

talking point

Meeting elearning styles:

A creative challenge

by Trevor Bentley



How do we learn?

When we enter this world as newborn babies the vast majority of us are equipped with miraculous abilities to learn. In fact our very survival depends on these abilities. We use our five senses to gather and process information in enormous quantities and in a continuous unending stream. All that is needed for this learning system to be triggered is stimulation to excite interest and cause the child to make a 'choice of focus'. Once this happens our learning system takes over.

Within a short space of time the information presented to the young child starts to become focused by carers into what they think their child 'should' learn. The natural curiosity that powers the learning system starts to be curtailed and learning becomes 'forced' into a particular path.

As children grow older this 'forced' learning becomes more prevalent as skills and information become 'taught' and children are rewarded according to their ability to acquire the teaching. Little regard is paid to 'stimulating and exciting interest', though many excellent teachers know this is how children learn best.

Learning styles

As we go through this institutionalised training process we develop preferences for how we like to learn. Sometimes these are self-protective, sometimes they match our abilities, there are times when they provide the 'easy' way and times it is more fun, and moments when they do excite our interest. It is possible for these preferences to become a conditioned response to the way we learn. Research with adults carried out by David A Kolb and later developed by Honey and Mumford came up with four broad learning styles.

These are:

Active experimentation A tendency to focus on involvement in human situations in a personal way. A preference for expressing as opposed to thinking. Practical rather than theoretical.

Concrete experience A tendency to want to influence people and situations. Prefers practical application rather

“ **The important point is that try as they might elearning designers cannot personalise learning for learners. Learners have to do it for themselves by exercising choice in what and how they learn** ”

than reflective understanding. What works as opposed to what's right. Doing rather than observing. Likes to accomplish things and see results.

Reflective observation A tendency to focus on understanding by observation and description. Understanding what's going on is more important than its practical application.

Abstract conceptualisation Prefers to be logical. Likes to think things through and appreciate the theory. Analytical rather than intuitive. Enjoys systematic planning and values precision and discipline.

Applying learning styles

At some point in our learning we are likely to visit all of these styles. In fact Kolb argues that we have to do so to some extent in order to learn effectively. The important point is that try as they might elearning designers cannot personalize learning for learners. Learners have to do it for themselves by exercising choice in what and how they learn.

Elearning development

In designing effective elearning that provides choice for learners' learning designers need to think about three key aspects of learning.

1. The desired learning outcomes
2. The content/information
3. The learning process or resource

Learning outcomes can usefully be expressed using the acronym ASK. This stands for, attitudes, skills and knowledge. If we add to this experience, i.e. the application of ASK in a variety of situations, we reach expertise.

The content/information that needs to be learned should be easily accessible whenever learners decide they need it and definitely not when the learning designer 'thinks' they do.

The learning process or resource offered to the learner needs to be flexible and adaptable to learners needs, just as a good stand-up trainer would be. I find that this can be achieved by providing a variety of exciting learning approaches that provide intrigue, surprise, fun and adventure and that stimulate learners to engage with the learning.

Intrigue This or curiosity, attracts and generates interest so that learners 'engage' with what is happening. The energy created is high and curiosity leads to a desire to 'discover' what is going on.

Surprise When something is unexpected it generates interest and heightens attention to what is happening. Not knowing what is going to happen next keeps people attached to the learning process.

Fun This is about enjoyment and pleasure, about playfulness and excitement. Fun should be participative and engaging. When people are enjoying what is happening they stay with it.

Adventure Exploration and discovery are key elements of adventure. They are about searching out the unknown. There is a sense of anxiety and wonder about what might be encountered.

The elearning programme

In elearning the program that learners interact with can be said to have two parts:

- A learning resource
- An information resource



The learning resource is a highly creative invitation to learn that will provide learning maps, tracking and note taking facilities, games, adventures, experiments and practical problem solving exercises. Providing sufficient variety to appeal to all learning styles.

The information resource will enable learners to connect, when they want to and from wherever they are in the program, with a vast array of web-based information as well as 'program specific information'.

The exact nature of any one individual program design depends on the learning outcomes that the program addresses. This can vary from general knowledge about a topic to developing specific skills in operating technical equipment.

The creative challenge

I believe that the current focus of putting 'content' online is going to severely damage the potential for elearning. It is much more convenient and effective to get information from printed paper. If the point is to provide information online for learners to print it out and then learn from it so be it, but for heavens sake don't call it elearning.

The key to personalised learning is not masses of information but putting the learner in charge of their learning by providing variety and flexibility in the learning resource. This is the creative challenge.

Trevor Bentley works with boards of directors as a corporate spell cracker. As well as cracking spells Trevor is a learning designer who has designed learning programs for some of the worlds leading organisations. Online, offline, Internet or Intranets it's all the same focus for Trevor and that is creating exciting learning. He combines his spell cracking and learning design with a broad experience of organisational development a subject in which he has a PhD.