

Learning Styles

Everyone has their preferred way of learning, and what suits one may not be helpful to another. In a learning relationship such as that between a curate and an incumbent an understanding of preferences and instinctive ways of communicating and working are essential. If, for example, an incumbent who likes to learn by doing and experiencing asks a curate to conduct a pram service for the first time with two days' notice there is likely to be a disaster if the curate is someone who needs to learn by thorough investigation, research and preparation. (Though it must be said that allocating a task with two days' notice is not an example of good practice in any case!)

You will probably be familiar with some version of the 'Learning Cycle' or 'Pastoral Cycle' which suggests that learning happens through engagement with a process of:

- experiencing
- reflecting on what happened
- considering what it means
- planning a future experience

In the case of a pram service, the process (which can start at any point) would look something like this:

- taking responsibility for organising and leading a pram service
- reflecting on what the experience was like for all those involved
- asking how the service relates to wider issues of theology, mission strategy, pastoral policy
- asking what would work in the future and planning 'next time'

Key questions at each point would be:

- can I have a go and do it?
- what are my thoughts, feelings, observations and reflections?
- how does this fit in with our strategy and theology?
- what works well? how can I be effective? what shall we do now?

Different learning styles have been identified:

Activist

Reflector

Theorist

Pragmatist

Most people will feel particularly comfortable with one, perhaps two of these approaches, and find that others come less naturally. These styles roughly correspond with the points on the learning cycle and different questions will be asked at different times.

The activist says 'can I do it now?'

The reflector wants to observe and ask questions, think about how it feels.

The theorist wants to know what it means, how it relates to other systems.

The pragmatist wants to know what will work best.

You may have done a questionnaire which gives you an indication of your preferences, or you may have an instinctive knowledge for what works best for you.

In the learning relationship it is important to experience:

- learning in comfortable, preferred and non-threatening ways
- being expected to learn in ways which are challenging

The following notes outline the characteristics of each style, and ways in which those who are not comfortable with that style as a preferred way of working might seek to develop their skills and effectiveness in that area. We will not be very effective if we can only learn in one way, and sometimes life does not arrange itself to suit our preferences and personality types!

If you are an activist:

You will learn best from activities where

- there are new experiences/problems/opportunities from which to learn
- you can engross yourself in short 'here and now' activities
- there is excitement/drama/crisis and diverse activities
- you have visibility, chair meetings, lead discussion, give presentations
- you are allowed to generate ideas without constraints of policy or structure or feasibility
- you are thrown in at the deep end with a difficult task, such as a challenge with apparently inadequate resources and adverse conditions
- you are involved with other people, bouncing ideas of them, problem solving as a team
- you can 'have a go'

You will learn least, or react against activities where

- you have a passive role, listening to lectures, monologues, explanations, reading, watching
- you are asked to stand back and not be involved
- you are required to assimilate, analyse and interpret lots of 'messy' data
- you are required to engage in solitary work such as reading, writing, thinking on your own
- you are asked to assess beforehand what you will learn and appraise afterwards
- you are offered statements you see as 'theoretical' explanations of cause or background
- you are asked to repeat essentially the same activity over and over again
- you have precise instructions to follow and little room for manoeuvre
- you are asked to be thorough and detailed, tie up loose ends, dot Is and cross Ts

Key Questions for you will be

- Shall I learn something new that I did not know or could not do before?
- Will there be a wide variety of different activities? (I don't want to sit and listen for more than an hour at a stretch)
- Will it be ok to have a go/let my hair down/make mistakes/have fun?
- Shall I encounter some tough problems and challenges?
- Will there be other like-minded people to mix with?
- Will I have the opportunity to do something?

If you are a reflector:

You will learn best from activities where

- you are allowed or encouraged to watch/think/chew over activities
- you are able to stand back from events and listen/observe, i.e. taking a back seat in a meeting, watch a film or video
- you can think before acting, assimilate before commenting, have time to prepare, read in advance, have background information
- you can carry out painstaking research, investigate, assemble information, get to the bottom of things
- you have the opportunity to review what has happened and what you have learnt
- you are asked to produce carefully considered analyses and reports
- you are helped to exchange views with others without danger i.e. by prior arrangement or within a structured learning experience
- you can reach a decision in your own time without pressure and tight deadlines

