

## Understanding Workshop Participants Using Learning Styles

The first task in designing a workshop is to understand your participants. This workshop design model assumes that any audience that you interact with will likely include individuals with different learning styles. By focusing on this characteristic, you can plan a workshop to meet the needs of all of your participants. The four learning styles used here were researched and described by David Kolb (1984) and have been applied to teaching by Bernice McCarthy (1980, 1990). The four learning styles are referred to as Imaginative, Analytic, Common Sense, and Dynamic (McCarthy, 1990; see Figure 2). These learning preferences can be easily measured using the Learning Styles Inventory (Kolb, 1985). People that display each of these learning styles have unique characteristics that workshop designers and facilitators should consider.

A. Imaginative Learners are oriented toward concrete experience and reflective observation. They have strengths in imaginative ability and awareness of meaning and values (Kolb, 1984). Imaginative learners learn best when they are given the opportunity to reflect on their own experience as a way of personally engaging in a learning process. It is important for these individuals to be able to construct personal meaning related to the current learning process. Learning environments that allow personal involvement and interpersonal interaction are ideal for imaginative learners (McCarthy, 1990).

B. Analytic Learners are oriented toward abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. They have strengths in inductive reasoning and creating theoretical models (Kolb, 1984). Analytic learners "devise theories by integrating their observations into what they know. They learn by thinking through ideas" (McCarthy, 1990). As a result of their reflective observation, they construct hypotheses that form the basis for learning. Analytic learners value expert knowledge and data. They often excel in traditional education settings because these settings provide the information and analysis that is attractive to analytic learners. In order to meet the needs of analytic learners, teachers or facilitators should inform learners with new factual information that allows reflection, analysis and conceptualization.

C. Common Sense Learners are oriented toward abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. They have strengths in problem solving, decision making and practical application (Kolb, 1984). Common Sense learners "integrate theory and practice, learning by testing theories and applying common sense" (McCarthy, 1990). They want to put new information to immediate practical use. Common Sense learners want to be involved in the process of hands-on learning that involves experimenting with new knowledge. Common Sense learners thrive in a learning environment that allows for direct involvement, practice and active experimentation.

D. Dynamic Learners are oriented toward concrete experience and active experimentation. They have strengths related to carrying out plans, taking action and getting involved with new experiences (Kolb, 1984). Dynamic learners "integrate experience and application, learning by trial and error" (McCarthy, 1990). Dynamic learners may be anxious to know how to apply any new information they learn in "real life." They will want to take knowledge and experience with them and learn on their own, outside of traditional learning environments. Dynamic learners need a learning environment that builds a bridge from learning to application and points to ways in which they can actively use the learning experience to further their own personal experience.

We believe that **an effective workshop designer and facilitator is aware of the learning preferences of all four learning styles quadrants**. When approaching a workshop as a designer it is important to assume that participants will have a variety of learning styles. In order to meet the primary learning needs of all of your participants, you should include activities that encourage all four types of learning. Likewise, you should use skills that are appropriate to all four types of learning. Activities related to these learning styles will be discussed in the next section on workshop design.

### References

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## Designing Workshops with Four Types of Learning Activities

Designing effective workshops involves choosing activities that meet the needs of your participants and can be appropriately adapted to your particular topic. We will be referring to these exercises and processes as "Adaptable Learning Activities." These activities promote four experiential learning processes that correspond to four learning styles quadrants. The four learning processes / activities are referred to as Reflecting on Experience, Assimilating and Conceptualizing, Experimenting and Processing, and Planning for Application.

It is our assumption that **an effective workshop design includes adaptable learning activities representing all four learning processes**. By including activities from all four quadrants, you ensure that the primary learning preferences of all of your participants are being met. Furthermore, you are encouraging all participants to learn in different ways that will complement and reinforce their preferred learning style.

### A. Reflecting on Experience

Reflecting on experience is used to capture the motivation, imagination, and energy of a workshop audience. These activities create the opportunity to reflect on past experience and apply it to the current learning situation. These activities start by affirming what participants already know. Reflecting activities illustrate how participants can benefit from a workshop and how the workshop can be enhanced by active participation. Reflecting activities correspond to the needs of imaginative learners and are essential to these learners. However, reflecting activities are also important for capturing the motivation of all learners. Reflecting activities are often used at the beginning of a workshop or when a new topic is introduced within a workshop.

