

The Importance of Learning Modalities and Styles

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Many trainers and educators have heard of learning modalities and styles. In some instances they have even taken the time to research the topics. Most simply accept that people have a preference for the manner in which they perceive and process information so that they are able to retain and later recall and use it. On the other hand, professional trainers and educators generally want to know the “why” behind strategies and tactics that they use in a learning environment. By researching how the brain gains, retains, recalls and uses information, you can enhance the quality of information that you share with your learners. Additionally, by self-assessing and learning about your own preferences and approaches to learning, and those of others, you will be able to design, develop and deliver content that really matters to learners.

In this article, you will briefly explore why learning modalities and styles are so important to trainers and learners alike.

Significance of Modalities

There are three primary means or modalities that people use to receive information, which the brain then processes – visual (seeing), auditory (hearing) and kinesthetic/tactile (doing). These are rooted in research on psychological type classifications that try to show how people perceive and process stimuli differently based on their environment and personal background, heritage, and other factors. The three modalities tie directly to the learning style preferences of those who attend your sessions and classes. Since knowledge is gained through the senses, it is important to know how to best provide stimuli to your learners. Some researchers believe that about 20% to 30% of learners are auditory, 40% are visual and the remaining 30% to 40% are some combination of all the senses.

Focus on All Modalities

Like many things in life, people resist change and tend to gravitate to situations and people who are similar to them. Trainers and educators sometimes do this related to their own modality preference. They build in an abundance of materials and strategies that they feel comfortable with and from which they would personally gain the most if they were a learner. This can create challenges for you as a trainer or educator in a learning environment.

Too avoid leaning too much toward your own learning preferences, it is a good idea to find a self-assessment tool that will help you determine your preferred modality, if you have never done so. This will increase your self-awareness. Once you have identified your own learning modality preference(s), you are more likely to be successful in designing and delivering program content. This is because by recognizing what you like, you can potentially avoid focusing on that preference when creating materials and strategies. For example, if you are primarily a visual learner, you may have a tendency

to use a lot of slides, videos, graphs, handouts and other visual training or job aids. The downside of this is that while auditory and kinesthetic/tactile learners can also benefit from visual products, their preferred modality is neglected. As a result, they might become bored or distracted. It is better to build in activities and approaches that periodically target a different modality preference in order to engage all learners at some point on a regular basis.

Relationship to Learning Styles

According to David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model, which is based on a four-stage learning or training cycle, there are four learning styles that fall into two categories.

Perceptions

- **Concrete Experience (CE).** During this phase learners absorb information through direct experience, by acting, feeling, and feeling. Their physical senses aid them in better understanding themselves and their world.
- **Abstract Conceptualization (AC).** By observing, analyzing and thinking about the stimuli they receive related to personal experiences, learners are able to plan ways to use their new information or ideas developed from what they experienced.

Processors

- **Active Experimentation (AE).** Many learners make sense of their experiences by "jumping right in" to apply new knowledge and skills. During this phase of the model, they actually begin to use and test their ideas in the real world in which they live and work.
- **Reflective Observation (RO).** By observing others involved in an experience and then organizing their new knowledge into some structure or organizational format, they can gather meaning.

Kolb's cycle can easily provide a basis for creating learning events that address the needs of all your learners while strengthening learning outcomes. By taking each of his styles into account when designing and delivering information, participants are more likely to be able to grasp, process and use what they experience.

Strategies for Enhanced Learning

By building variety into your learning events, you create a more stimulating and brain-friendly environment. To increase your success in working with people who prefer all learning modalities and styles, conduct research on how the brain best processes information. Make sure that you periodically engage people through as many senses as possible and that you create ways where they are actively engaged in the learning process as possible. Regularly incorporate a wide variety of stimulating and experiential elements into the classroom as possible and focus on experience, observation,

conceptualization, and experimentation. For example, use sound, motion, demonstrations, case studies, movement, music, role plays, visual aids, small group activities, and discussions.

Conclusion

Successful learning events do not occur by chance. Trainers and educators who research and address learning modalities and styles are more likely to create experiences in which learners quickly see the value, importance and application of what they learn. By setting up an environment in which learners are able to more effectively grasp concepts and skills in a way that is effective for them, they succeed and so do you.

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