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Do They Really Get It?

Using the Kolb LSI to Reach *Every* Student

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INTEREST IN LEARNING STYLES and their application in the classroom has skyrocketed in the past two decades. Both divergent and complementary theories abound. One concept describes visual, aural, or kinesthetic/tactile learners; another, the model of multiple intelligences, describes no fewer than seven categories of intelligence.¹ Differences in learning have even been described as having generational tendencies. In his book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984), David A. Kolb theorized that people develop preferences for learning in the same way they develop preferences for management, leadership, and negotiation. This article explores Kolb's research and its practical application for teachers of singing and voice-related subjects.

My interest in Kolb Learning Styles was a result of my work with the Graduate Teacher Program (GTP) at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The GTP was founded in part because a significant percentage of undergraduate lecture courses at CU are taught by graduate students, many of whom are teaching for the first time. One of the tools used in the GTP is the Videotape Consultation, which is offered to graduate assistants campus-wide as a tool to improve their teaching.² David Kolb and Roger Fry's *Theory of Experiential Learning*, which was introduced in the mid-1970s and gained prominence in 1980s, was a key factor in the development of the Video Consultation program and served as a foundation for the GTP.

Kolb and Fry asserted that the heart of all learning lies in how we process experience. Kolb further refined this concept by dividing it into two separate learning activities, both of which must occur for effective learning to take place: perceiving and processing. Although the activities can be viewed separately, these two modes occur simultaneously. As Kolb describes it:

... there are two primary dimensions to the learning process. The first dimension represents the concrete experiencing of events at one end and abstract conceptualization at the other. The other dimension has active experimentation at one extreme and reflective observation at the other. Thus, in the process of learning one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer, from specific involvement to general analytic detachment.³

To reflect these extremes, Kolb plotted these two activities on two axes, because "the modes of active experimentation and reflection, like abstractness/concreteness, stand in opposition to each other. Reflection tends to

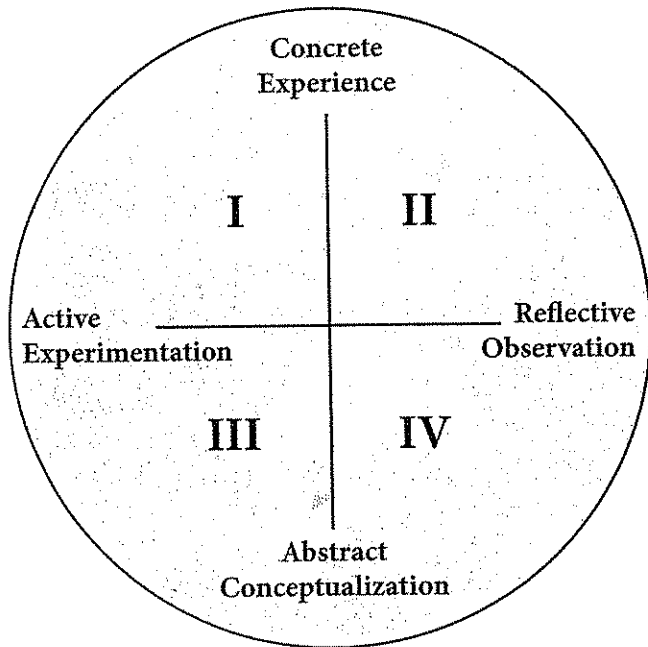


Figure 1. Kolb adaptation; © concept by David Kolb, adaptation and design by Alan Chapman 2005–06, based on Kolb's Learning Styles, 1984.

inhibit action and vice versa.”⁴ He posited that all learners could be charted to reflect where they fell on each continuum (Figure 1). Placement was determined by the answer to two questions: 1) When perceiving or grasping information, does the subject engage in abstract conceptualization or concrete experience (thinking v. feeling/sensing)? 2) When processing or transforming information, does the subject engage in reflective observation or active experimentation (watching v. doing)? Put another way, learning preference is determined by whether we primarily *think* or *feel*, as well as whether we prefer to *watch* or *participate*. Kolb explains why learning preferences might develop in such an individual manner.