### B. Assimilating and Conceptualizing

Assimilating and conceptualizing is used to provide workshop participants with new information and apply it to one's life. These activities add knowledge to help participants expand their awareness. Assimilating activities can provide outside information in the form of theories, data, and facts, or can inform the group about itself or inform individuals about themselves. For example, a workshop facilitator could report research results related to the workshop topic, can survey the workshop audience and discuss the group's attitudes toward the topic, or can have participants complete an instrument or questionnaire that informs individuals about their own attitudes. Assimilating activities correspond most closely to the needs of analytic learners but are also important for providing a knowledge-base for all participants.

### C. Experimenting and Practicing

Experimenting and practicing encourages participants to use new knowledge in a practical way. These activities provide an opportunity for participants to practice and involve themselves in new behaviors, skills, and knowledge. A workshop can provide a safe environment to try out new things in preparation for applying them outside in the "real world." Experimenting activities are often paired with assimilating activities so that new knowledge can be put to practical use. Experimenting activities correspond to the primary needs of common sense learners but provide a context for all learners to make the transition from abstract to active learning.

### D. Planning for Application

Planning for application provides a context for implementing and utilizing new learning outside the workshop context. Because most of the application will occur after the workshop ends, these activities may be seen as preparation for application rather than application itself. It is important to attend to the process of application so that workshop learning is not lost when participants leave the workshop. These activities are often used at the conclusion of a workshop or when the focus of the workshop is about to shift from one topic to another. Planning activities correspond most directly to the needs of dynamic learners but are critical to allow all learners to complete a learning cycle and "take the workshop with them."

## Reflecting on Experience Workshop Activities

### Definition

Reflecting on experience is used to capture the motivation, imagination, and energy of a workshop audience. These activities create the opportunity to reflect on past experience and apply it to the current learning situation. These activities start by affirming what participants already know. Reflecting activities illustrate how participants can benefit from a workshop and how the workshop can be enhanced by active participation. Reflecting activities correspond to the needs of imaginative learners and are essential to these learners. However, reflecting activities are also important for capturing the motivation of all learners. Reflecting activities are often used at the beginning of a workshop or when a new topic is introduced within a workshop.

### Examples

1. Icebreakers are brief interactive exercises to encourage and prepare for interpersonal learning during the workshop. These activities may or may not be related to the workshop topic. Example: Participants have the names of famous people taped on their backs so that others can read their identity but they cannot. They are asked to mingle with others and ask "yes or no" questions until they discover their own identity.
2. Motivation Grabbers are short topic-relevant activities that increase participants' motivation to think and learn about a new topic. Example: Having participants share in dyads the answers to several sentence stems related to the workshop topic. An example of a sentence stem related to a workshop on self-esteem might be: "I feel best about myself when..."
3. Stimulus Role-Plays are pre-planned role-plays structured by facilitators and presented to workshop participants that are meant to stimulate thinking about a topic and provide a relevant example to reflect upon. Example: At the beginning of a workshop about sexual orientation, facilitators role-play a discussion between a gay or lesbian person and a coworker who asks questions about their personal life assuming that they are heterosexual.
4. Gallery Exercises are used to prompt reflection on a workshop topic. Pictures related to the workshop theme are displayed and participants are asked to respond to the images. Example: In an alcohol awareness workshop, images of alcohol from the media and advertising are displayed in order to highlight how we are taught to think about alcohol. Participants are asked to write their responses on Post-It notes next to the pictures. After participants have responded, they are asked to circle the gallery again and read others' responses.
5. Brainstorming is a method of generating a variety of ideas related to a workshop topic. Responses are generated without evaluation in order to encourage original and creative ideas. Example: In a time management workshop, participants are asked to brainstorm a list of reasons why people procrastinate.
6. Guided Fantasies are used to assist participants in imagining scenarios related to the workshop topic. Participants are asked to relax and close their eyes, and the facilitator verbally encourages them to imagine different scenes and experiences. Example: In a career decision making workshop, participants are asked to imagine a day in the future. The facilitator guides participants through different parts of the day related to work and personal life. In processing the fantasy, participants are asked to reflect on what they imagined and how it might impact their current decision making.
7. Games are engaging activities used to activate thinking about the topic. Example: Cultural bingo asks participants to seek out others in the group who know culturally-relevant information about different groups in order to fill their bingo card.
8. Music can be used to encourage participants to relate to a topic on a more emotional level than might be accessed with content alone. Songs with lyrics related to the topic are helpful in setting a mood. Example: While doing art work in a family systems workshop, songs with family themes are played in the background.

