

COUNSELLOR LEARNING STYLE: A VARIABLE IN CAREER CHOICE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the assumptions (Kolb & Plovnick, 1976) that people chose careers which are consistent with their learning styles and are further shaped to fit the learning norms of the career once they are in it. A group of 35 counsellor trainees completed Kolb's (1976) *Learning Style Inventory* by indicating their "preferred" learning style, and subsequently, their perceptions of "counsellor" learning style. The results supported the assumptions and were discussed with respect to the implications for counsellor training methodology and client/counsellor problem-solving behaviour.

Résumé

Le but de cette étude était de connaître les hypothèses qui feraient, selon Kolb et Plovnick, 1976, que les gens choisiraient leurs carrières selon leurs aptitudes; lesquelles seraient compatibles avec leurs styles d'apprentissage dans le choix de leur carrière. Un groupe de 35 stagiaires en orientation ont complété le test: Inventaire des Styles d'Apprentissage de Kolb, 1976 en indiquant leurs préférences et subséquemment leurs perceptions au sujet du "rôle du conseiller d'orientation". Les résultats à l'appui de ces hypothèses furent discutés en respectant les implications pour la méthodologie de formation du conseiller et le comportement clinet/conseiller.

Previous research (Goldman, 1972; Margerison & Lewis, 1978; Plovnick, 1978; Wolfe & Kolb, 1979) suggests that learning style is a major factor influencing choice of vocation, and that satisfaction with one's vocation is largely determined by the extent to which the individual's learning style is consistent with the learning norms of the vocation (Kolb & Plovnick, 1976; Plovnick, 1974). What is not understood, however, is whether one's learning style is shaped by the particular vocation that is entered, or by selection processes that determine an individual's eligibility for that field of study (Kolb & Plovnick, 1971). It is proposed that both factors probably operate. That is, people chose fields consistent with their learning styles and are further shaped to fit the learning norms of the field once they are in it. According to Kolb's (1971) research, one's undergraduate education is a significant factor in the development of a person's learning style.

The present study was designed to investigate the validity of Kolb's (1971) learning style paradigm with respect to counsellor trainees. According to Kolb's (1979) assumptions the trainees would be characterized by a "divergent" learning style; and, additionally, the learning/problem solving norm of the counsellor training program would emphasize a divergent process.

Kolb's (Kolb, Rubin, & McIntyre, 1979, pp. 37-38) concept of learning style is based upon

an experiential learning model. The following assumptions underlie this model; which is illustrated in Figure 1.

- (1) learning and problem-solving are a single process.
- (2) learning/problem-solving, as a process, is both active and passive, concrete and abstract. This single process consists of a four-stage cycle: (a) concrete experience is followed by, (b) observation and reflection which leads to, (c) the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations which lead to, (d) hypotheses to be tested in future action which leads to new experience.
- (3) The four-stage cycle represents a learning process in which the individual continuously tests his concepts in experience and modifies them as a result of outcomes of experience.
- (4) The direction which learning takes is determined by an individual's needs and goals.
- (5) Since learning is directed by individual needs and goals, learning styles become highly individualized in both direction and process.
- (6) Individuals tend to develop a learning style characterized by an emphasis on particular components of the four stage cycle. For example, a physicist may place greater emphasis on the formation of abstract concepts, while an artist may be more inclined toward concrete experience.
- (7) The experiential learning paradigm consists of four learning modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and

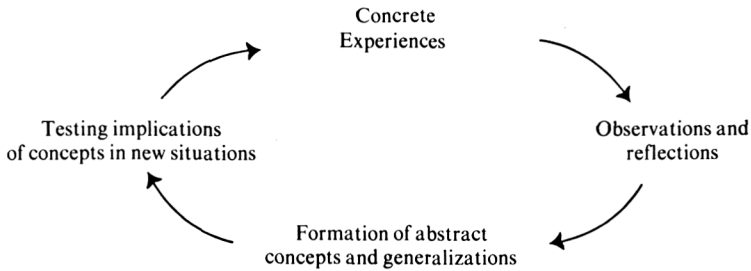


Figure 1
Four-stage learning/problem solving cycle.

active experimentation, which represent the four stages of the learning/problem solving cycle.

- (8) No specific learning mode is regarded as being any better or worse than the others.
- (9) An individual's tendency to emphasize particular learning modes of the four stage cycle does not necessarily mean that the individual is incapable of engaging in the other learning modes.
- (10) Ideally, effective learning means being competent in each learning mode when it is required. (1979, pp. 37-38)

Kolb's (1971) conceptualization of learning style is based upon a two-dimensional representation of the four basic learning modes: the dimension of concreteness versus abstract conceptualization; and the dimension of active experimentation versus reflective observation. The intersection of these two dimensions results in four quadrants. These four quadrants, labelled divergence, assimilation, convergence, and accommodation, represent four dominant learning styles. The learning style model is illustrated in Figure 2.