As a result of our hereditary equipment, our particular past life experience, and the demands of our present environment, most people develop learning styles that emphasize some learning abilities over others. We come to resolve the conflicts between being active and reflective and between being immediate and analytical in characteristic ways. Some people develop minds that excel at assimilating disparate facts into coherent theories, yet these same people are incapable or uninterested in deducing hypotheses from their theory; others are logical geniuses, but find it impossible to involve and surrender themselves to an experience . . .⁵

Kolb further crystallized his theory into a cycle of learning that involves the four processes previously mentioned, all which must be present for learning to occur: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). He believed that every learning experience began with concrete experience, since the most effective learning is that which emanates from personal experience.⁶ The learning cycle continues through the processes clockwise until reaching active experimentation; the process might need to be repeated several times until learning is complete (Figure 2). The theory was later revised to acknowledge that some people enter the learning cycle at another stage (e.g., abstract conceptualization), but still continue through the cycle in the presupposed order.⁷ Raschick and others agree with this revised approach, and also suggest tapping into the student's preferred style first.⁸

From my own observations, I have come to believe that one may enter the learning cycle at any point and proceed in any order, provided all four processes eventually take place. Learning in the specific order Kolb suggests is not necessarily required: people generally have habitual ways of learning.⁹ One might begin with active experimentation, for example, and then proceed to reflective observation and concrete experience, before arriving at abstract conceptualization.

Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) was created to help people understand their learning style. This is accomplished through a series of open ended questions regarding learning a new skill or concept that are self ranked from 1 (least like you) to 4 (most like you). Léonie Sugarman states that, “because the LSI is an ipsative measure, a high score on one dimension necessitates a lower score on others.”¹⁰ The LSI does have some limitations: because it relies on self-rating, it is not based on objective standards or behavior. In this author's experience, however, repeated testing yields nearly identical results.¹¹ My own ranking on the LSI (AE, RO, AC, CE, with highest score appearing first) does not follow Kolb's premise that one must proceed in a clockwise direction around the learning cycle (Figure 2).

THE FOUR PREFERENCES OR STYLES

In the GTP, we found that renaming the Kolb quadrants made the concepts easier for a lay person to grasp (Figure 3).

