# Introduction to Learning Styles

Have you ever looked around the classroom during an activity and discovered that some participants are fully engaged, while others are confused or perhaps disinterested? People could be reacting differently because of their unique learning styles. Learning style is the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, absorb and retain new information (Dunn & Dunn, 1992; 1993). Understanding learning styles is important because it helps us to structure our training to ensure that everyone is learning.

There have been countless studies done over the last century about how people learn, and numerous learning style models developed. There is no definitive model and debate on learning styles continuous (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2008). Nevertheless, the outcomes from the studies are extremely valuable (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). From the studies we know that everyone learns in different ways and every person’s brain works differently to process and express information (Ryan, 2003). We also know that people are not limited to just one way of learning and when we use different ways of learning we increase the amount of information that participants can process (Grist, 2009). Applying a learning style model can help us to ensure we use a variety of activities to engage all learners.

The VAK (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) learning style model, sometimes known as VAKT (visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile) is one of the most widely used models of learning styles. It is described below.

# The VAK Learning Styles Model

The VAK learning styles model provides a good starting point to look at the different ways that people learn. The model describes 3 different ways of learning: (1) visual, (2) auditory and (3) kinesthetic (Coffield et al., 2004). People use all of these ways to learn and receive new information, but generally have one or two dominant ways of learning (Clark, 2011). This model can be used to establish simple criteria when designing and delivering lessons.



**Visual learners** are those who find it easiest to remember what they read or see. Some people prefer *reading/writing* visuals, while others prefer *spatial* visuals, such as charts, maps, and diagrams (Fleming & Mills, 1992).



You can do some of following things to integrate visual learning techniques into your training:

* Use visual aids, such as graphs, charts, diagrams, pictures, mind-maps, coloured pens and papers
* Use graphic organizers, such as colour coding, different fonts, chunking information, bullet points
* Write down instructions, keywords and participant responses on flipchart paper or boards
* Provide written assignments and written materials including manuals, reports and essays
* Provide white space in margins for participants to write notes

(UNITAR, 2014; VARK Learn Limited, 2014; Clark, 2011)

**Auditory learners** are generally good listeners and often learn better by listening or talking. You may find them moving their lips when they are reading, reading out loud, or talking to themselves (Clark, 2011; VARK Learn Limited, 2014). They learn best by listening to lectures, engaging in discussions and questioning (Fleming & Mills, 1992) (VARK Learn Limited, 2014).



To integrate auditory learning techniques into your training use:

* Verbal instructions, storytelling and lectures
* Opportunities to talk with other participants including small group discussions and Think-Pair-Share activities
* Verbal questions
* Rhymes, jingles, rap, poems, songs and audio recordings

(UNITAR, 2014; Clark, 2011)

**Kinesthetic learners** learn best when all of their senses are engaged –sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing – to connect them to reality. This connection can come through direct experience, examples, practice or simulations (Fleming & Mills, 1992). Essentially, the kinesthetic way of learning is a combination of visual and auditory along with touch, taste, smell and movement.



Kinesthetic and tactile learners are often combined under the category of kinesthetic. Tactile focuses on touch and manual manipulation. These two learning styles are often put together as both types prefer experiential learning. This is when new information is presented through experiences and demonstrations in which they can participate (Coffield et al., 2004; Fleming & Mills, 1992).

To integrate kinesthetic learning techniques into your training use:

* Activities that get participants to move their bodies, such as role plays, skits, field trips, group games, tableaux, simulations and dances
* Activities where participants use their hands, such as moving sticky notes, playing board games, doing experiments, building models, working with clay or play dough
* Activities where participants engage their sense of smell and touch
* Real-life examples and simulations with many opportunities for participants to practice

(UNITAR, 2014; VARK Learn Limited, 2014; Clark, 2011)

When we combine activities from the visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles we help participants to process information more effectively.

# Applying Learning Styles in Training

When delivering training on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), there are multiple opportunities to use a combination of visual, auditory and kinesthetic activities. Below is an example of how this can be done when teaching about handwashing. This activity has been broken down to illustrate which learning style it addresses.

1. **Kinesthetic:** Put glitter or chalk on your hands. As participants enter the room shake their hands to transfer glitter or chalk to their hands.
2. **Auditory:** Ask participants to discuss in pairs what the glitter on their hands could represent. Explain that it represents pathogens that can be transferred from hand-to-hand and person-to-person when we don’t wash our hands.
3. **Visual (spatial):** Provide participants with a demonstration of how to wash their hands effectively. Then review the steps by using a diagram that illustrates them.
4. **Kinesthetic:** Ask participants to practice washing their hands following the steps on the diagram.
5. **Auditory:** Do a Think-Pair-Share activity. Ask participants to individually think about the critical times when they should wash their hands. Then ask participants to discuss their thoughts in pairs. Share some of the ideas in the full group.
6. **Visual (reading/writing):** Write down the critical times for handwashing on flip chart paper, and ask participants to write them down in their notes.

When you are delivering training think about how you are engaging visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. Create a variety of activities throughout each lesson that will involve all of the VAK modalities. This will ensure that participants are better able to process, retain and apply the information that you provide.

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