

LEARNING STYLES



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Developed by Judith Walker-Hutchinson and David Walker.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **Aims of the booklet**

This booklet does not aim to be a comprehensive study of the vast body of knowledge which addresses the human behaviour that is learning. Rather, my aim is to introduce you to the topic giving you a brief overview of some of the key theory such as that of Kolb and Honey and Mumford and then to look at how we might apply that knowledge to the kind of study you need to undertake during the course of your CIPFA programme.

Kolb's work and that of other earlier experiential learning theorists has been much developed and adapted with the result that many apparently competing theories now exist. In this booklet I will aim to simplify these theories and help you to understand how and why you learn so that you can play to your strengths and recognise your potential weaknesses. I have deliberately avoided an over academic approach as this is meant to be a practical and useful study aid, but if you are interested in understanding the underpinning theory you will find a list of useful references in the bibliography.

### **How should you use the booklet?**

I hope that this booklet helps you, it is not intended to be a heavy read and although there are exercises they are straightforward and not particularly time consuming. I do not intend that this booklet adds to your study burden and it should not be a distraction from your core work. Read it, see if it speaks to you and, if it does, attempt the exercises which will help you gain an insight into your psychological make up as a learner. As with all psychoanalytic tools, assessment of learning styles has its potential weaknesses and my caveat is that that is absolutely true for a booklet that attempts to simplify those tools even further to make them practically accessible in this format. That said, have a go, have some fun and I hope it helps.

### **What is different about CIPFA's qualification?**

There are two distinctive features about studying for CIPFA. First is the assessment, which is totally examination based. The second is the method of study which is based around the published learning materials. Those materials remain the focus of your study regardless of whether you add value through attendance at an approved course or not.

The CIPFA process is developmental, throughout IPD and CPD, and tries to draw on both education and training. To make abundantly clear the difference between the two I only have to think about how I'd be perfectly happy for my son to receive sex education at school, but if he came home and said he'd had a sex training session – perhaps not. The CIPFA assessment process draws on both theory and practice and in that sense ought to appeal to a wider range of learning styles than many other qualifications. This is particularly true of reflective practice which as a theory is a direct development of the key model we will be examining, Kolb's 'experiential learning cycle'. Thus this booklet should not only help you to understand yourself better, but also to gain an insight into why the CIPFA learning and assessment model is so successful.

## 2. Learning

### The theory of learning

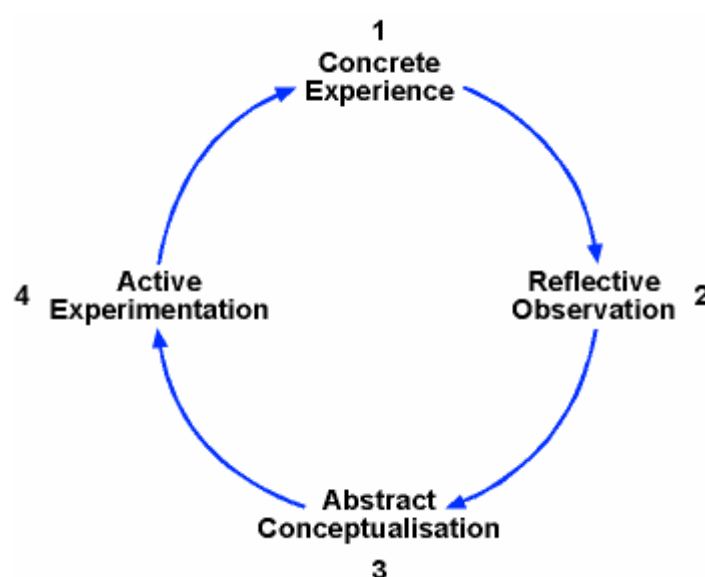
*'...here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump on the back of his head behind Christopher Robin. It is as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it...'* (AA Milne)

In terms of understanding human learning behaviour, the bumping did stop in 1984 with the publication of David Kolb's 'Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of Learning and Development'.

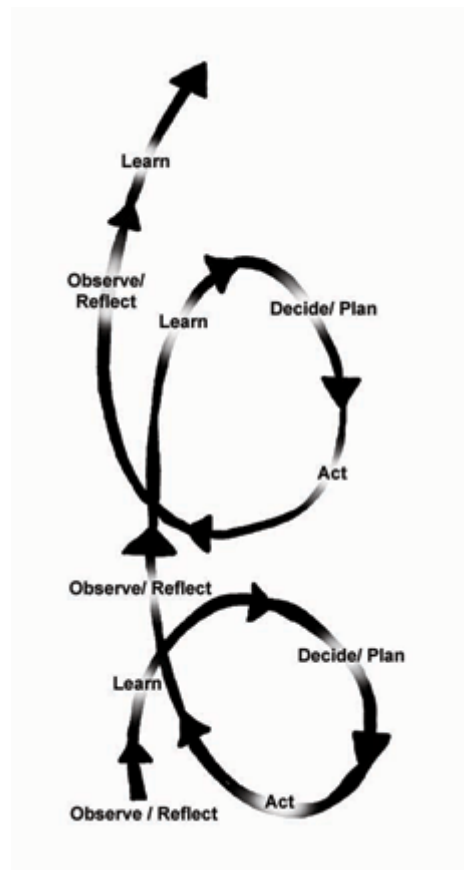
Although influenced by early twentieth century work on experiential learning (of among others Rogers, Jung, Piaget, and Dewey), Kolb's work, his experiential learning theory (ELT) and learning styles inventory (LSI) developed from it, are considered seminal.

Kolb identified a four stage learning cycle, a generic model of experiential learning which can be represented diagrammatically.

### Kolb's experiential learning cycle



In this cycle, immediate or concrete experiences provide the basis for observation and reflection on those experiences. These observations and reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts. These abstract concepts lead to new implications for action which can be actively tested thus producing new experiences. So in fact rather than a closed cycle for action, Kolb's theory would be better presented as a spiral. The World Bank presents their version of this spiral of learning like this.



You need to be aware that not everyone finds Kolb and other similar theorists helpful. To assess a respected dissenting voice you may like to look at the work of Phil Race who finds Kolb and other cyclical models unrealistic, prescriptive and needlessly academic. His alternative "ripples" model is discussed in detail in RACE P (2005) *Making Learning Happen*, London; Sage.

## Why we learn

Unlike the rest of our body, brain capacity does not significantly deteriorate with age. So no matter how out of practice we are and however much we may feel like we've lost the capacity for it, we *can* learn. But just because we are physiologically capable, does not mean that we *want* to. Learning, particularly revision for a summative assessment, can feel very unpleasant, like non-work, impractical and a complete waste of time. Unless we key into what is happening to us psychologically and remember why we were motivated to undertake that course of study in the first place we may lose the impetus we originally had.

### Exercise:

Think back - why did you originally decide to undertake this course?

There could be many reasons:

- It may be a condition of employment
- You may be aiming for promotion/status/more money
- It may be the only way you can see out of a job you're doing now which no longer stimulates you
- You may want to ensure your continuing 'marketability'
- You may have been pressurised into it by your boss/ parents/peers
- You may feel your talents are currently under-utilised and the 'badge' of qualification will bring recognition and opportunity for self-development

or

- If you subscribe to a fundamental Freudian view of motivation, you may simply feel that becoming qualified/increasing your status will make you more attractive to others.

There are as many reasons as there are CIPFA trainees and my aim here is not for you to make value judgements about the quality of your motivation but to have you, privately and confidentially, call to mind and clarify just why you are doing this.

Are your original reasons still valid? If not how have they changed?

Whatever your reasons, identify them and list them. Try as far as possible to concentrate on the positive reasons. Motivation is more sustainable when it's positive rather than negative. Aiming for promotion or self-development is a better long term motivator than the fear of losing ones job, for example.

When you hit a low point, use this list to remind yourself of just why you're putting yourself through all this. Periodically review your list as you go through the course so that it remains relevant to your changing needs.

### **Methods of learning**

As a generalised overview, theories of learning styles try to assess how people study and assimilate information over three main areas:

- a) perceiving information
- b) processing information; and
- c) organising and presenting information

#### **a) perceiving information**

As with all the information we gather, whether for study or not, we use our senses when we do so. We each have individual preferences as to whether we rely more on hearing, sight, reading/writing or other sensations such as movement and touch (kinaesthetics).

