

ENGAGING THE ADULT LEARNER THROUGH INNOVATIVE TEACHING METHODOLOGY THAT BEST FITS THEIR LEARNING STYLE

Prof.(Dr.) Deepa Diddi¹, Prof.Sangeeta Shahane²

^{1,2}IBS Gurgaon (India)

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore and find remedies for the disagreement and disinterest in the adult learner due to traditional method of teaching. The paper speaks in favour of innovative methods of teaching based on the various learning styles as expounded by Kolb and Fleming. The researchers pinpoint the fact that teaching methodologies in line with the learning styles have the potential not only to improve education, but also to empower the adult learner thereby galvanize efforts to achieve the human resource development goal for the industry. In this experiential paradigm of learning, role of the student is more important than the teachers. We need to have higher levels of interactive teaching in the changing role of education with the tech savvy generation. The paper indicates the importance of assessment of learning style while preparing content and mode of delivery to suit to the students needs. The problem based approach according to the researchers is helpful as it ensures that the students remain at the center of the learning process.

Key Words: Experiential Learning, Learning Styles, Teaching Methodologies, Teaching Aids

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is described as the total life experience acquired by individuals in order to adapt in different environment and appreciate living in the global world. This gives opportunity for individuals to raise and build a better society individually and collectively. The development and prosperity of any nation depends on the quality of the education received by its citizens. As teachers, the main idea of teaching is not to quantify how much can be memorized by the student but how the student understands the phenomenon in order to apply the knowledge for the benefit of mankind. No two teachers are alike, and all teachers will agree that their teaching style is unique. Over the years I have learnt that each teaching strategy will have a different impact on the learning outcome in each student, based on the attributes and use of the strategy, cognitive styles and learning preferences. Students, especially adult ones, are more likely to remember information with which they can agree or relate to, and forget that with which they disagree. Disagreement or disharmony should therefore be explored in an objective fashion. The paper tries to throw light on the expectations of the adult learner and as teachers how can we meet them! We have taken into account the learning styles of different students and how being aware of the learning and teaching styles we can enhance the learning process of our students and make them life long learners.

II. ADULT LEARNER

Adult Learners are autonomous and self-directed; have a foundation of life experiences and knowledge; are goal-oriented; relevancy-oriented; practical; and need to be shown respect. Adults are characterized by maturity, self-confidence, autonomy, decision-making, and are generally more practical, adept at multi-tasking, purposeful, self-directed, experienced, and less open-minded and receptive to change. All these traits affect their motivation, as well as their ability to learn. So let's study the adult learners' cognitive and social characteristics, and what educationists need to know in order to create the right course content and structure, and adjust their attitude.

Self-direction- Adults feel the need to take responsibility for their lives and decisions and this is why it's important for them to have control over their learning. Therefore, self-assessment, a peer relationship with the instructor, multiple options and subtle support are all imperative.

- Practical and results-oriented- Adult learners are usually practical, resent theory, need information that can be immediately applicable to their professional needs, and generally prefer practical knowledge that will improve their skills, facilitate their work and boost their confidence. This is why it's important to create a course that will cover their individual needs and have a more practical and pragmatic content.
- Less open-minded and therefore more resistant to change- Maturity and profound life experiences usually lead to rigidity in adult learners. It is imperative that instructional designers provide the "why" behind the change, new concepts that can be linked to already established ones, and promote the need to explore.
- Integrative knowledge- The depth of learning in the adult learner tends to increase over time, taking knowledge and skills to unprecedented personal levels.
- Use personal experience as a resource- Adults have the tendency to link their past experiences to anything new and validate new concepts based on prior learning. This is why it's crucial to, encourage discussion and sharing, and try to create a learning community consisting of people who can interact.
- Motivation- Learning in adulthood is usually voluntary. It is crucial to tap into a learner's intrinsic impetus with the right thought-provoking material that will question conventional wisdom and stimulate his mind.
- High expectations- Adult learners have high expectations. They want to be taught about things that will be useful to their work, expect to have immediate results, look for a course that will be worth their while and not be a waste of their time or money. This is why it's important to create a course that will maximize their advantages, meet their individual needs and address all the learning challenges.