Kolb (1979) contends that counsellors are characterized by a divergent learning style. The author proposes that counsellors' dominant learning strengths are concrete experience (CE) and reflective observation (RO). Persons with an orientation

toward concrete experience are described as having a preference for being involved in experiencing and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way. They are sensitive and empathic toward people's values and feelings. Individuals with this orientation are also described as good intuitive decision-makers, functioning well in unstructured situations in which they can learn from examples rather than structured, theoretical approaches to learning (Kolb, 1979).

Kolb (1979) contends that in having a preference for a divergent learning style, counsellors would tend to emphasize reflective observation as opposed to active experimentation. Individuals with an orientation toward reflective observation focus on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them. They emphasize understanding as opposed to practical application. They are also good at looking at situations from different perspectives. They like to rely on their own thoughts and feelings to form opinions, and they value patience (Kolb, 1979).

This study was designed to determine (a) whether the "preferred" learning style of counselor trainees, prior to training, would emphasize a "divergent" style, (b) whether the undergraduate

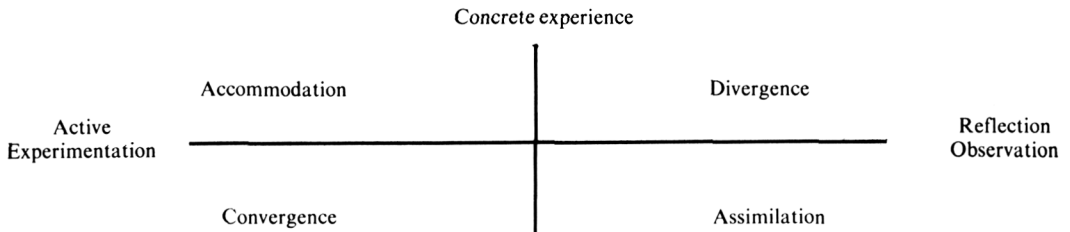


Figure 2
Learning style model (Kolb 1971).

education of the counsellor trainees would be consistent with their "preferred" learning style, and (c) whether the trainees' role perceptions of counsellor, following exposure to the training program, emphasized a divergent learning style.

Method

Subjects

A total of 35 counsellor-trainees (30 females and 5 males) participated in this study. All subjects were graduate level students beginning their first year of a two-year training program in counselling psychology. Each subject had been admitted into the training program on the basis of a selective screening process which evaluated their personal characteristics, experience, and motivations for electing counselling. All subjects met the minimum academic requirement (GPA of 3.0) set by the Graduate Faculty. Subjects' ages ranged from 24 to 43 years, with a mean age of 32.3 years.

Kolb's (1976) Learning Style Inventory was used to assess the subjects' "preferred" learning style and "counsellor" learning style. The Learning Style Inventory (LSI) consists of nine sets of four words. Subjects are asked to rank-order the series of four words by giving a high rank to those words which best describe their learning/problem-solving behaviour, and a low rank to those words which are least characteristic of their behaviour. Each of the words corresponds to one of the four learning modes and tabulation over nine sets of words yields scores on Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). Two scaled scores indicating the degree to which each subject emphasizes Abstractness over Concreteness (AC-CE), and Action over Reflection (AE-RO) are obtained. These two scaled scores are then plotted on a learning style grid to obtain each subject's learning style. A test-retest reliability study was conducted and yielded a correlation coefficient of .71 at the end of a 10-day period.

Undergraduate Education

Each subject's undergraduate major was classified according to learning style, based on previous research findings (Kolb, 1971) to determine whether it was consistent with the present "preferred" learning style.

The investigation was conducted in conjunction with the regular counsellor-training program. At the beginning of the first semester the subjects were asked to complete the Learning Style Inventory according to their "preferred" learning/problem-solving style. At the end of the first semester the subjects were asked to complete

the Learning Style Inventory according to their perceptions of "counsellor" learning/problem-solving style.

As a result of missing data, a sample of 31 subjects completed the measure of "preferred" learning style, and 33 subjects completed the measure of Counsellor Learning Style.

Results

The group means for the scaled dimensions AC-CE and AE-RO for "preferred" and "counsellor" learning style are shown in Table 1. As illustrated in Figure 3, plotting the group means on a learning style grid resulted in a coordinate which located the group in the divergent quadrant with respect to both the measure of "preferred" learning style and "counsellor" learning style.

A *t*-test analysis of the difference in means between the group measure of "preferred" learning style and "counsellor" learning style is also shown in Table 1. The results of this analysis indicated a statistically significant increase on the Concrete Experience learning mode and a statistically nonsignificant increase on the Reflective Observation learning mode. This result would suggest the existence of a learning norm, in which the counsellor was perceived as engaging in a divergent learning/problem-solving process.

Finally, the study revealed that 83% of the subjects had majored in a BA program, 11% had obtained a BSc degree and 6% had a BEd degree. In light of the finding that the preferred learning style of the group was "divergent", this result supports Kolb's (1971) research which revealed that individuals in the arts and humanities were characterized by a divergent learning style.