How you prefer to learn depends on which of your senses you tend to rely on. If you are an auditory learner you will be quite comfortable with a traditional lecture or tutorial group situation, for example, but if you are a kinaesthetic learner you will get more from practical, hands-on type activity.

## **b) processing information**

However you acquire information, whether by listening, watching, reading or other means you will then need to process it.

Again, we each have preferences for the methods we employ to do this.

Do you for example pick up concrete, practical facts better than abstract ideas? Do you prefer to see the big picture then fill in the details or do you like to build up information logically one step at a time? Do you prefer to observe and reflect or are you happier when you experiment with ideas?

## **c) organising and presenting information**

Once you have gathered and processed information you need to make further choices about how to organise and present it. You will already know whether you are more comfortable giving a holistic overview or a detailed analysis and whether you prefer to verbalise or use images to present results.

## **Personality styles and learning**

There has been much work on the interface between personality preferences and learning. The most widely known model for assessing personality preference is Myers Briggs. The Myers Briggs assessment analyses the innate preference we have for certain ways of thinking and behaving. The system uses a four letter code based on four personality preferences.

### 1. Where you prefer to direct your energy

If you prefer to deal with people and the 'outer world' you would be classified with a preference for **Extroversion** (note this does not equate to how sociable you are).

If you prefer to deal with ideas, explanations and beliefs or the 'inner world' your preference is **Introversion**.

The Myers Briggs analysis would denote you either E or I.

2. How do you prefer to process information?

If you prefer to deal with facts, to have clarity, or to describe what you see, then your preference is for **Sensing**.

If you prefer to deal with ideas, look into the unknown, to generate new possibilities or to anticipate what isn't obvious, and then your preference is for **Intuition**.

The Myers Briggs analysis would denote you either S or N (the letter I has already been used for Introversion).

3. How do you prefer to make decisions?

If you prefer to decide on the basis of objective logic, using an analytic and detached approach, then your preference is for **Thinking**.

If you prefer to decide using values and/or personal beliefs, on the basis of what you believe is important or what you or others care about, then your preference is for **Feeling**.

You would be Myers Briggs type T or F

4. How do you prefer to organise your life?

If you prefer your life to be planned, stable and organised then your preference is for **Judging** (not to be confused with being judgmental).

If you prefer to go with the flow, to maintain flexibility and respond to things as they arise, then your preference is for **Perception**.

You would be Myers Briggs type J or P.

Putting these four options together identifies a four letter personality code for example I am ENTP. There are sixteen combinations identifying sixteen dominant personality types.

Myers Briggs is a much respected and widely used analysis but it is a complex psychoanalytic tool involving analysis not only of your dominant but also your 'shadow' personality. We can do no more than a simple

introduction within the scope of this booklet and the best way to use this tool is under the guidance of one of the many trained Myers Briggs assessors in workshop conditions. However, you may like to try out one of the many on line questionnaires available, for example, that at [www.teamtechnology.co.uk](http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk) to find out more about your personality preferences.

From even this brief overview of the theory of learning we can see that our actual behaviour is influenced by many different factors. If we are to make productive use of any of this information we have to try to assess how it impacts us as an individual learner and how we can use the knowledge and understanding we gain to improve our capacity to learn.

### 3. Learning styles

#### Different learning styles

Ideally an individual should engage equally with all stages of Kolb's learning cycle - experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, but Kolb explains that individuals naturally tend to prefer a single learning style. Analysing this adds another level to Kolb's model by which he defines these learning styles.

How we both grasp and transform experience operates in dialectically related modes ie they conflict, we can't do them at the same time. We therefore decide whether to do **or** watch, to think **or** feel. How we approach and respond emotionally to an experience is a product of our preferred learning style.