III. CHALLENGE FOR INSTITUTIONS AND EDUCATORS

The implication from the above discussion is that challenges and opportunities exist for educators to provide a course content which meets the expectations of the adult learner and simultaneously focuses on enhancing their employability skills as expected by the industry. In a study done in Australia (Meyer Committee) a set of key competencies have been identified as essential for all the young people who need to participate effectively in the emerging forms of work and work organization. Some of these are, communicating ideas and information, planning and organising activities, working with others and in teams, using mathematical ideas and techniques, solving problems and using technology. Similar studies have been done in India by the Confederation of Indian

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Industry (CII) and Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASSOCHAM). Their studies have identified transferable skills or employability skills which are not job specific but are generic in nature and are required horizontally across all job functions at all levels in the Industry. Out of these the major non-technical skills required by the workforce in India are communication skills, presentation skills, team work, decision making and multiple tasking. Many other recent studies have also shown that communication skills at workplace is one of the key competencies which is found to be lacking and has been a major impediment for the existing as well as emerging workforce in getting jobs. Hence, in order to compete at workplace in the present global scenario and with the global workforce, the ability to read, write and speak effectively in English seems to be not just beneficial but also essential. This would have a direct impact on the effective display and usage of the employability skills.

Although the Indian Industry has seen tremendous growth and it is estimated that at present it is contributing almost 350,000 engineers and 2.5 million university graduates annually to our workforce, yet at any given time millions of graduates remain unemployable in the country, and justifiably so because due to its competitive edge on global platform. Indian industry can ill-afford to compromise on this aspect as it would result in lowering of the standards and would have a direct impact on their output.

A huge workforce is required by the Industry on a continuous basis since it has shown great potential and has been growing at a very rapid pace. But the reality is such that despite of such requirements by the industry and a continuous supply of manpower from the Institutes unemployment is still rampant. This is an upsetting trend and one needs to look for solutions to this problem since this would lead to better employment for our future workforce.

We therefore have to bring the change in order to meet the requirement of the industry. The purpose of education is to ensure learners are inspired to strive for excellence in whatever they do. Industry expects the graduates they hire to be well equipped in employability skills, to quickly adapt to the work culture and environment. Employability Skills include: Communication, Teamwork, Problem Solving, Self-Management, Planning and Organising, Technology, Lifelong Learning, Initiative and Enterprise.

Including all these skills in the curriculum and ensuring that they become part of the individual is indeed a challenge for institutions and teachers!

This is where innovative methods of teaching based on the learning styles of students come into play. The lecture method should be supplemented with the new innovative styles. One of the biggest challenges for teachers is in developing a blend of strategies to bring about effective learning in all students. Part of the challenge is the fit between the teachers' style and learning preference and that of each of the learner. One has to keep in mind and be aware of one's own approaches to learning and how these approaches enhance or hinder the learning of others.

IV. LEARNING STYLES

When teachers are asked to cater for individual variances it does not mean that every student must be given an individual work program or that instruction must be on a one-to-one basis. When teaching and learning is individualised it is reflected in the classroom organisation, curriculum and mode of instruction. Teaching and

learning strategies can include a range of whole class, group and individual activities to accommodate different abilities, skills, learning rates and styles that allow every student to participate and to achieve some degree of success. It is not enough to be merely a teacher who wears a “know all” mask, but a facilitator who understands one’s students, empathizes with them, and in fact becomes a part of the search with one’s students, for knowledge and wisdom.

I was inspired when a student shared this excerpt narrating a young girl’s experience about learning to ride a bicycle.

“I sometimes ride a bicycle to school. When and how did I learn it? I remember it was during the summer vacation when I was seven. I was the youngest in the family and too small to reach the pedals on my brother’s bike. So my parents bought me a small bicycle. I got on to the bike and came down hard on the pedals. I tipped over. I got back and tipped again. The bike fell on top of me and I had bruises all over. Kids younger and smaller than I could ride a bicycle with great ease. I had to learn, so I kept at it. In a week I could ride pretty well. Today I can read, write, swim, cook and drive a car and also do minor repair work. I learned them all the same way. There is something very simple in this way of learning. I needed to know or do something, so I went after it. It was hard, and hurt at times, but it worked. But learning in the classroom was not like learning to ride a bicycle. Often I sat passive, waiting for the class to be over. Sometimes I got interested in something and read about it. Anyhow, I did well in tests and exams and everyone thought I was a good student, but I have forgotten many things I learned in school!”

This sentence is what concerns me: “I have forgotten many things I learned in school.” The effort that whatever is done in the class is imbibed and stays with the students led to lot of experimentation. I realized we are all unique, we think and learn differently, and so we find some classes interesting as it suits our learning style whereas we doze off with open eyes in others. The best ways we can bring about effective learning is by recognizing students as individuals, with unique, personal ways of knowing and learning.

