

Personality Theory and Learning Styles

If there were only one thing that has been learned about the various personality theories, it would be the premise that no two people are ever just alike. Much like our fingerprint or DNA, our personalities uniquely impact what we do and how we do it. In particular how we learn is an issue that should be near and dear to the heart of every parent, every student, and every instructor.

It is first important to note in this discussion there is NO right or wrong, good or bad, smart or dumb types. What is referred to here are preferences and learning styles...nothing more. Any personality theorist that makes a claim that one personality is smarter or more creative or more advanced over another is ill advised.

All students must be taught basic skills. How they are taught has a significant impact on the learner's ability to grasp and understand the concepts. This article briefly explores the function of perception and how it impacts learning styles. Exploring this one dichotomy demonstrates a stark but poignant glimpse into the differences in learning styles among students from grade school through adult learners. Perception is the function of becoming aware and is a cognitive process of collecting data or information used in how we come to *know*. There are two commonly understood perceptive processes known as sensing and intuition. This article focuses on the learning styles of these two divergent perceptive functions.

Learning Styles

Learners with preferences for exact, sequential, and detailed learning that is driven by the five senses are typically known as *sensors*. These process-oriented learners want basic skills explained in a clear, concise and sequential format. They want and expect instructors to say what they mean in literal, concrete and non-figurative terms. They enjoy learning that is hands on and can be learned through experiential exercises which yield results that can be seen, felt, tasted, or heard. Their preference is for a classroom that is filled with objects depicting the reality of what will be learned. Their coping abilities for mostly inferential, theoretical, and abstract data tend to be low.



The *sensing* learner will often be heard asking for specifics such as what does this mean, *exactly*? You may also hear their need to learn in the present by asking how this lesson is going to help them right now or why is this information useful to know today? *Sensing* students value tangible experiences, facts they can use immediately and may want to know the “right way” to get things done. These students often benefit immensely from repetitive practice, field trips that accentuate lessons learned in the classroom, acting out (role-play) lessons they are learning, small group projects, real life illustrations and activities that allow for application specific learning.

In contrast, those learners with preferences for visualizing possibilities, experimenting with the unknown and who enjoy abstract concepts are generally known as *intuitive*. These students want to be able to allow their imaginative and relational approach to perception be used in the classroom to help them learn. For the *intuitive* student, having a classroom replete with books, symbolisms, and opportunities to explore and discover knowledge is important for learning. They seem to thrive on experiences that cause their visual thought processes to move into the realm of possibilities and not just the mundane education often provided by instructors without knowledge of personality theory. These individuals have a low tolerance for detailed, step-by-step, sensory learning experiences.

The *intuitive* learner may read in “leaps” as they don’t have a need to read every word on a page and they are quick to see meanings and associations. They tend to read between the lines. They value and trust their insights and want and need to be able to find their own way in learning their lessons. These students enjoy complexities as they often lead to learning. The instructor who seeks to be successful with these students will help them see the big picture first and then allow them to fill in the gaps as they need in order to understand.

The *intuitive* student will benefit most from activities that allow them to experiment or perform creative problem solving. They tend to enjoy research projects that allow their need for open ended, divergent thinking skills to develop. These learners are often seen as “day-dreamers” but it should be understood that this is part of their learning process.

Failing to take a learner’s personality and learning styles into account during the learning process, may lead to a less than desirable learning experience for both the student and the instructor. As a result, skills may not be learned as effectively leading the learner to develop the notion that rather than be labeled as dumb, learning is not worth the trouble (Lawrence, 1993). Discipline problems, lack of interest in school, acting out and even dropping out can be the possible consequences of failing to add the component of personality theory to the classroom or learning experience.

The MBTI® As A Tool

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) is an important and useful instrument in assessing one’s natural learning style while making some fairly accurate evaluations of one’s favored approach to learning. When one’s learning style is understood, teaching methodologies that incorporate some adjustments to meet learning preferences of students can help ensure the learning experience is successful.

Teachers, professors and instructors in every discipline who are genuinely interested in successfully appealing to all types of students, will take individual preferences into consideration and design their curriculum to meet the learning needs of all their pupils. “People of any age, from



six to sixty, apply themselves with greater vigor to the task in hand when they are interested" (Lawrence, 1993). I would also add that the student who is engaged in their learning will be less distracted, more enthusiastic and participatory and is open to learning more as a result. Instructors that use personality theory as part of their curriculum design understand the value in allowing students to learn in a way that suits them best.

When teachers understand type differences, it can influence how they present lessons, how they construct tests, and how they design classroom rules. Teaching in a way that honors the different processing styles should result in higher achievement. Teachers who use knowledge of type to honor natural differences are able to balance their teaching lessons so that the learning preferences of all types can be respected. (Murphy, 1992, p. 79, 81).

It is important to note that personality preferences are **NOT** in and of themselves the entire story. Personality preferences give us a window into how and why preferences manifest themselves in communication styles, learning styles and relationships, to name a few. Personality theory also offers some insightful clues about how to successfully increase interpersonal skills for increased effectiveness.

For parents, taking the time to learn about their child's learning style can be of enormous value as they begin the necessary step of understanding how their student learns best. This will help when it comes to being involved in assisting the teacher to become more fully aware of the student's individual learning needs and in their role as support for their learners. For adult students, learning styles are important not only in the job experience but also in understanding one's own personality and how it can help or hinder advancement or opportunities to move ahead.

Learning is a lifelong journey and one in which we never arrive at the destination. The process of understanding our personal learning styles becomes extremely meaningful when presented in the context of personality theory. Meeting the needs of **all** students can be both challenging and rewarding. Begin your journey into self-exploration today and have a great learning experience right now!!

References

Murphy, E. (1992). *The developing child: Using Jungian type to understand children*. Palo Alto: Davies-Black Publishing

Lawrence, G. (1993). *People types and tiger stripes* (3rd ed.). Gainesville: Center for Application of Psychological Type.

About the author

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For more information on using the MBTI® and the Myers-Briggs Personality Type to aid in understanding learning and teaching styles, please call (937) 866-7511 or visit: www.step-up-to-success.org. You may also reach Linda at DrBurrs@step-up-to-success.org.

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