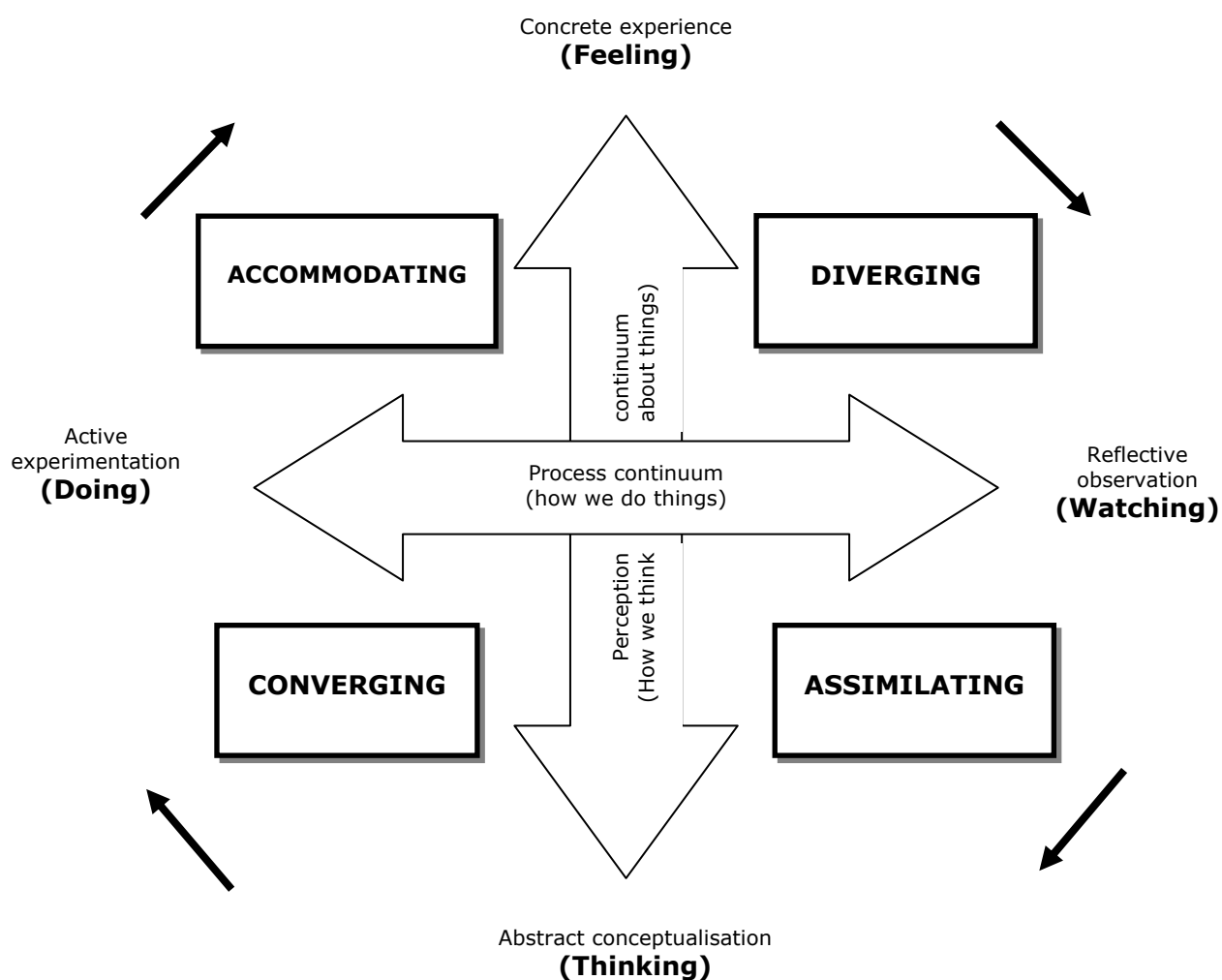
Imagine a two by two quadrant overlaying the learning cycle, giving four separate areas of preference. These areas of preference represent a tendency to the activity in that quadrant. Our individual preference operates on two different continuums. Looking at the original cycle there is one continuum vertically - the perception continuum or how we think about things, where preference operates between 'concrete experiences' (CE) or **feeling** and 'abstract conceptualisation' (AC) or **thinking**. The other continuum is horizontal, the process continuum or how we do things which moves between 'active experimentation' (AE) or **doing** and 'reflective observation' (RE) or **watching**.

Overlaying the cycle and the quadrants, Kolb identified four separate learning styles which he defines as:

- CE/RO = Diverging (in the quadrant between feeling and watching).
- AC/RO = Assimilating (in the quadrant between watching and thinking).
- AC/AE = Converging (in the quadrant between thinking and doing).
- CE/AE = Accommodating (in the quadrant between doing and feeling).