Kolb’s learning Style Model along with Fleming’s VAK learning Styles model has proved to be effective in recognising the various learning styles and then designing the class modules to best fit all the styles.

Kolb explains that different people prefer a certain single learning style. Various factors influence a person’s preferred learning style. Kolb defined 3 stages of a person’s development and suggests that our propensity to reconcile and successfully integrate the 4 different learning styles improves as we mature through our development stages. The development stages that he identified are:

- Acquisition- birth to adolescence- this stage marks the development of basic abilities and cognitive structures
- Specialisation – schooling, early work, and personal experiences of adulthood- the development of a particular ‘specialised learning style’ shaped by social, educational and organizational socialization
- Integration – mid career through later life – expression of non dominant learning style in work and personal life

He further remarked that whatever influences the choice of style, the learning style preference is the product of two pairs of variables, or two separate choices that we make. Kolb presented these on two lines of axis, each with conflicting modes at either end:

The East West Axis, called the Processing Continuum, which talks about how we approach a task? The two variables on this axis being Concrete Experience- CE (Feeling) -----V -----

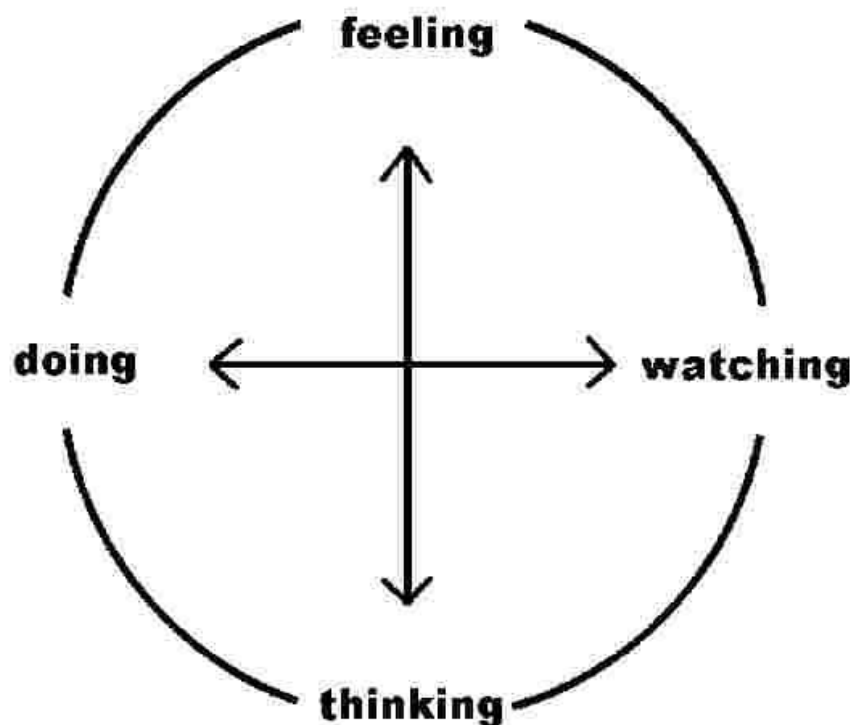
Abstract Conceptualisation – AC (Thinking)

The North- South Axis being the Perception Continuum. The axis represents how we think or feel about the task. The variables of this axis being Active Experimentation – AE (Doing) -----V -----

Reflective Observation – RO (Watching)

Kolb says that we decide whether we wish to do or to watch and at the same time we decide whether to think or to feel. The result of these 2 decisions produces the preferred learning style. We choose a way of ‘grasping the experience’, which defines our approach to it, and we choose a way to transform the experience into something meaningful and usable, which defines our emotional response to the experience. Our learning style is the product of these 2 choice decisions:

