

Alternate Title: How learning styles can improve our communication skills

'Learning styles' are about how people prefer to receive information. Research shows that each person has their own unique preference for how they receive and process information. But don't fall into the trap of thinking that **learning styles** are exclusively bound to classrooms and training activities, etc.

Learning styles and Communication

Learning styles can help us whenever we are providing information to someone and are looking to **make a connection** with them. Having a working knowledge of **learning styles** will allow every one of us to *improve our communication skills*. Firstly, we will become more effective as 'presenters' of information; secondly, when we know what our own preferences are, we can become more effective as 'receivers' of information.

Whoever we are, and whatever we do, throughout the day most of us are 'transmitting' information to others, mainly through speech, or in writing. Whether we are speaking or writing, or using some other mode (e.g. drawings or graphics), most of us will invariably present our information in a manner which would suit us if we were the 'receiver'.

Communication and Memory

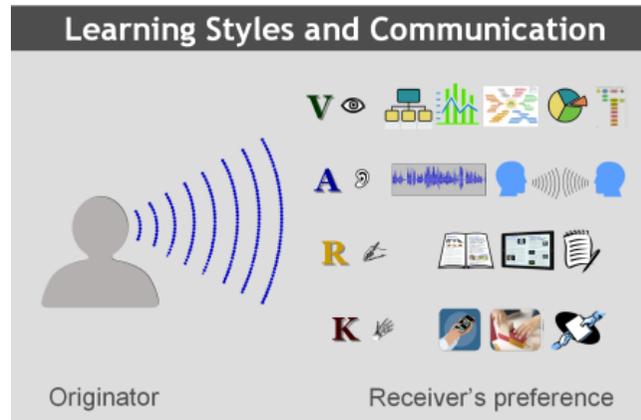
At the same time, we are also taking in information regularly throughout the day. At home, at work, or 'out and about', all of the time we are seeing and hearing, as well as touching, tasting, and smelling. But, because of the way that our memory works, only a small amount of that information actually 'sticks' [See: [The Brain – how memory works](#)].

There are two problems here:

- firstly, information is usually presented in a manner that suits the 'transmitter', but this presentation may not necessarily suit the audience,
- secondly, when we are the 'receiver', we tend to be selective about what we take into our short-term (or working) memory – basically it is only what catches our attention.

Individual preferences

Because each person has their own preference for how they receive and process information, there will be a significant number of people who are forced into receiving in a 'less preferred' mode. That means some information may not catch everyone's attention. The consequence will be that while some people will retain parts of what was presented, there will be others who retain very little at all.



Applying learning styles can help improve communications

And so, here we have one of the reasons why we sometimes do not **make a connection** – we did not 'get' the other person's attention. When we are presenting information to someone, we need to do it in a manner that will catch their attention, which will improve the chances of retention. This is where our knowledge of **learning styles** will give us an edge.

VARK is here to help

While there are a number of **learning style** models available, I have used the VARK model for **learning styles** for well over 10 years [See: [Improve your learning skills – here's how](#)]. VARK is about how people prefer to receive information when they are learning:

- **visual** – i.e. prefer to receive information in a graphical form (diagrams, charts, symbols)
- **auditory** – i.e. prefer to receive information in a spoken form (listening and speaking)
- **read/write** – i.e. prefer to receive information displayed as words (reading and note-taking)
- **kinaesthetic** – i.e. prefer to receive information through experiences (hands-on, tactile activities)

The designer of the VARK model, New Zealand educator Neil Fleming, has reported that there is no typical VARK profile. Fleming's statistics suggest that about 1/3 of people prefer a single mode, while about 2/3 have a multimodal preference. VARK questionnaire data for Jul-Dec 2013 (*dominated by respondents from the USA and UK*) shows:

- visual - 20.9%
- auditory - 24.9%
- read/write - 26.7%
- kinaesthetic - 27.5%

Notes:

1. The VARK questionnaire identifies **preferences**, not strengths; it is also about **learning**, not leisure.
2. Data/statistics for different time periods does show variances.
3. There are some differences between genders, and similarly across generational and national boundaries.