## Assimilating and Conceptualizing Workshop Activities

### Definition

Assimilating and conceptualizing is used to provide workshop participants with new information and apply it to one's life. These activities add knowledge to help participants expand their awareness. Assimilating activities can provide outside information in the form of theories, data, and facts, or can inform the group about itself or inform individuals about themselves. For example, a workshop facilitator could report research results related to the workshop topic, can survey the workshop audience and discuss the group's attitudes toward the topic, or can have participants complete an instrument or questionnaire that informs individuals about their own attitudes. Assimilating activities correspond most closely to the needs of analytic learners but are also important for providing a knowledge-base for all participants.

### Examples

1. Lectures are used to provide factual content information about the workshop topic. Example: In a stress management workshop, the facilitator provides factual information about the physiological effects of anxiety.
2. Group Surveys are a way to provide participants with topic-relevant information about the group itself. Example: In a sexual assault prevention workshop, participants' attitudes are surveyed using a brief instrument, results are tallied and feedback is given to the audience highlighting gender differences in attitudes.
3. Questionnaires / Instruments allow participants to gain new knowledge about themselves. Example: In a staff development workshop, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is used to explore personality type and how it impacts the work setting.
4. Modeling Role-Plays are used to demonstrate effective behavior related to the workshop topic. Example: In an assertiveness workshop, facilitators perform a role-play demonstrating assertive behavior.
5. Case Studies are accounts of actual events related to workshop topics that are used to prompt exploration discussion. Example: In a fraternity leadership workshop, reports of incidents involving hazing and alcohol use are used to promote discussion.
6. Values Clarification exercises allow participants to explore their own values and experiences and how they differ from those of other participants in an involving and non-threatening way. Example: In a multicultural workshop, a series of diversity-related statements are read and participants are asked to move to one of four corners labeled: "Yes," "No," "Maybe," and "No Comment." An example of a diversity values statement might be: "I am equally comfortable spending time with people of my own race and people of other races."
7. Movement / Sorting exercises have people move to different areas of a room to increase awareness of individual differences and encourage reflection on previous experiences related to the workshop topic. Example: In a multicultural workshop, members of different oppressed groups are asked to move to another side of the room. This is used to illustrate the effect of multiple oppression.
8. Fishbowl Discussions are structured exercises in which a group of participants sit in a circle while another group silently observes outside the circle. These activities are used to help participants gain knowledge related to the workshop topic along with knowledge about the group itself. Fishbowl discussions allow participants in the observer role to gain "inside information" from another group that might not be expressed in a between-groups discussion. Example: In a workshop on sexual harassment, the female participants are asked to discuss their fears about being sexually harassed while male participants listen silently. Subsequently, male participants sit inside the circle and discuss their feelings about sexual harassment while the female participants listen silently.
9. Read-Arounds ask participants to read excerpts, scenarios, or other information related to the workshop topic. Example: In a workshop on racism, participants are asked to read a list of white privileges.
10. Handouts are concise, written summaries of material related to the workshop topic. Example: A summary of topic-relevant facts and statistics are presented during a workshop.
11. Videos are used to present new information in an interesting way. Example: In an interview skills workshop, examples of effective and ineffective interview behavior are presented in a video format.

## Experimenting and Practicing Workshop Activities

### Definition

Experimenting and practicing encourages participants to use new knowledge in a practical way. These activities provide an opportunity for participants to practice and involve themselves in new behaviors, skills, and knowledge. A workshop can provide a safe environment to try out new things in preparation for applying them outside in the "real world." Experimenting activities are often paired with assimilating activities so that new knowledge can be put to practical use. Experimenting activities correspond to the primary needs of common sense learners but provide a context for all learners to make the transition from abstract to active learning.