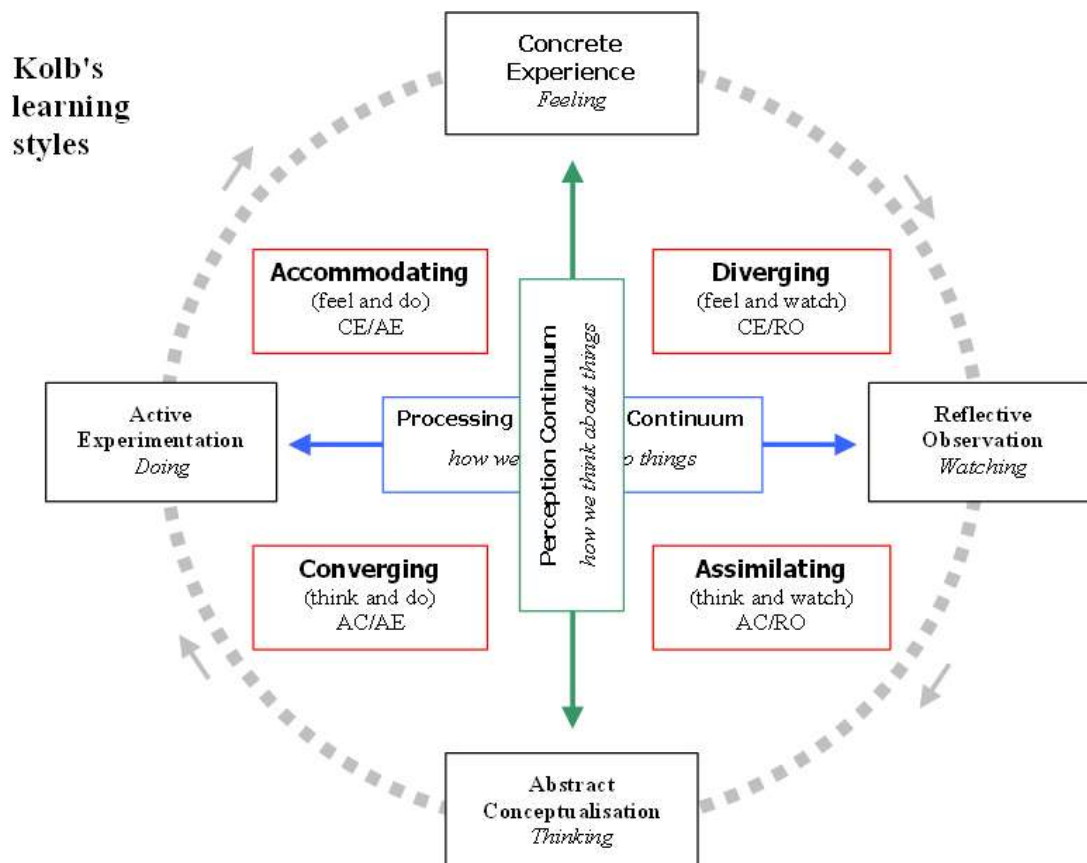
- How to approach a task- i.e., grasping experience- preferring to (a) watch or (b) to do
- Our emotional response to the experience – i.e., transforming experience – preferring to (a) think or (b) feel



In other words, we choose our approach to the task or experience by opting to (a) watch others involved in the experience and reflecting on what happens (reflective observation – watching) or by (b) jumping straight in and just doing it (active experimentation- doing). At the same time, we choose how to emotionally transform the experience into something meaningful and useful by opting for either, (a) gaining new information by thinking, analyzing or planning (abstract conceptualization- thinking) or (b) through experiencing the concrete, tangible,

felt qualities of the world (concrete experience- feeling). The combination of the two choices produces a preferred learning style.

From the image on the next page, we can easily make out that a person with a dominant learning style of doing the task and feeling the experience will have an Accommodating learning style. A person with Diverging learning style will watch and feel, an Assimilator would watch and think, whereas a Converger would think and act.



Lets also take a look at the VAK Learning Styles.

The Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic learning styles model or 'inventory', usually abbreviated to VAK, provides a simple way to explain and understand one's own learning style and learning styles of others. 'Learning style' should be interpreted to mean an individual mixture of styles. Everyone has a mixture of strengths and preferences. No-one has exclusively one single style or preference. Learners use all three modalities to receive and learn new information and experiences. However, according to the VAK or modality theory, one or two of these receiving styles is normally dominant. This dominant style defines the best way for a person to learn new information by filtering what is to be learned. This style may not always to be the same for some tasks. The learner may prefer one style of learning for one task, and a combination of others for a different task.

A person does not necessarily possess abilities or strengths in all of the characteristics but may instead specialize in some of the characteristics. Some of this may be due to a person's educational background or background of experiences. For example, an auditory learner may be strong in the area of language skills but

may not have had the experience to develop skills with a foreign language or music.

A visual learner learns best by seeing information, can easily understand and recall printed information in the form of numbers, words, phrases, or sentences, information presented in pictures, charts, or diagrams, have strong visual-spatial skills that involve sizes, shapes, textures, angles and dimensions. An auditory learner learns best by hearing information, can accurately remember details of information heard in conversations or lectures, have often strong oral skills that enable them to be articulate, have finely tuned ears, often have exceptional musical talents.

