



Recognizing learning styles

“Hey, mailman! Can you tell me how to get to...?” Most of us can relate to being stopped while carrying our routes by someone who’s having trouble finding an address, doesn’t know how to get back to the highway or is in some other directional dilemma. For many of us, it happens quite frequently. So, being the helpful public servants that we are, we stop what we are doing and try our best to help. Some of us will try to assist them by scribbling out a rough map on a scrap of paper. Others will give oral directions: “Go down to the third light and turn left at the Chevron station...” We watch as they drive off and wonder if they understood our directions well enough to find what they were looking for.

Giving directions is not unlike teaching adults. Someone is seeking information that you have and you try to pass it on in a way that the person will understand and find useful. But have you ever thought that how you give directions is an indication of how you like to learn? Ask yourself this: When giving directions, are you a map drawer or do you prefer to state them? When telling them where to turn, do you use street names and numbers or do you describe landmarks? How about when you are the one asking for directions? Are you good at recalling stated directions or do you prefer looking at a map? Studies have shown that the way we prefer to get directions is usually the same way we prefer to give them.

Educational experts have differing ways of describing it, but all agree that people accept and retain information in different ways and that we each have our own preferred learning style. These tendencies can be broken down into a number of categories, but for our purposes, let’s focus on the three main learning styles, which are: visual, auditory and physical.

- **Visual learners** tend to learn best through observation and can more easily recall what they’ve seen or read than what they’ve heard. They enjoy reading and can follow written directions. They like to use written notes or drawings to help them recall information. Visual learners learn best through the use of charts, graphs,

diagrams, pictures and graphics, silent reading and computer-assisted learning. These folks can go somewhere once and find their way back with no problem.

- **Auditory learners** prefer to take information in orally. They like to listen for information and patterns and will consult with peers to discuss what they’ve heard to reinforce their learning. They can easily recall what they’ve heard and can follow oral directions. They repeat words aloud for memorization. Auditory learners generally learn best thorough lectures, discussion, dialog, question-and-answer sessions and debates. They enjoy hearing anecdotes and stories and like to listen to tapes, CDs and podcasts. Some can play music by ear; others can recall movie lines with ease.
- **Physical learners** are inclined to learn through experience and physical activity. They benefit from demonstration and learn from teaching others. They are active “hands-on” learners preferring to touch and manipulate objects rather than passively listening or reading. Physical learners are apt to learn best through physical activities such as “learning by doing” exercises, drawing or designing things, playing games or getting involved in skits or role plays. Walk them through something once and they’ve got it.

It is important to recognize that while we are not limited to learning in only one of these styles, most folks tend to have a dominant style—a preferred way to learn.

As union educators, it is important for us to recognize these differences because we want to reach as many of our learners as possible. So when preparing to conduct a class or hold a training session, we should think about how we are going to present the information. If we only lecture, before long the visual learners will get bored and the physical learners are going to be squirming in their seats. However, if our lecture is accompanied by a visual presentation, some handouts, a short video clip and we incorporate a group discussion and some hands-on exercises where the students get to practice what they’ve learned, we will be much more effective and will reach a larger audience. ☒