Discussion

Consistent with Kolb's (1979) assumptions, counsellor trainees were found to be characterized by a divergent learning style. A majority of the trainees had also received their undergraduate education in the Arts and Humanities. Previous research (Kolb, 1971) has indicated that individuals who elect to major in these undergraduate fields tend to emphasize a divergent learning style. The results of this study, then, support the contention that individuals are inclined to those academic/vocational fields that are consistent with their learning style (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Plovnick, 1978).

Counsellor trainees also perceived the role of counsellor as that of engaging in a divergent learning/problem-solving process. The significant emphasis given to the Concrete Experience learning mode suggests the development of a learning norm relative to role perceptions in which the training program may have been instrumental in

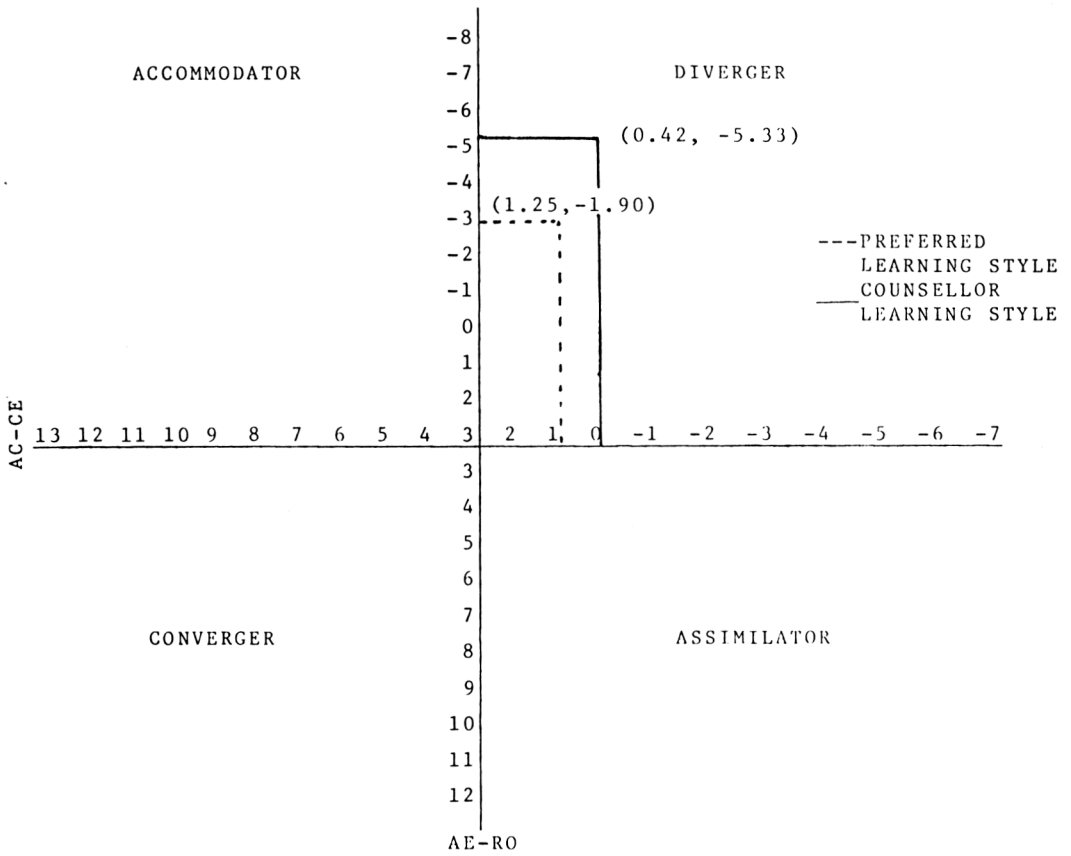


Figure 3
Coordinate means for preferred and counsellor learning style.

further shaping the trainees' perceptions. Further research employing training as an experimental variable is suggested to determine its influence upon an individual's preferred learning style. For example, it is proposed that a training program which emphasized a behavioural orientation toward counselling would favor individuals characterized by a convergent learning style.

To conclude, further research into the implications of Kolb's experiential learning paradigm for both training methodology and counselling outcome appears warranted (Eden & Mathis, 1977). In the latter regard, it may be anticipated that a counsellor's degree of success/failure, as a facilitator of client learning/problem-solving, would be influenced by the counsellor's competen-

Table 1
Means and *t*-test Analysis for the Coordinate of Active Experimentation (AE) Minus Reflective Observation (RO) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) Minus Concrete Experience (CE) for "preferred" Learning Style and "counsellor" Learning Style

	<i>Preferred learning style</i>	<i>Counsellor learning style</i>			
	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
AE-RO	1.26	0.42	62	0.59	<i>p</i> > .05
AC-CE	-1.90	-5.33	62	2.02	<i>p</i> < .05

cies in the learning/problem-solving process (Lewkewitz, 1979). As Kolb (1976) points out, no particular learning mode, in the four stage learning cycle, is better or worse than any other. The key to effective learning is being competent in each learning mode when it is appropriate.

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