It may help to see this diagrammatically:

## Kolb's four-type definition of learning styles



You may have come across learning styles defined as:

- Activist
- Reflector
- Theorist and
- Pragmatist

These are the categorisations used by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, who although they based their work on Kolb's, produced a different analysis. However, Honey and Mumford themselves acknowledge that the similarities are stronger than the differences and the categories of learning style are broadly analogous.

Activist = Accommodating

Reflector = Diverging

Theorist = Assimilating

Pragmatist = Converging

**Exercise:**

You probably already have an idea of how you think you learn. Take a few moments to think where you may fit on each of the two Kolb continuums:

Thinking about how you do things – do you prefer to do or watch? (or as Kolb expresses it - how do you 'grasp experience'?)

And when you have an experience do you prefer to feel or think your way through it? (How do you 'transform experience'?)

Holding those two results together, where does that place you on Kolb's quadrant?

**Understanding yourself**

**Exercise:**

What kind of learner am I?

This is not the best context in which to attempt this sort of exercise but the aim is to try to give you a better understanding of how you prefer to learn.

Tick any of the following boxes that seem to apply to you. Note they are not either/or, simply identify the ones that seem to resonate for you.

I	E	L	P
I like to draw creative, beautiful diagrams, maps and graphs	I get easily bored and like to move on to new things	I like to understand why something works or how that idea got developed	I get down to work easily
I like to think around topics and often find myself daydreaming	I like variety and work quickly flitting from one thing to another	I like to persist with one thing at a time	I think daydreaming is a waste of time
I can sometimes spend too long thinking about my work without actually getting down to it	I learn more talking about a topic with others rather than work on it on my own	I learn best by reading about things and coming to my own conclusions	I work steadily and consistently which means I usually have time for doing other things as well as my work
I work best in short bursts	I enjoy writing freely, as it comes without planning too much	I will rework an essay until I get it absolutely right	I enjoy the feeling that I have finished a piece of work more than I enjoy doing it
I'm not keen on detail but readily see the big picture	I am not interested in detail	I pay great attention to detail	I like to have a clear timetable for study and revision
I'm often the one in a team who sees the new or alternative way of doing things	I like to take life as it comes and be spontaneous	I am a good critic, asking searching questions and raising doubts	I like to get on with the task and not be side-tracked by new approaches or questions

When I sit down to study I often find I'm not where my books and notes are	When I enjoy a subject I immerse myself totally in it, but when I don't I tend to neglect it	I conscientiously work on subjects I don't enjoy as well as those I do	I get annoyed with people who don't keep to deadlines
I can easily see connections between the different modules of the CIPFA course	I will try any new technique and give any new idea a chance	I prefer to listen to others than talk	I like to work on my own
I like to find new and imaginative ways of presenting my work	Once I've finished a piece of work I don't read it through	I read through my essays and examination scripts before handing them in	I make certain that I know exactly what is required from me before an examination: any compulsory sections, how the marks are spread etc

The way this exercise can be presented on a written page is much (and definitely over) simplified and a note of caution needs to be aired before you get too hung up on these results, but notice whether you have put more ticks in one column than the others and identify which column that is.

Analysing the results:

Each of the four columns represents a preferred learning style. I have used labels which are neither Kolb's nor Honey and Mumford's, but which will give us a general understanding based on both models.

I = imaginative

E = enthusiastic

L = logical

P = practical

If we were perfectly balanced in our learning skills we would probably have ticks evenly distributed across the columns. If that's how your results were – congratulations, but don't let that lead to complacency, there's always room for improvement and it may be worth your while to review the next exercise anyway. More likely however, is that over time you have learned a dominant way of doing things and whilst that may be quite effective for you and clearly has sufficient strength to have got you this far, there are potential weaknesses in each of these styles.

**Exercise:**

Thinking about your approach to study and examinations and having identified yourself as imaginative, enthusiastic, logical or practical, reflect on what you think may be the strengths and weaknesses of your preferred approach (you may be fairly evenly balanced between two columns, in which case consider them both).

Below are just some of the things you may have come up with.

**Imaginative**

Broadly analogous to Honey and Mumford's 'reflector' or Kolb's 'divergent' style. Imaginative learners tend to prefer to watch rather than do. Interested in people, you will tend to be sensitive and strong in the arts.