You will learn least from, or react against activities where

- you are forced into the limelight, act as chair or leader, role play in front of others
- you are involved in situations which require action without planning
- you are pitched into doing something without warning, to produce an instant reaction or top-of-the head idea
- you have insufficient data on which to base a conclusion
- you are given cut and dried instructions on how things should be done
- you are worried by time pressure or rushed from one activity to another
- in the interests of expedience you have to make short cuts or do a superficial job

Key Questions for you will be:

- Shall I be given adequate time to consider, assimilate and prepare?
- Will there be opportunities/facilities to assemble relevant information?
- Will there be opportunities to listen to other people's points of view, preferably a wide cross section of people with a variety of views?
- Will I have adequate time to prepare and not to under pressure to extemporise?
- Will there be useful opportunities to watch other people in action?

If you are a theorist:

You will learn best from activities where

- what is being offered is part of a system, model , concept or theory
- you have the chance to question the basic methodology, assumptions or logic behind something
- you are intellectually stretched, by analysing a complex situation, tested in tutorial situation, working with high calibre people who ask searching questions
- you are in structured situations with a clear purpose
- you can listen to or read about ideas and concepts that emphasis rationality or logic and are well argued/elegant
- you can analyse and then generalise the reasons for success or failure
- you are offered interesting ideas and concepts even though they are not immediately relevant
- you are required to understand and participate in complex situations

You will learn least from, or react against activities where

- you are pitchforked into doing something without a context or apparent purpose
- you have to participate in situations emphasising emotions and feelings
- you are involved in unstructured activities where ambiguity and uncertainty are high i.e. with open ended problems
- you are asked to act or decide without a basis in policy, principle or concept
- you are faced with alternative/contradictory techniques/methods without exploring any in depth i.e. as in a very superficial and general course
- you doubt that the subject matter is methodically sound i.e. questionnaires not validated, or statistics not available to support an argument
- you find the subject matter platitudinous, shallow or gimmicky
- you feel out of tune with other participants, i.e. lots of activists or people of lower intellectual calibre

Key Questions for you will be

- Will there be lots of opportunities to question?
- Do the objectives and programme of events indicate a clear structure and purpose?
- Shall I encounter complex ideas and concepts that are likely to stretch me?
- Are the approaches to be used and concepts to be explored sound and valid?
- Shall I be with people of similar calibre to myself?
- Will this experience give me the chance to develop a general view or model?

If you are a pragmatist:

You will learn best from activities where:

- there is an obvious link between the subject matter and a problem or opportunity on the job
- you are shown techniques for doing things with obvious practical advantages i.e. how to save time, make an impression, deal with awkward people
- you are exposed to a model you can emulate and practise techniques with coaching and feedback from someone with credibility and experience
- you are given techniques currently applicable to your own job
- you are given immediate opportunities to implement what you have learnt
- there is high face value in the learning activity i.e. 'real' problems/situations
- you can concentrate on practical issues, i.e. action plans with obvious end result

You will learn least from, or react against activities where

- the learning is not related to an immediate need or benefit you recognise
- organisers of the learning seem distant from reality, all theory, ivory towered
- there is no practice or clear guidelines on how to do it
- you feel that people are going round in circles and not getting anywhere
- there are political, managerial or personal obstacles to implementation
- you can't see sufficient reward from the learning activity i.e. better competence, shorter meetings, increased effectiveness

Key Questions for you will be

- Will there be ample opportunities to practise and experiment?
- Will there be lots of practical tips and techniques?
- Shall we be addressing real problems and will it result in action plans to tackle some of my current problems?
- Shall we be exposed to experts who know how to/can do it themselves?
- Will this really contribute to the immediate performance of myself and my colleagues?

Developing your 'activist'

If this is not your preferred style, you may be inhibited from being more of an activist by

- fear of failure and making mistakes
- fear of ridicule
- anxiety about trying new or unfamiliar things
- self-doubt, lacking self-confidence
- taking life very seriously, very earnestly

Consider:

- Doing something new, something you have never done before, once each week. Visit a part of your organisation you are unfamiliar with, go jogging at lunchtime, read an unfamiliar newspaper, change the layout of your furniture in your office
- Practise initiating conversations with strangers. At conferences and large gatherings force yourself to initiate and sustain conversations with everyone present.
- Deliberately fragment your day by changing activities each half hour. Make the change diverse, from cerebral activity to something routine and mechanical. If you have been talking, keep quiet; if sitting, then move about.
- Force yourself into the limelight. Volunteer to chair meetings or give presentations. Determine to contribute to a meeting within the first ten minutes.
- Practise thinking aloud and on your feet. Think of a problem and bounce ideas off a colleague, engage in games with a group such as speaking impromptu for five minutes on a given subject