### Examples

1. Practice Role-Plays are used to practice new behavior related to the workshop topic. Example: In a social skills workshop, participants are encouraged to practice different ways of meeting new people.
2. Simulations are used to present realistic situations so that participants can practice using knowledge related to the workshop topic. Example: In a leadership workshop, participants are asked to play the roles of members of a selection committee and make decisions about fictitious applicants.
3. Worksheets require participants to use knowledge in a written format. Example: In a time management workshop, participants complete a weekly schedule in order to learn how to budget their time.
4. Structured Discussions provide an organized way for participants to share their ideas in an interactive manner. Example: Participants are asked a series of questions that progressively lead from information to practical application.
5. Art Work is used to allow workshop participants to creatively access and express their ideas and experiences related to a workshop topic. Example: In a family dynamics workshop, participants are asked to draw a picture of their family. They can represent their family either realistically or symbolically including relationships and dynamics with the use of different colors and shapes.
6. Scenarios are exemplary situations that provide specific examples with stimulus questions and are used to activate learning in structured discussions. Example: As a part of a sexual assault prevention workshop, a scenario of two college students on a date is presented. As different stages of the date are described, participants are asked stimulus questions related to communication, decision making, and consent.
7. Maps are graphic depictions of aspects of people's lives. Example: In a career decision making workshop, participants are asked to depict the different roles in their lives according to Super's career-life rainbow. This map is used to illustrate the multiple role demands that must be addressed in career and life-style planning.
8. Timelines are graphic depictions of significant life events across time. The events recorded on the timeline should be related to the workshop topic. Example: In a career decision making workshop, timelines are constructed to represent family events, educational events, personal accomplishments and disappointments, and career-oriented thoughts across participants' lives.
9. Psychodramas use a range of techniques in which participants represent aspects of themselves or dynamics present in their lives that are relevant to the workshop topic. This encourages emotional release and insight. Example: In a family dynamics workshop, participants choose people in the workshop to represent members from their family and arrange them in a way that represents their relationships with each other. The experience is processed focusing on family dynamics and emotional impact.
10. Check-In/Check-Out is used at the beginning, throughout, and especially at the end of workshops to allow participants to verbalize how they are experiencing information and processes that are a part of the workshop. Example: In a workshop for survivors of sexual assault, facilitators ask participants what they have learned about the recovery process from a panel speakers who are also rape survivors.

## Planning for Application Workshop Activities

### Definition

Planning for application provides a context for implementing and utilizing new learning outside the workshop context. Because most of the application will occur after the workshop ends, these activities may be seen as preparation for application rather than application itself. It is important to attend to the process of application so that workshop learning is not lost when participants leave the workshop. These activities are often used at the conclusion of a workshop or when the focus of the workshop is about to shift from one topic to another. Planning activities correspond most directly to the needs of dynamic learners but are critical to allow all learners to complete a learning cycle and "take the workshop with them."

### Examples

1. Personal Practice of Skills Learned in Role-Plays provides an opportunity for participants to incorporate knowledge from the workshop into their own personal behaviors. Most workshop will not allow for "real" practice to occur that is not role-playing. However, it is possible to plan for personal practice and anticipate future opportunities for practice.

Example: In a couples' communication workshop, spouses practice problem-solving with one another using skills learned in the workshop.

2. Action Plans offer participants the opportunity to contract with each other and the facilitators to take knowledge gained in the workshop and apply it to their outside lives. Example: In a time management workshop, participants make plans to complete a project such as a research paper that is actually due in one of their classes. They use techniques learned in the workshop and set small realistic goals recording these goals on a calendar provided in workshop handouts.

3. Goal Setting involves stating specific, measurable goals and dates when those goals are expected to be accomplished. This specificity increases the likelihood that application will occur. Example: In a job search workshop, participants will set goals for when they will write their resume and how many jobs they will apply for each week.

4. Brainstorming Solutions can be used as a way for the group to cooperate in identifying possible solutions to an individual or collective difficulty. Example: In a social skills workshop, participants are asked to brainstorm places where they can meet new people and apply the skills they have learned in the workshop.

5. Homework can be used to provide participants the opportunity to apply knowledge they have learned from the workshop after they leave. Example: After a relaxation workshop, participants are asked to use techniques they have learned when experiencing anxiety.

6. Speak-Outs give participants the opportunity to verbally express how they have been impacted by the workshop. Example: Participants talk about what they have learned and will take away from the workshop.