Strengths as a learner

- You are able to look at things from different perspectives
- You will gather plenty of information and use your imagination
- You are good at ideas generation and seeing the big picture

Possible weaknesses:

- You might run out of time when studying.
- You may overlook detail.
- You may spend so long drawing pretty pictures of your work that you never actually get down to it.
- You may run out of energy and enthusiasm for a topic.
- You might procrastinate so long over which approach to take to an examination question that you run out of time to actually do it.

### **Enthusiastic**

If you had more ticks in the E column then chances are you're an enthusiast.

This is broadly the same as Honey and Mumford's Activist or Kolb's accommodating style.

This is a very hands-on learning style, relying heavily on intuition rather than logic. Attracted to new challenges and experiences you are useful in roles where action and initiative are required.

Strengths as a learner:

- You will take on a learning task enthusiastically and commit fully to it.
- You will readily engage with others to broaden your understanding of a topic.
- You are open to new ways of looking at a subject.

Potential weaknesses

- You get easily bored and may have difficulty sticking with a sustained period of revision.
- You might easily get drawn off on a tangent with something you find really interesting but isn't really core to what you need to learn or write about.

- You might spend so long talking to other people about your ideas on a subject that you don't get through the volume of work you need to revise.
- You may jump in to answering an examination question without reading the question properly.
- You may lose marks on an assessment because you haven't checked your presentation or spellchecked your work.

## **Logical**

More ticks in the L column and you're likely to be a logical learner.

Roughly equivalent to Honey and Mumford's Theorist or Kolb's Assimilating style you like a concise, logical approach. You are great at taking in a huge range of information and organising it. You are less interested in people than abstract ideas and concepts.

Strengths as a learner:

- You are undaunted by the size of the task.
- You will read around your subject and understand the mechanics of it.
- You will check your work and make sure you don't lose marks for sloppy presentation etc.

Weaknesses:

- You might get thrown by questions that ask you to take an alternative viewpoint.
- You might get 'stuck' on a topic you are revising if you have a problem understanding it.
- You may have a tendency to spend too long making lists and plans for your revision.
- You may exclude other valid viewpoints.
- You might have difficulty thinking on your feet if a topic comes up that you haven't revised.

## **Practical**

Last but not least, if you ticked more Ps then you're likely to be a practical learner. As with Honey and Mumford's Pragmatists or Kolb's Coverging learning style you can solve problems and find practical solutions. You prefer technical tasks and are less concerned with people. You are keen to experiment with new ideas.

Strengths as a learner:

- You quickly see the practical application for material you are studying.
- You will revise!
- You are not easily distracted from the task in hand.

Potential weaknesses:

- You may fail to take account of other people's opinions and viewpoints.
- You might struggle with topics you can't relate to practice.
- You may fail to see alternative ways of doing things.
- You may become irritated with others if you're trying to learn in a group and they seem to be wasting time.
- If its not clear what a question requires you may struggle to know how to answer it.

The point of all this is not to make you feel inadequate or try to make you change your style, but to have you recognise where you might function at less than your optimal capacity and develop strategies to combat those potential weaknesses.

## **Assessing your own 'training gap'**

Be realistic about what you can do well and what you need to develop. The temptation when we review our learning in preparation for assessment is that we concentrate on the things we are comfortable with and ignore those we feel unduly challenged by even though we know these are the things that may cause us to come unstuck in the assessment.

## **Applying knowledge to CIPFA studies**

Knowing your learning style can help you to understand why some learning environments work better for you than others.

- **Imaginative**

Imaginative people like to stand back and observe, take time to think about what happened and look at the situation from different perspectives.

They learn best when:

- 1 They can observe others at work.
- 2 They have an opportunity to review the experience and think about what they have learned.
- 3 They don't have to work to tight deadlines.

If you are an imaginative learner you may be uncomfortable when:

- 1 Made to act as a leader or role play in front of others.
- 2 You aren't given preparation time for a task.
- 3 You are thrown in at the deep end.

- **Enthusiastic**

Enthusiastic people like to learn by doing. They like working with others and trying out new ideas.