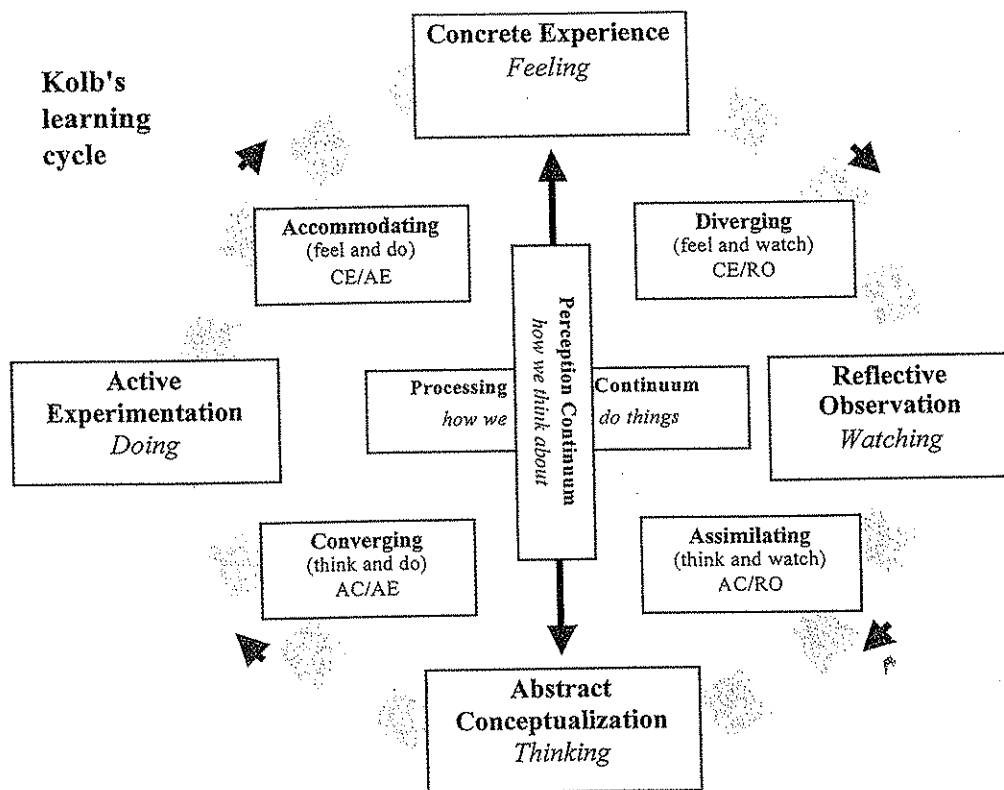


Figure 2. Kolb's learning cycle; © concept by David Kolb, adaptation and design by Alan Chapman 2005–06, based on Kolb's Learning Styles, 1984.

While the original quadrant names are included, the titles in parentheses are based on those used by the GTP. Qualities of each quadrant are summarized below. Bear in mind that two people whose LSI is charted in the same quadrant might still learn and behave quite differently. For example, one person might exhibit exaggerated tendencies while another displays understated qualities, depending on where his or her LSI test score falls within the quadrant.

Accommodator or Pragmatist ("Product")

This person may be called a dynamic learner, as learning relies partially on trial and error. Since concrete experience is paramount for this person, he often excels in laboratory and field work. He usually gets things done in an efficient manner because the final product is his goal, even though sometimes he may make mistakes. This person is often a leader, and prefers *doing* things to theorizing about them. For this reason, he can be impatient, and may resort to meaningless activities or busy work just to feel as if he is accomplishing *something*.

This student often asks: "What can this become? How can I apply this in practice?" He seeks to produce and is motivated by a product, and will become disillusioned if the process takes too long. His goal is to make things happen, and not being able to start often causes frustration or anxiety. This person thrives on a one-on-one relationship and craves mentorship. Not having a mentor is stressful for him; without feedback, his style of learning by making mistakes goes unchecked. People with this learning preference often teach the same way they learn: that is, they encourage others to *do*, often by modeling.

Diverger or Reflector ("Heart")

Reflective observation is important for this student, so having opportunities to brainstorm or create a journal is useful. Taking time to understand problems and to craft various solutions is part of her learning. The drawback to this kind of thinking is that she might generate too many possibilities, becoming paralyzed by the options from which to choose. She is imaginative, empathetic, and

