, when I am under stress my score on the practical orientation and theoretical orientation is the same. This does not surprise me because, although I am often under stress at work, I have an excellent team who takes my planning to the next stage: the action stage. However, according to Herasymowych & Senko (2003), it is accurate to say that I become impatient with my team if too much time is spent on action orientation. My impatience is a weakness that I will explore in more detail in part two.

PART TWO: My Facilitation Style, Strengths, and Weaknesses

There are four facilitating orientations that directly correlate with the four learning styles. To assist my staff (learners) through the learning cycle I must balance my preferred facilitation style and consciously implement characteristics and behaviours from the other styles. These facilitating orientations are: (1) Interpreter, (2) Director, (3), Coach and (4) Listener. Upon completion of the *Training Type Inventory (TTI)*, it was identified that my first facilitation preference is the interpreter. I enjoy making connections, integrating theories and concepts, lectures, readings, as well as hearing other ideas. The downside to this style is that I prefer to keep things impersonal, and I avoid sharing personal feelings (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). This facilitation orientation directly correlates with my preferred learning style as a theoretical learner. My second facilitation style is director. I tend to be very structured, give black and white instructions or directions accompanied with examples, and prefer to concentrate on one thing at a time (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003).

This facilitation orientation works perfectly with my second highest learning style of reflective learning. Concentrating and making sense on one theory or concept at a time allows me to process the information and then integrate it with my prior knowledge. My third facilitation orientation is the coach orientation. Some characteristics associated with this preference are allowing time for self-evaluations, involving learners in discussions, using learners as a resource, and making experiences personally relevant (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). This facilitation style works directly in relation to the practical learning style, whose preferred activities include: fieldwork, homework, limited discussion, and applied lectures (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). As embarrassing as it is, my least preferred facilitation orientation is the listener. The characteristics of the listener are: making sure everyone is heard, reading non-verbal behaviours, and exposing one's emotions. This style works effectively with the active learning style. Some learning activities used are: structured exercises, discussions, and self directed learning. I find it interesting that my preferred facilitation styles of interpreting and directing is teacher-centered or in other words: "sage on the stage" (Fenwick, T., Sobon, S.A., Conrad D., & Hobin, B, 2006). Whereas my non-preferred styles as coach and listener is learner-centered or "guide on the side" (Fenwick, .et al, 2006). The "sage on the stage" style is the complete opposite of my *ideal* facilitation style. I would rather be considered as a "guide on the side". Furthermore, and according the *Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI)* that measures thinking styles, I use the neo cortex (associated with cognitive function) of my brain more than the limbic system (part of the brain responsible for emotions). This instrument is divided into four quadrants: Quadrant A thinkers reacts unemotionally to information; Quadrant B thinkers reacts to information by thinking about it; Quadrant C thinkers tend to act cautiously; and Quadrant D thinkers reacts spontaneously (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). Quadrant A and B (sage on the

stage) use the neo cortex and Quadrant C and D (guide on the side) use the limbic system. I scored very strong in Quadrant A, and strong in Quadrant B. I scored low and moderately low in Quadrant B and C respectively. I use my neo cortex because I feel psychologically safer controlling my emotions, rather than allowing my emotions to be prevalent as indicated by the limbic system. Acting as a "sage on the stage" I remain impersonal.

What I enjoy most about facilitating is learning new ideas and perspectives. I know what I know, and to be honest, it's not that much! Understanding other perspectives and theories only expands my constantly changing position of knowledge, or worldview. What I find most difficult about facilitating is being open and verbal about my emotions. This does not mean that I am not empathetic with my staff (learners). They can be as emotional as they want (although, I must admit, I find this annoying if too much emotion is displayed at the cost of productivity). I prefer to keep my professional life separate from my personal life.

Referencing the *TTI* (1986), my five facilitation strengths within my primary facilitation orientation as interpreter are: (1) Making connections (2) acknowledging others' interpretations as well as own; (3) using theory as foundation; (4) providing information based on objective data; and (5) encouraging learners to think independently.

These strengths can become weaknesses because I am negating the emotions and practical applications associated with learning and focusing only on theories and facts. For example, where I make a connection is not necessarily where others will make a connection. My tendency for abstract conceptualization may appeal to the activist, reflective, and theorist learner, but it will annoy the practical learner. The practical leaner may feel that they are "going around in circles and not getting anywhere fast" (Herasymowych & Senko, 2003). To avoid this becoming a weakness, I must state why a theory or concept is important and how it can be applied to everyday situations.