They learn best when:

- 1 They can get involved with new experiences, problems or opportunities.
- 2 They are given the opportunity to work with others in team tasks and role-plays.
- 3 They have to chair a meeting or lead a discussion.

If you are an enthusiastic learner you may be uncomfortable when:

- 1 You have to listen to a lecture or long explanation.
- 2 You have to read, write or think on your own.
- 3 You have to absorb and understand a lot of detailed data.

- **Logical**

Logical learners like to understand the underpinning theory. They like to work with models, concepts and facts.

They learn best when:

- 1 They are put in complex situations where they have to use their skills and knowledge.
- 2 They have an opportunity to question and probe.
- 3 They are in structured situations with a clear purpose.

If you are a logical learner you may be uncomfortable when:

- 1 Made to participate in situation which emphasise emotion and feelings.
- 2 The activity you're given is unstructured or the brief is poor.
- 3 You have to do things without knowledge of the underlying theory or principles.

- **Practical**

Practical learners like to try things out. They like concepts that can be applied to their job.

They learn best when:

- 1 There is an obvious link between the topic and the job.

2 They have an opportunity to try out the idea and get feedback for example in a role play.

3 They can emulate a role model.

If you are a practical learner you may be uncomfortable when:

1 Made to act without practice or guidelines.

2 You can't see any immediate benefit from what you're asked to do.

3 You see the learning or event as too theoretical.

#### 4. Your approach to studying

As with any behavioural model, you should not see this as a strict set of rules, but you are most likely to learn effectively when you can match your learning activity to your learning style. Clearly we don't always have the luxury of such choice but when you're planning something like revision for a summative assessment you can take account of your preferred style.

For example, if you're a practical learner, explore the links between the theories and concepts and your current work, look for ways that things could be applied in practice. If you're an enthusiastic learner, see if you can find someone else to study with so that you can bounce ideas around. While doing that with the things that appeal to you, bear in mind your potential pitfalls. For example, recognise that if you're a logical learner you will need to give yourself a clear objective to a revision session or you'll lose interest in it when you just can't see the point. If you're an imaginative learner you'll need to start revision early so that your creative meanderings don't mean you run out of time.

#### **Exercise:**

Go back over the strengths and weaknesses of your preferred learning style in the 'understanding myself' section and the assessment of your preferred learning environments in the 'applying your knowledge to CIPFA studies' section. Note down the key points from this analysis. In particular take note of the things that are likely to distract you or make you uncomfortable and work out a strategy to counter them.

Some of the things you may adopt include:

For an imaginative learner:

- Make sure you allow adequate time for study and revision and try to stay on task.
- Learn how to use mind maps to effectively tap into your love of diagrammatic representation.
- Use colour to highlight important points in your notes.

For an enthusiastic learner:

- Allow plenty of time for study and revision so that you can take enough breaks to avoid boredom.
- Force yourself to read examination questions thoroughly.
- When you revise, choose active techniques such as summing your notes to key words rather than read and re-read.

For a logical learner:

- Make sure you don't over absorb yourself in drawing up study plans and revision timetables.
- Try to set up a buddy system so that if you get stuck on a topic you have someone you can trust who you can contact for advice.
- When your study material involves charts, graphs and diagrams you might find it more effective to convert them into words.

For a practical learner:

- Try to develop a more open mind by reading around your subject or forcing yourself to discuss it with other people.
- Look for ways of relating the topic you're studying or revising to your working situation.
- Use models and plans wherever you can.

Whatever your learning style try to help yourself with a few common sense tips:

- Set yourself realistic targets that give you a sense of achievement and growth when you reach them.
- Reward yourself for a successful study session (you're on your own as to deciding what is appropriate reward, it could be chocolate, a trip to the cinema, a meal out or whatever). This will give you a more immediate sense of pay-off if the long term goal you established at the start of this booklet seems too distant to be an effective short-term motivator.

- Try not to exhaust yourself with learning. Remember long study sessions are not as effective as a series of shorter ones. Research has shown that for each two hour learning session there is an average recall of 75% if you take three short breaks during the 2 hour slot. It drops to 50% if you take no breaks and to between 30% to 50% if that two hour period is part of a longer study session.
- Use the power of positive thinking by reassuring yourself of your achievements so far and retaining an awareness of the strengths of your own learning style.

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