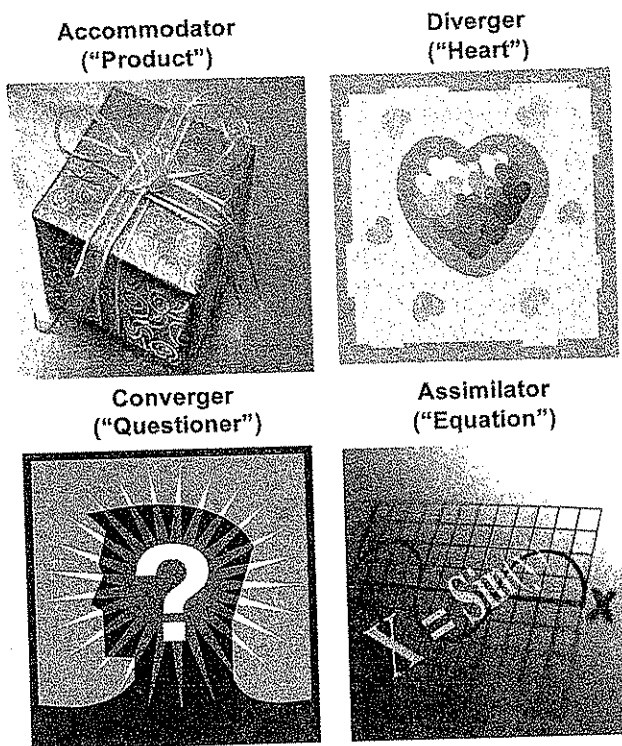


Figure 3. Kolb quadrants: renamed; based on adaptation of Kolb by Laura L. B. Border, Graduate Teacher Program Director, University of Colorado at Boulder.

likes personal involvement; she looks for meaning and seeks to integrate experience with the self. This student asks: "Why or why not?" She is stressed by busy work, lack of feedback, and if she feels uninformed. She is soothed by knowing why something is occurring and by supportive feedback from her mentor. Finding meaning and being involved in important issues is paramount for her. Teachers who are personally involved motivate this student, and she enjoys taking time to listen, absorb, and discuss before acting. This student generally enjoys lectures, especially when the professor is someone she views as an expert taskmaster or guide. Curiosity and passion fuel her, and as a teacher, she works to motivate students to find their own purposes.

Converger or Activist ("Questioner")

As one would expect, the Activist learns by *doing*, and could be called a common sense learner. This student is pragmatic and asks: "How does this work?" He usually dislikes group activities, although small groups are tolerable if there is helpful peer feedback. He prefers things

to people, finds homework helpful, and is highly efficient. He questions and doubts everything, seeking to find usability and application. Lab work is especially enjoyable, because he can *try* it himself. Given reasonable boundaries, this student is happy to jump in and experiment. Teachers who encourage questioning soothe this student; he learns by hands-on experience, and by making mistakes. He is motivated, not discouraged, by problems and questions; occasionally, he will solve the wrong problem, but still hates being given the answer. The ability to determine his own criteria for the relevance of materials is crucial. He is anxious when given no boundaries, even though he rarely can be bothered to read directions. Clear parameters—and the freedom to experiment within those parameters—are soothing for him. Not being able to *try* something is stressful. As might be expected, this learner teaches others by questioning and encouraging.

Assimilator or Theorist ("Equation")

Since she is an analytic learner, lectures, papers, and analogies appeal to the Equation. Ideas are of greater interest to her than subjective judgments. She asks: "How does this relate to that, and what are the facts?" This student learns best by reading, compiling research, and thinking alone. She is adept at creating models and plans, and is less interested in talking, even with experts. Organized and rational, she amasses knowledge, and seeks facts and expertise to reach her goal of achievement. She is motivated by an expert teacher, although most of her learning is accomplished by listening, reading, writing, and organizing. Expertise and mastery motivate her. One of her greatest weaknesses is that she forgets practical application and can be overly critical of others. Not knowing the overall plan and therefore being surprised is stressful for her. Being forced to work quickly, which can result in mistakes, is also unhelpful. She is soothed by clear plans, time to gather all the facts, and a professor she views as an expert. She prefers continuity, values sequential thinking, and thrives in traditional classrooms. As a teacher, she conveys information via lecture.

Other points of interest with regard to teaching

By now you might be wondering: "Where do I fit? I see a little of myself in each of these descriptions."

Since everyone needs and uses all four learning elements, this should not be surprising; however, you should be able to see which traits most fully describe your learning preferences. Taking the LSI test yourself would certainly help to enhance your understanding of the manner in which you learn. Another method is to describe someone who was your ideal teacher. How did s/he teach? What made you feel successful in that environment? Which learning preference did that teacher likely have and was it possibly the same as your own? As one might guess, it is highly likely that you have similar learning styles. But what if the teacher and student prefer different styles of learning? Healey and Jenkins cite Fielding's assertion that "learning may suffer where a marked mismatch occurs between the style of the learner and the approach of the teacher."¹² Certainly, as teachers we must bear in mind that our job is to reach every student, not just those who are carbon copies of ourselves.

