

Learning styles - the key to personalised e-learning?

Peter Honey discusses the results of a survey he has conducted about e-learning, in particular the things that people like and dislike about e-learning.

I have been steeped in learning styles for so long that people I meet often express astonishment that I am still alive; 'So you're the Honey of Honey and Mumford?' Warming to the theme, they usually go on to tell me how many times they have completed the Learning Styles Questionnaire, and/or that they have strong Activist preferences and hate filling out questionnaires, and/or that their learning style preferences seem stubbornly resistant to modification. I even met someone once who was convinced that Honey Mumford was one person - and, with a name like that, a female to boot! Quite understandably, the truth was a terrible shock!

Anyway, with all the hype about e-learning, it was inevitable that sooner or later someone would pop the question 'Are there e-learning styles?' and I found myself saying 'Hmm, that's an interesting question - I wonder?' (When in doubt, I have an unfortunate tendency to say something vaguely encouraging like this. How much simpler life would be if I could steel myself to say something authoritative and totally dismissive like 'Don't be silly. The learning styles we have come to know and love apply to all types of learning. What's so special about e-learning?') But no, before I know it, tentative ponderings are taken as a definite commitment to do something.)

So it was that, in conjunction with my friends at the Campaign for Learning and KPMG, I set about devising an online questionnaire to investigate the existence or otherwise of e-learning styles. Some of you were amongst the 242 people kind enough to complete the questionnaire (thanks). For those of you who missed out (a narrow escape!) I should just explain that the questionnaire invited people to indicate their learning style preferences and to react to a long list of potential likes and dislikes about e-learning. The idea was to correlate learning preferences with the likes and dislikes and see what significant differences emerged.

So far so good. However, as I'm sure you will have discovered, conducting a survey is the easy bit. It creates a welcome flurry of activity and the comforting illusion that you are making purposeful progress towards a worthwhile objective. Making sense of the results is the taxing part - not least because you realise, too late, that you should have designed the survey differently or asked some additional questions which now, in retrospect, seem blindingly obvious!

Well, you must have guessed by now that the survey didn't reveal the fascinating differences I was hoping for - the likes and dislikes were remarkably similar regardless of learning style preferences. However, the survey did produce some worthwhile general findings about e-learning that, I believe, have some important implications. Here are the top six likes and dislikes.

I like e-learning because:

- It allows me to learn at my own pace
- I can choose when and for how long I learn
- I can timetable it when it suits me
- I can get on with it without waiting for anyone else
- It puts me in the driving seat/in control of my own learning

- I can fit it around other things I am doing.

I dislike e-learning because:

- I find waiting for access etc is irritating
- I find the banners, adverts etc distracting
- It fails to help with the acquisition of complex interpersonal skills
- Working through packaged programmes can be time consuming
- I have to motivate myself to do it
- The technology often lets me down.

The convenience of e-learning and the attractions of it being self-managed shine through loud and clear. We would have to drill down deeper to discover if people with different learning style preferences had the same things in mind when they signed up for these likes and dislikes. For example, it seems unlikely that learning 'at my own pace' and 'when and for how long' would be the same for, say, Activists and Reflectors. My hunch is that Activists would want the pace to be faster and the chunks of time to be shorter than Reflectors. I also think a deeper exploration of how people 'fit it around other things' would reveal some real differences. Activists might need more support and 'coercion' than, say, Theorists and Pragmatists who are likely to be more disciplined and better at planning it into their schedules.

My initial survey may have failed to reveal e-learning styles as such, but I am confident that it shows up some important differences about how people approach online learning. We all have a vested interest in knowing more about this; users in order to know how to improve their e-learning effectiveness and sustain their motivation, trainers in order to know how best to provide support, providers in order better to personalise their offerings and gear them to the needs of diverse learners. 'One size fits all' has never worked for clothes. Why should it for e-learning?

***Peter Honey,
February 2001***