A kinesthetic learner learns best by doing. They learn well in activities that involve performing, they are well coordinated with a strong sense of timing and body movements, often labelled as hyperactive.

When teaching adult learners, there is a shift in the relationship between faculty member and students, and a shift in the way that learners will perceive the effectiveness of different teaching methods. Hill has defined three areas where adult learners have identified specific teacher traits that they found beneficial to their learning (2014). These three areas are teaching competencies, relationships with students, and teacher attitudes.

- Teacher competencies included having relevant practice knowledge —providing relevant, real time information and teaching practice applications as well as theory— and teaching material that is up-to-date and evidence based. Adult learners were appreciative of instructors who were able to structure classroom learning, implement a variety of teaching techniques, and stimulate discussion. They expected instructors to follow the syllabus, and had very little patience for instructors who were unprepared for class.
- In forming relationships with their instructors, adult learners valued instructors who were approachable and available, and were flexible both in regard to deadlines and class activities. They found it important that the instructor valued and validated their experience, as well were sympathetic to the problems faced by them.
- With regard to teacher attitude, adult learners appreciated instructors who were fun and enthusiastic and who listened to students, viewed 'students as having knowledge and did not treat them like blank slates.

Part of the challenge is the fit between the teachers' style and learning preference and that of each of the learner. One has to keep in mind and be aware of one's own approaches to learning and how these approaches enhance or hinder the learning of others.

V. TYPES OF TEACHERS

Based on various researches teachers can be categorised into five broad categories, an expert, formal authority, personal mode, facilitator and a delegator.

VI. TEACHER AS AN EXPERT

An expert possesses Possesses knowledge and expertise that students need. Expert teaching style strives to maintain status as an expert among students by displaying detailed knowledge. The professor-as- expert attempts to challenge students to enhance their competence. The expert concentrates on transmitting information, and requires that students be prepared to learn and use that information. The expert's information, knowledge, and skills are the combined advantage of this teaching style. The disadvantage is that, if overused, the display of knowledge may intimidate less experienced students. Also, the display of knowledge and skills

may not always reveal their underpinnings.

VII. TEACHER AS FORMAL AUTHORITARIAN

Possesses status among students because of knowledge, and role as a faculty member. In this style professors provide positive and negative feedback. The professor establishes learning goals and expectations and rules of conduct, providing students with a learning structure. Students concentrate on correct, acceptable, and standard methods. The advantage is that the focus is on clear expectations and acceptable methods. The disadvantage is that a strong investment in this style can lead to rigid, standardized, and less flexible ways of managing students and their concerns.

VIII. TEACHER AS A PERSONAL MODEL

Believes in teaching by personal example. This professor establishes a prototype for thinking and behavior, then oversees, guides, and directs by showing how to do things. A Personal Model teacher also encourages students to observe, then emulate the instructor's approach. The advantage is an emphasis on direct observation and emulation of a role model. The disadvantage is that some professors may believe that their approach is the best way, leading some students to feel inadequate if they cannot live up to the expectations and standards of the method they see.

IX. TEACHER AS A FACILITATOR

Emphasizes the personal nature of teacher-student interactions. The professor guides and directs students by asking questions, exploring options, and suggesting alternatives. The professor encourages students to develop criteria to make informed choices. The professor concentrates on the overall classroom goal of developing the capacity for independent action, initiative, and responsibility, while providing students with as much support and encouragement as possible. The advantage is the personal flexibility provided by a professor's focus on students' needs and goals. This allows the student to explore options and alternative courses of action. The disadvantage is that this style can be time-consuming; sometimes more direct approach is needed; can make learner uncomfortable

X. TEACHER AS A DELEGATOR

This professor develops students' capacity to function in an autonomous fashion. This educator encourages students to work on projects independently or as part of autonomous teams. He or she is available upon request as a resource person. This approach has the advantage of helping students perceive themselves as independent learners, but it may cause professors to misread student's readiness for independent work. Some students may become anxious when given autonomy. The disadvantage being that learners may not have capability to function in an autonomous manner; some learners are anxious when not closely supervised.

A teacher over the years develops all the traits of the above mentioned styles unconsciously. The current scenario requires the expert teacher to consciously undertake the journey to become a facilitator and a delegator,

to involve all the learning styles present in the classroom thereby ensuring that the student is involved in the learning process.