APPLYING THIS KNOWLEDGE TO THE CLASSROOM OR STUDIO

Classroom teaching is perhaps the most practical way to employ knowledge of Kolb to engage every style of learner. As you prepare your courses for the semester, try to design lesson plans that equally involve each learning style. The following is an example of a Singer's Diction class in which the goal is to master double versus single consonants in Italian.

To grab the interest of the **Hearts** in my class, I begin by explaining the importance of double versus single consonants by telling an applicable story. This illustrates *why* it is important to differentiate them from an emotional point of view. Choose an example of a word that is especially colorful and has an entirely different meaning if the spelling is altered only by a double or single consonant (e.g., *anni* versus *ani*).

For the **Equations**, one might consider having the class timeline readily available. This allows students to see exactly what you are planning to cover and in which order, and allows them to see where you are in the timeline throughout the class period. A thorough lecture on the linguistic components and issuing clear directions appeals to the **Equations**, who want all the facts before trying it themselves. Handouts with rules and examples

are also helpful. In the greater class context, syllabi that are long, thorough, and include a class calendar are particularly appealing.

Applying the material is crucial to the **Questioners**. The teacher might provide multiple examples for students to try, requiring everyone in the class to attempt at least one. Having several extras on hand for the **Questioners** who appreciate multiple attempts is useful. One word of caution: be flexible about who needs to do which activity, and when they need to do it. **Reflective Observers (Hearts)** will want to watch and listen, and will participate much later and less often than the **Active Experimenters (Questioners)**. Find ways to reward those who aren't as "active" as others.

Trial and error is also important for the **Products**, who are also likely to want to try multiple examples. Extra work, which they can complete and then discuss with the professor, often appeals to them. A final project, such as a song for students to perform with examples imbedded, is certainly important for every student, but is especially gratifying for the **Products**. Remember that they also learn by making mistakes: having the opportunity to try examples in class and make mistakes without penalty will often result in higher test grades, especially for **Questioners** and **Products**. Assigning homework grades simply for completing projects, rather than grading based on the accuracy of each assignment, is an option that allows for learning via mistakes without academic pressure.

Applying Kolb learning preferences in the applied voice studio is a bit more complicated than in a classroom setting, but is equally useful. Part of my students' weekly assignment is to complete a one-page journal entry. The only guidelines are that half of the entry must include observations from the lesson recording (what did you hear, what did you notice, what worked and what didn't), and half must be reflections on practice sessions (how much did you practice, what were you able to replicate from lessons, what was effective and what was frustrating). This gives each student some boundaries, while giving them the flexibility to use the assignment however they see fit. **Hearts** tend to reflect on the text and how they feel about their practice; **Products** talk about what they accomplished and where they learned from mistakes; **Equations** occasionally have elaborate grids where they can chart their practice time.

There is room for students with each learning style to share what they do in their practice sessions in a manner that works for them, and I am able to understand better how they are processing our work.

Characteristics of learning preferences often reveal themselves in students' behavior in the voice studio. Hearts must have a reason to sing well; they want to express something more profound than speech allows. These students respond well to questions about the poetry or about the composer's life circumstances when the work was written. Often, they come to their next lesson with a rich journal entry, bursting to share an exciting discovery that puts the entire piece in a new light. Questioners tend to move a great deal; they fidget, and want to get right down to the business of experimentation. It can be helpful to give them the opportunity to change tempi of vocalises, choose what to work on next, and to allow them to walk or even choreograph their exercises. There is often a great deal of exchange during lessons with Questioners, who want to actively participate. Equations are often more interested in anatomic explanations, reasoning behind exercises, and information about the composer. They often need to be reminded that one cannot learn to sing via information alone—one must *do* it. Products are often the students who were so intent on finishing something quickly that they come to lessons with wrong notes and wrong rhythms. They are truly product-driven and will rush to finish, occasionally missing crucial elements. For these students, establishing several goals to complete for the week, such as tapping the rhythm before adding the pitches, or writing an accurate translation in the music before bringing the song into the next lesson, gives something concrete that also helps build skills. Since they are product driven, having several midpoint goals or "mini-products" can help to keep them on track. Having a general idea of a student's learning style allows us to help students remediate their weaknesses and accentuate their strengths.