4. The dominance of the 'K' and 'R' people is worth noting – we will come back to that later.

If I am working one-on-one with someone, and if I do not know their preferred mode, I watch for clues while covering all four options in my presentation approach. The VARK model tells me that I need to:

- illustrate something with graphics – **visual**
- explain and discuss it – **auditory**
- offer a written description – **read/write**
- and allow my charge/s to 'try' for themselves – **kinaesthetic**

Applying VARK

When I can identify a person's preference/s, I will adapt my approach to suit. If I am working with a group, the chances are that I will stay with the broad 'catch-all' approach, unless I find a predominant preference. An exception to this might be when I have a particular 'target' within a group, e.g. a 'decision-maker' or 'influencer'. Then I will focus my approach towards meeting their preference (if I know it, or can detect it).

I cannot emphasize enough how invaluable I have found **learning styles** in helping me to **make a connection** with different people. I not only apply this technique in coaching and training activities, but I also use it in business meetings and other forums.

Making the connection

Using **learning styles** to help **make a connection** can be applied in countless situations – anywhere that information is being presented. We could be with a co-worker, a friend, an acquaintance, or even a stranger, helping them to understand something.

If we are 'selling' something, whether it is (say) in retail, or whether it is more about promoting our ideas, using **learning styles** to help **make a**

connection becomes really important. In one of his FAQ, Fleming notes: "*Marketers understand and use VARK principles cleverly!*"

When we present our information in a manner which suits someone's modal preference/s, we have the best chance of catching their attention. This not only improves the chances of memory retention, but it also increases the likelihood of **making a connection** with them as they become 'engaged'.

Whenever we are taking the 'catch-all' approach, Fleming's statistics can be useful. Based on the modal preferences, we should start (where possible) with something for the 'K' people, and also the 'R' people. Then we can address the 'A' people, and finally the 'V' people.

TRED

Here is a suggested approach - **TRED**:

1. **Touch and Do** – begin (where practical) by offering people the chance to touch or do something (**K**)
2. **Read and Write** – provide text-based information, and allow the opportunity for people to make notes (**R**)
3. **Explain and Discuss** – offer an explanation, and be sure to invite (and encourage) discussion (**A**)
4. **Display as Graphics** – show key information in the form of diagrams, charts, graphs, symbols (**V**)

TRED helps us to use learning styles to improve our communications skills

TRED is a guideline – a simple four-step approach to **make a connection** by **using learning styles**. By following this sequence, we are addressing the more common single-mode preferences first, otherwise we may 'lose' these people right from the start (remember, about 1/3 of people have a single-mode preference). Overall, the 'V' preference is the *least common* of the four modes.

While we are talking about using **learning styles** to **make a connection**, let's switch for a moment to being the audience ourselves:

We are considering (say) purchasing a new iPhone, and so we head to the Apple retail store. Once at the store we can pick up and handle the merchandise, even without a salesperson at our shoulder.

Steve Jobs may have been one of the 'Crazy Ones', but he surely wasn't silly – he knew all about the 'connection'. Being able to 'touch' and 'do/try' something is always a great start to **making a connection** (and a 'conversion'!).

Next time we are in a situation where we need to make a connection with someone, remember we can use **learning styles** to improve our chances of catching their attention (*and making a connection*). If we have already identified their preferred mode/s, we can adjust our pitch to suit. On the other hand, if we do not have that knowledge, or if we are working with a group, we can apply **TRED**. Either way, **using learning styles** can give us an edge.

Worth a look

Our free nugget for this Post is [How Apple Store Seduces You With the Tilt of Its Laptops](#) from Forbes (14 June 2012 – approx 4 minute read). Carmine Gallo describes the 'touch and do' Apple Store experience, and how it made a **connection** with his daughters. He finishes with this statement: "*So the next time you walk into an Apple Store, pay attention to the smallest details. You might learn something valuable about building loyal customers.*"

Coming next:

Motivation - why do we do what we do?

<http://freezapnuggets.com/wordpress/?p=767>