XI. CONCLUSION

The training which learners receive should prepare them to direct the course of their own learning, that is, it should take them from their states of varying degrees of dependence to the state of independence or autonomy. If this is to occur, then the learner must acquire a number of relevant techniques or strategies. After considering students' needs, learning styles and levels of achievement in relation to the learning outcomes, it is important for the faculty to select strategies focusing on a) the development of knowledge, skills and attitude that will assist students to engage in the essential content, b) that will support and extend learning to enable adult students to make progress in their achievement and c) maximize their accomplishment of the learning outcome.

Information from Kolb's four dimensions serves as an excellent example. Let's take a look:

- Students who are convergers readily become bored with straight lecture, especially with topics that are abstract in nature. These students work better by themselves so they are less likely to participate well in a group. As facilitators we can give them a pre-task, an essay, or research paper to read and come prepared for a discussion or presentation in class.
- Learners with the divergent style learn from case studies and will actively participate in discussion, but they may have difficulty detaching personal values from the issue. These students are often visionary group leaders. They have to be given a constructive feedback on being objective.
- Individuals with the assimilator style manipulate ideas well, so they will participate well in discussion, or write comprehensive papers; however, these students may be less practical. Thinkers and reflectors, they should be engaged in a manner where their creativity and out of box thinking is highlighted.
- Accommodators usually enjoy case studies, new or unusual teaching strategies, skill lab, and tinkering with new equipment. These learners tend to be more responsive to a challenging complex situation.

According to the VAK theorists, we need to present information using all three styles. This allows all learners the opportunity to become involved, no matter what their preferred style may be.

Auditory learners often talk to themselves. They also may move their lips and read out loud. They may have difficulty with reading and writing tasks. They often do better talking to a colleague or a tape recorder and hearing what was said. To integrate this style into the learning environment, teachers could:

- Begin new material with a brief explanation of what is coming. Conclude with a summary of what has been covered. This is the old adage of "tell them what they are going to learn, teach them, and tell them what they have learned."
- Use the Socratic method of lecturing by questioning learners to draw as much information from them as possible and then fill in the gaps with your own expertise.
- Include auditory activities, such as brainstorming, buzz groups, or Jeopardy. Leave plenty of time to debrief activities. This allows them to make connections of what they have learned and how it applies to their situation.

- Have the learners verbalize the questions
- Develop an internal dialogue between yourself and the learners.

Visual learners have two sub-channels—linguistic and spatial. Learners who are visual-linguistic like to learn through written language, such as reading and writing tasks. They remember what has been written down, even if they do not read it more than once. They like to write down directions and pay better attention to lectures if they watch them. Learners who are visual-spatial usually have difficulty with the written language and do better with charts, demonstrations, videos, and other visual materials. They easily visualize faces and places by using their imagination and seldom get lost in new surroundings. To integrate this style into the learning environment, we can:

- Use graphs, charts, illustrations, or other visual aids.
- Include outlines, concept maps, agendas, handouts, etc. for reading and taking notes.
- Include plenty of content in handouts to re-read after the learning session.
- Leave white space in handouts for note-taking.
- Invite questions to help them stay alert in auditory environments.
- Post flip charts to show what will come and what has been presented.
- Emphasize key points to cue when to takes notes.
- Supplement textual information with illustrations whenever possible.
- Have them draw pictures in the margins
- Have the learners envision the topic or have them act out the subject matter.

Kinesthetic learners do best while touching and moving. It also has two sub-channels: kinesthetic (movement) and tactile (touch). They tend to lose concentration if there is little or no external stimulation or movement. When listening to lectures they may want to take notes for the sake of moving their hands. When reading, they like to scan the material first, and then focus in on the details (get the big picture first). They typically use color high lighters and take notes by drawing pictures, diagrams, or doodling. To integrate this style into the learning environment the following techniques can be used:

- Activities that get the learners up and moving.
- Play music, when appropriate, during activities.
- Use colored markers to emphasize key points on flip charts or white boards.
- Give frequent stretch breaks (brain breaks).
- Provide high lighters, colored pens and/or pencils.
- Guide learners through a visualization of complex tasks.
- Have them transfer information from the text to another medium such as a keyboard or a tablet.

Our educational system is failing to meet the real needs of our society. We, as teachers, have to create a genuinely humane climate in which we have to initiate a process where a young person can find him/herself respected, can make responsible choices, can experience the excitement of learning, can lay the basis for living as an effective, concerned citizen, well informed, competent in knowledge and skills and confident of facing the

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future. The ultimate aim of education – of all attempts at teaching – is to make the learners capable of doing things on their own. They need to be able to cope with the unpredictable.

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