Are there drawbacks to designing courses and lesson plans in this manner? Certainly, it is much more time intensive, and takes more thoughtful planning. The advantages, however, far outweigh any inconvenience, and once the initial effort has been invested, minor adjustments are fairly easy to make. Simply recognizing your own learning style makes it more likely that you will shape your teaching in a manner that includes rather than excludes

students. The rewards of knowing that more students are engaged and successful are immeasurable. It is also possible that Products and Hearts drop out of college at a disproportionately high rate. Hearts are likely to become disillusioned and wonder: why bother? Products are likely to become frustrated with the process and wonder: where's the final product? Our goal is to keep them in college, keep them learning, and keep them in music.

There are useful applications to the Kolb LSI beyond the classroom.¹² In a group activity, the entire faculty could take the LSI and chart each person's location on a master grid. Having a faculty meeting designed around a Kolb workshop and its interpersonal implications could be a useful way to begin the academic year. Knowing how each person in the department processes information and how each person needs to interact with others in order to feel valued, could raise both morale and effectiveness. Deeper understanding of how one's colleagues perceive and process information—whether in a hallway conversation, an interoffice memo, or a rehearsal technique—could change the academic culture for the better. And that benefits both faculty and students in the long term.

NOTES

1. Lynn Holding, "Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences," *Journal of Singing* 66, no. 2 (November/December 2009): 193–199.
2. For more information on the Graduate Teacher Program at the University of Colorado-Boulder, please visit <http://www.colorado.edu/gtp/>
3. David A. Kolb, Joyce S. Osland, and Irwin M. Rubin, *Organizational Psychology: A Book of Readings*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 28.
4. *Ibid.*, 29.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Léonie Sugarman, "Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning: Touchstone for Trainers, Students, Counselors, and Clients," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 64 (December 1985): 267.
7. Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins, "Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Its Application in Geography in Higher Education," *Journal of Geography* 99, no. 5 (September/October 2000): 186.
8. Michael Raschick, Donald E. Maypole, and Pricilla A. Day, "Improving Field Education Through Kolb Learning Theory," *Journal of Social Work Education* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 31.

9. Sugarman, 265.
10. Ibid.
11. The LSI is under copyright, and may be purchased at www.haygroup.com
12. Healey and Jenkins, 185.
13. David A. Kolb, Joyce S. Osland, and Irwin M. Rubin, *Organizational Behavior: An Experiential Approach*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1995), 49–59.

Soprano **Kristine Hurst-Wajszczuk** is Assistant Professor of Voice and Opera at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She received the BM and MM from Westminster Choir College and the DMA from the University of Colorado–Boulder. A specialist in the lute songs of John Dowland, she has performed and lectured throughout North America on the socio-

political intrigue surrounding the songs, including the College Music Society, National Association of Teachers of Singing, the International Congress of Voice Teachers, and others. Her article on the subject was published by the *Journal of Singing*, and Centaur released her solo CD of Dowland lute songs in 2008.

Dr. Hurst-Wajszczuk debuted with the Boulder Bach Festival in 2004. An active recitalist, her credits include both world and American premieres of music by several living composers. She participated in composer Bill Mayer's 70th birthday celebration concert in Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall, in the role of Madeline in the composer's *The Eve of St. Agnes*. In 2002, she was a regional finalist in the NATSAA competition; in 2006, she was featured on Wisconsin Public's Radio's broadcast of *Live from the Chazen Museum*. An avid student of several languages, she has won grants to participate in the German for Singers program at Middlebury College and for study in Vienna.

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