

when learners need the skills or knowledge to pass an assessment

- Learning by doing. Active learning is generally believed to be more motivating, especially with adult learners
- Learning from feedback. Let the learners find out how they are doing
- Making sense of what has been learned. Developing understanding must be at the heart of teaching. Anything else is just training or passing on information.

In order to motivate your learners you need to identify ways of maximising each of these five influences. This will be through the way you design the learning opportunity and the techniques you use; and the way you can respond to the learners.

#### Theories of learning

Many theories, based on different assumptions about human nature and society, are used to explain how people learn.

#### Behaviourism

The focus of learning is a change in behaviour.<sup>3</sup> This has influenced the increasingly popular focus on problem-solving or trial and error learning, with the teacher intervening to encourage or dissuade the learners' decisions or directions.

#### Cognitivist theories

These consider how awareness of the outside world is internalised either through assimilation (or fitting the ideas into your mind) or accommodation (by changing your existing knowledge or understanding), perhaps by extending learning potential through effective support.<sup>4,5</sup> This has influenced much learner support and informal teaching activity.

#### Social learning

Jarvis, Holford and Griffin<sup>6</sup> use this term to discuss the influence of sociology and social psychology on learning theory. We exist in society and therefore learn within it. Our learning is naturally conditioned by our environment, be it our national culture, gender expectations, social class or immediate peer group.

#### Experiential learning

This is the process of taking the learners' experiences and turning them into learning. This is most widely known through Kolb's learning cycle (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> The principle is that ideas are formed and

‘Does a desire for, or expectation of, dependency still underpin many of our assumptions about how we engage in... supporting learning and development activities among our users?’

re-formed through a cycle of experience.

Experiential learning approaches are often used when working with adults. Kolb's learning cycle can be a very powerful way of structuring a learning and teaching event.

#### Constructivism

This draws on the last three approaches. The underlying assumption of constructivism is that learners do not absorb knowledge passively, but rather construct their learning on the basis of prior knowledge and experiences. Learning is more effective if learners are encouraged to try out and test what they have learned through problem-solving.<sup>8</sup> Many online learning environments are based on constructivist approaches, designing a rich learning universe of content, activity and interaction within the same virtual space.

#### Personality and learning

Curry<sup>9</sup> provides a helpful classification of learning styles, which may relate to:

- personality type (for example introverts and extroverts)
- information-processing preference
- instructional preference.

Following Curry, a learning style may be described as the strategy that you adopt when learning, or it might be your cognitive style for learning, i.e. whether your learning style is innate or a response to external forces.

Some of the learning strategies you will come across are:

- Deep and surface learning. A surface approach is where learners will adapt their learning to match the requirements of a course, simply regurgitating the information required, but not retaining the new knowledge for any length of time. Deep learning takes place when learners absorb or digest the new information and can process it in different contexts.
- Holistic and serialist. Serialist learners work step by step in a linear way, usually

only pulling together a complete picture at the end. Holistic learners try to put a whole picture together at the start and fit the details in later. Setting activities to do piece by piece would work well with serialist learners, but would be less effective for holistic learners. A holistic learner might prefer topic-based learning or the freedom to explore on their own within an overall area.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the most popular cognitive style descriptions are:

- Kolb's experiential learning style. Kolb's description of the learning cycle is also translated into individual learning styles, relating to whether you are a concrete or an abstract thinker and if you process information in an active or reflective way. The two dimensions combine to form four different learning styles:

*Diverger* – you think in concrete terms and process what you learn reflectively. You need to be personally engaged in the learning activity

*Converger* – you perceive information abstractly and process it reflectively. You need to follow detailed sequential steps in a learning activity

*Assimilator* – you think in abstractions and process your new knowledge actively in the company of others. You would need to be involved in pragmatic problem solving in a learning activity

*Accommodator* – you think in concrete terms and process it actively. You need to be involved in risk-taking, making changes, experimentation and flexibility.

- Honey and Mumford<sup>11</sup> applied Kolb's theories to define four different learning styles most often applied to management development:

*Activists* – respond best to learning situations offering challenges, and enjoy new experiences, excitement and freedom in their learning ('learning by doing something new').

*Pragmatists* – like relevant learning opportunities with scope for theory and practice ('learning what is useful')

*Reflectors* – prefer structured learning opportunities which provide time to step back and observe, reflect and think about what has happened. They often seek out detail ('learning through reflection')

*Theorists* – like logical, rational structure, clear aims and the opportunity to question and analyse what they have learnt ('learning from theory').

- Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner<sup>12</sup> used biological as well as cultural research to formulate a theory of multiple intelligences, which are:

