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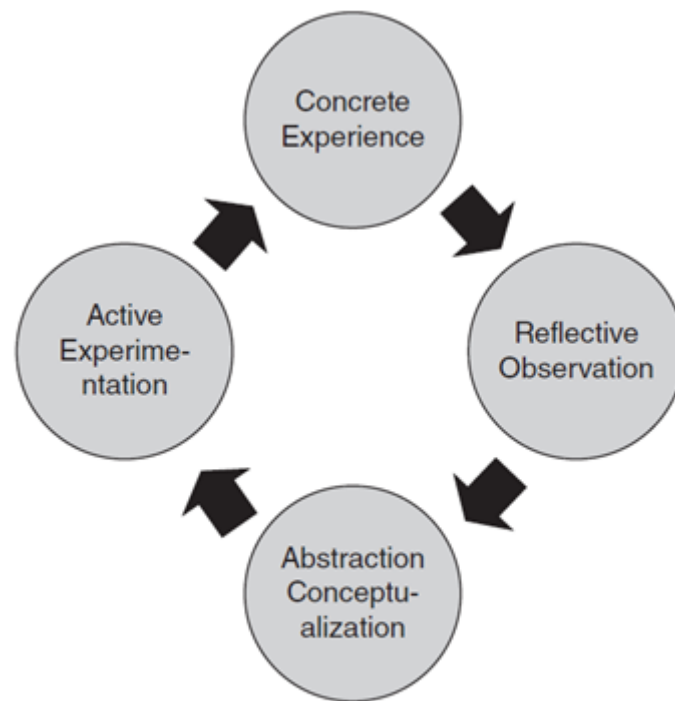
# Lesson Proper for Week 5

## Understanding Your Preferred Learning Style

Thinking about your preferred learning style and the associated cognitive habits that you bring to your internship will heighten your self-awareness and enhance your ability to learn more deeply from your internship experiences. Although there are many different theories and approaches to understanding learning styles, David Kolb's (1984) work on experiential learning is particularly useful and relevant to internships since a central concept of that theory is how human beings learn from experience. Kolb's learning style theory, extensively tested and supported by research over the past few decades, provides a useful perspective for understanding the individual differences that students bring to their internship experiences.

A key point in the theory is that there is no one "best" approach to learning. According to Kolb's theory, each of us routinely employs all of the learning styles to some degree while also having a particular style that we are most comfortable with as our "preferred" approach. Kolb suggests that the most effective learners are those who develop the ability to use *all* of the learning styles effectively. According to Kolb, four modes of learning are necessary to complete a four-step learning cycle which consists of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, as indicated in Figure 4.1. Each of these steps emphasizes a particular cognitive approach in the learning process.





**FIGURE 4.1**  
**Kolb's Learning Cycle**

Step 1 *Concrete Experience* involves intuitive learning drawn from the lived experience itself.

Step 2 *Reflective Observation* involves a close examination of the experience and a search for the meanings within it.

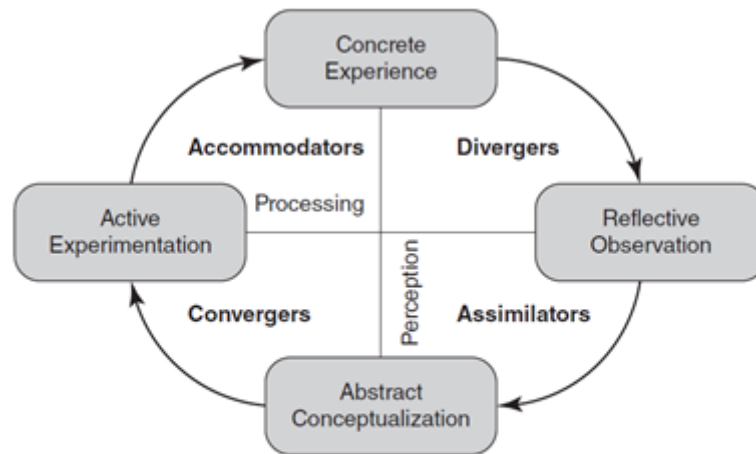
Step 3 *Abstract Conceptualization* involves logical analysis of the experience as well as developing hypotheses and plans based on that analysis.