Developing your 'reflector'

If this is not your preferred style , you may be inhibited from being more of a reflective by:

- being short of time to plan or think
- preferring to move quickly from one activity to another
- being impatient for action
- a reluctance to listen carefully and analytically
- a reluctance to write things down

Consider:

- Practise observing, especially at meetings with agenda items that do not directly involve you. Study people's behaviour. Keep records about who does the most talking, who interrupts whom, what triggers disagreements, how often the chairman summarises and so on. Study non-verbal behaviour. When do people lean forward or back? How do they emphasise a point with a gesture? Notice people looking at watches, folding arms, chewing a pencil etc.
- Keep a diary and each evening write an account of the day. Reflect on the events of the day and any conclusions you draw from them.
- Practise reviewing after a meeting or an event. Go back over the sequence of events identifying what went well and what could have gone better. Perhaps tape

conversations or meetings and play back, reviewing the details of the interaction. List observation, lessons learnt or conclusions drawn.

- Give yourself something to research, which requires painstaking gathering of data from different sources. Find information from libraries or talk to people about their knowledge or experience.
- Practise producing highly polished pieces of writing, Give yourselves essays to write on various topics (which you may have researched). Write a report or paper about something. Draft a policy document, or other statements about agreements and procedures. Volunteer to do the writing up for these types of tasks. Review what you have written and find ways of improving the clarity of information or style.
- Practise drawing up lists for and against a particular course of action. Take a contentious issue and produce balanced arguments from both points of view. When you are with people who want to rush into action, caution them to consider options and anticipate consequences.

Developing your ‘theorist’

If this is not your preferred style, you may be inhibited from being more of a theorist by :

- taking things at face value
- a preference for intuition and subjectivity
- a dislike of a structured approach to life
- giving high priority to fun loving/spontaneity

Consider:

- Read something ‘heavy’ and thought provoking for at least 30 minutes each day. Summarise what you have read in your own words.
- Practise spotting weaknesses or inconsistencies in other people’s arguments. Look at different newspapers of different persuasions and comparatively analyse their points of view.
- Collect other people’s theories, hypotheses and explanations about events; whether environmental issues, theology, natural sciences, human behaviour, anything which is a topic with different and preferably contradictory theories. Try to understand the underlying assumptions each theory is based on and see if you can group similar theories together.
- Practise structuring situations so that they are orderly and more certain to proceed in the way you predict. For example, plan a conference where delegates are going to work in different groupings. Structure the timetable, tasks and plenary sessions. Try

structuring a meeting by having a clear purpose, an agenda, and a planned beginning, middle and end.

- Practise asking questions, the sort of questions that get to the bottom of things. Refuse to be fobbed off with platitudes or vague answers. Particularly ask questions designed to find out precisely why something has occurred: 'What is the relationship between this problem and what happened last week?'

Developing your 'pragmatist'

If this is not your preferred style, you may be inhibited from being more of a pragmatist by :

- a preference for perfect (rather than practical) problems
- seeing even useful techniques as oversimplifications or gimmicks
- enjoying interesting diversions (and being side tracked)
- leaving things open ended rather than committing to specific action
- believing that someone else's ideas will not work in your situation

Consider:

- Collect techniques, i.e. practical ways of doing things. They can be about anything useful to you and the tasks you regularly undertake. They might be time saving techniques, ways of being efficient or effective or personal techniques to improve your memory, cope with stress or lower your blood pressure.
- In meetings and discussions of any kind concentrate on producing action plans. Make it a rule never to emerge from a meeting without a list of actions for yourself or others or both. The actions should be specific and include a deadline.
- Make opportunities to experiment with newfound techniques. Tell other people you are experimenting. Avoid situations where a lot is at stake. Experiment in routine settings with people whose support or aid you can enlist.
- Study techniques other people use and model yourself on them. Pick up techniques from colleagues.
- Subject yourself to scrutiny from 'experts' so that they can observe your techniques and methods, offer feedback and coach you.
- Tackle a do it yourself project – renovate a piece of furniture or put up a shelf. Calculate your own statistics. Learn to type or word process or a new computer skill. Learn or teach yourself a foreign language.