Acknowledging others' interpretations as well as my own, is a strength but also a weakness. I was reprimanded in a previous CACE course because I told a fellow learner that her opinion was "right" although it was in complete juxtaposition to my own view. The instructor took issue with my choice of the word "right" and negated my intent—which was to mean, "you're perspective is correct because it is your truth". Acknowledging others' interpretations as well as my own can become a weakness because it can lead to an inability to move beyond one's/my own perspective. Edgar Schein (1993) called this Anxiety 1— "the inability or unwillingness to learn something new because it appears too difficult or disruptive". Acknowledging others' perspectives is a weakness if you do not create a learning environment where the learner feels psychologically safe and is internally motivated to change his/her current perspective, and thus change his/her behaviour.

Using theory as foundation, and providing information based on objective data, can become a weakness if there is not a link to the subject matter or problem that is relevant to the learner. Theories and objective data appeal to the theoretical learner, but there must be a context or purpose to understanding the theories and data. Practical learners also require an immediate application of theories and data. Reflective learners enjoy theories and data but only if they have the time to think about it. Activists will disengage themselves from if it is delivered by listening to lectures or reading textbooks. They will enjoy learning about theories and data if it is discussed in groups without constraint or structure.

Encouraging learners to think independently can become a weakness if the facilitator does not actively participate and reward the learner for their efforts. My facilitation style is hands off until problems arise. While my staff appreciates my non-micro managing/facilitating style, I also know that at times they feel uncomfortable with certain responsibilities. As long as I remain cognizant of their discomfort I am able to help them.

The key is to know when they are feeling anxious and create an environment where they feel safe to move beyond their anxiety.

One area of improvement that I am currently working on, and that I hope is easy to fix, is to be emotionally available for my staff. We are currently experiencing a lot of change, and I know this has affected my staff. It is important that I remain constant for them. I have implemented weekly and informal staff meetings where everyone talks about work issues they have and what can be done to assist them. These meetings also give me the time to reward them for doing well, and to let them know what is happening in the college as a whole. This transparency of communication is effective. It shows that I respect and hear them.

One area of improvement that may take up to 6 to 8 months and it's associated with my short term improvement is: I want my behaviour and facilitation orientation to reflect the listener style. As I mentioned before, this is my *ideal* facilitation style. Some behaviour characteristics I need to work on are: encouraging learners to express personal needs freely, reading non-verbal behaviours, not worrying about the training, and appearing relaxed and unhurried.

CONCLUSION:

The process of writing this paper has engaged me as a learner. I am currently in the midst of completing the learning cycle. I am still moving between action and reflection. I know if I want transformation to occur, I will need to repeat this new information into practical activities. Prior to writing, I spent too much time gathering information, reflecting, and synthesizing. I felt uncomfortable and insecure that I was "forced" into action. However, I thoroughly enjoyed learning other perspectives and theories. Understanding these theories

and perspectives has expanded my constantly changing position of knowledge. This assignment has also made me aware that all learning styles are relevant. Furthermore, an effective manager or facilitator must create psychological safety for all learners and they must engage all learning styles and their learning characteristics.

I chose to complete assignment choice # 1 because it is more relevant to my job. I believe that managers are facilitators, and that what I learned in this course directly applies to my position. I am aware of my strengths, but more importantly, I am aware of my weaknesses. It is my intent to become a better listener (guide on the side) and be emotionally available to my staff.

References

Binnie, K. (2008). CACE 5711 – *Adult learning and development*. Edmonton: University of Alberta

Fenwick, T., Sobon, S.A., Conrad D., & Hobin, B. (2006). CACE 5950 - *Facilitating adult learning: linking learning relationships, and community*. Edmonton: University of Alberta.

Herasymowych, M., Senko, H. (2003). *Revving up thinking and learning course design guide.* Calgary: MHA Institute Inc.

Honey, P., Mumford, A. (1995). *Learning styles questionnaire.* Pennsylvania: Organization and Design Inc.

Honey, P., Mumford, A. (1995). *Capitalizing on your learning style.* Pennsylvania: Organization and Design Inc.

Mackeracher, D. (2004). *Making sense of adult learning* (2nd ed.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Schein, E. (1993). *How can organizations learn faster? The challenge of the green room.* Sloan Management Review, winter.

Wheeler, M., Marshall, J. (1986). *The training type inventory (TTI): identifying training style preferences.* San Diego: University Associates.