Step 4 *Active Experimentation* involves testing hypotheses and solving problems through risk-taking and action. Using these ideas as the building blocks of his learning style theory, Kolb places each of these modes of learning on one of two axes. The vertical axis represents how the learner *perceives* an experience, with one end of the axis specified as “concrete” and the opposite end as “abstract.” The concrete end of the axis represents the ability to involve oneself in the experience without bias while the abstract end of the axis represents the ability to analyze, draw conclusions, and develop theories and hypotheses based on the experience. The horizontal axis represents how the learner *processes* an experience, with “reflective” on one end of the continuum and “active” on the opposite end. The reflective end of that axis represents the ability to observe the experience carefully and impartially, considering many different perspectives while the active experimentation end of the axis represents the ability to generate new ideas, make decisions, and solve problems based on the experience. Individual learning styles are identified by assessing where a person is situated on these two axes in terms of their preferred approaches to perceiving and processing new experiences. Kolb (1984) emphasizes that all of the abilities represented on these two axes are necessary in order to learn from experience:

Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different kinds of abilities. . . . That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their



experiences into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE). Yet this ideal is difficult to achieve. (p. 30)



**FIGURE 4.2**  
**Learning Styles Proposed by Kolb**  
(Center for Teaching Excellence, 2012)

This passage describes well the intellectual challenge that your internship holds for you. Becoming aware of your own preferred learning style is a good first step in rising to that challenge. Conceptually, the four learning styles proposed by Kolb might best be understood as the quadrants created by the two intersecting axes of perceiving experiences and processing experiences as indicated in Figure 4.2. According to this theory, each person falls into one of the four quadrants below in his or her preferred learning style and can thus be identified as either an accommodator (CE-AE), a diverger (CE-RO), a converger (AC-AE), or an assimilator (AC-RO). Knowing your own learning style can be helpful as it clarifies your particular strengths as a learner and how you prefer to encounter new learning experiences while also calling attention to the learning approaches that might not come as naturally to you, therefore requiring more intentional effort on your part.

The Learning Style Inventory (LSI) developed by Kolb (1984) is the formal instrument used to identify preferred learning styles. That instrument includes numerous items, each of which is descriptive of a given quadrant in the diagram (Figure 4.2). Based on rankings and ratings of each item, the respondent's preferred learning style emerges as one of four types: an accommodation, a diverger, a converger, or an assimilator. Since this instrument is proprietary, it cannot be included here. The exercise below is intended only as an opportunity to explore the major ideas and the general approach used in the LSI. The brief survey included in the exercise is not a formal, standardized, validated instrument to assess learning styles. Nevertheless, the exercise can provide an opportunity for you to explore the key concepts of Kolb's learning style theory and to think about how they might apply to you.

### **The Role of Reflection and Critical Thinking in Learning from Experience**

An extensive and rapidly growing body of scholarship shows the importance of student reflection and critical thinking in internships from virtually all academic disciplines and fields, ranging from communication, counseling, and business management to human services, education, and political science. You might think of experience without this type of critical thinking as being somewhat like an unread book sitting on a shelf, or perhaps a book that you have quickly scanned but not carefully read, understood, or thought about. As days become busier,



sometimes even hectic, you might feel that “there isn’t time to think” and only barely enough time to do what must be done. Also, after being immersed in theoretical, intellectual work in the classroom for a long time, it feels good to be busy, active, and on the go. No matter how fascinating your work or how busy you become, these are no substitute for time and effort spent in careful reflection, critical thinking, and analysis of your work. Be sure to carve out time for this kind of reflection daily to ensure that you are learning the most from your experiences.

An important dimension of internships in any field is the transfer of learning from the classroom to the world of work (Murdock et al., 2005; Pecorella, 2007; Sullivan & Rosin, 2008). A primary objective of your human service fieldwork is making meaningful connections between your practice experiences and the knowledge that you have gained through your academic program so that your work is guided and informed by the knowledge base of the profession. If you are like many students, you might find this surprisingly difficult to do. A number of factors contribute to this difficulty. Additionally, reading current scholarly literature focused directly on the issues and populations you are working with will be particularly meaningful and potentially applicable.

Effectively applying theory to practice requires that you employ every mode of learning in Kolb’s four learning styles: accommodating, diverging, assimilating, and converging. Tapping into all of the learning styles, rather than resting more comfortably within the one or two that are most comfortable for you, will require intentional effort and time. As you work to achieve this goal, you will benefit from opportunities to collaborate with others whose preferred learning styles are complementary to your own. The internship seminar and your discussions with your supervisor are critical in expanding your ways of thinking as your own thoughts will be expanded by seeing how others, perhaps with different preferred learning styles, think about various experiences. Eventually, through thinking about your work in different ways, you will internalize habits of mind that are more diverse, equipping you with the intellectual skills that you need as a growing professional.

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