Understand Learning Styles to Make Your Teaching More Effective

by Captain Joan Gilmore

I believe that sailing is the perfect "wet lab" environment for team building and for self-discovery. It is particularly perfect for learning interpersonal skills quickly and effectively when participants are directed by a trained captain/facilitator.

Here is why sailing is the perfect environment…

There is no escape. Once you leave the dock, you are unavoidably part of the team.

Everyone must keep working together continuously or else! Unlike other no-escape environments like power boating, where a single helmsman can control the boat, each sailing crewmember must keep tending his/her post to prevent grounding or getting lost.

The elements are few, simple and easily understood…

The crew — Others can't be called in to sub for crew that "want off."

The weather — You deal with what comes.

The equipment — You are responsible for repairs at sea.

Since the elements are few, and relatively simple, you have a stripped-down laboratory with relatively few elements outside the control of the crew.

There is little to no interaction with the outside world. Once you are out of cell phone range, the crew has only each other to rely on for knowledge and companionship.

This creates a relatively pure, self-contained wet-lab for examining human interactions in a very efficient and profound way.

For my master's degree thesis in adult learning I conducted an onboard learning experiment using subjects who had never sailed before. They were paired with a personality opposite and taped by an onboard videographer as the pairs learned sailing skills together. I used the Myers-Briggs test to pair the subjects for this experiment. This is the test that gives you a designator such as "INTJ." It measures whether a subject is introverted or extroverted, prefers thinking to feeling, etc.

The results of this experiment were very surprising, indicating that cultural upbringing (tied to age and gender) were more important than the personalities of the individuals in determining how they would interact with a stranger in a learning environment.

Many tools besides the Myers-Briggs exist to diagnose learning styles, including sensory preference tests (to identify visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners). I currently use the Learning Styles Inventory* to help my students quickly identify their type and that of other students. This way, the engineer will understand why the marketing manager is asking him so many personal questions while he is busy computing the tensile strength of the halyard.

The point of my research using learning styles in a practical sense is to teach adults how to change their accustomed style so that they are able to respond to the world in new ways.

**www.personalpowerproducts.com/learnstyles.htm*

This awareness will improve their understanding of how other people operate and gives my students more tools in their learning toolbox. If a logical thinker can get out of his box long enough to experience the world as an enthusiastic learner, he will be a much more self-reliant and versatile sailor, capable of dealing with new situations using different social and learning skills than the ones that he has been using most of his life.

As a sailing instructor, awareness of learning styles helps me to realize that people have a wide range of ways they process and master new information. The more I study different styles, the more I am able to tailor my teaching to reach all of my students to help each learn most efficiently.

Here are descriptions of four Learning Styles as they relate to sailing students. Try sharing these descriptions with your students. Ask them to place themselves on the continuum between Thinking and Feeling and between Observing and Doing in order to identify their own and their classmates' learning styles. This may be used as a springboard for discussion and a fun way to enrich and vary your students' learning processes and their understanding and appreciation of others.

Enthusiastic Learners:

- Eager to take the helm.
- Important for them to get to know fellow crewmembers.
- Like to try the lines, wheel and gear shift before receiving directions on how to use them.
- Like to "try it by myself" first, then discuss "it" with crewmates, then receive formal directions on "it."
- First to volunteer to climb the mast to retrieve the lost halyard.
- May get too involved in conversations with crewmates during important maneuvers, such as docking.

Imaginative Learners:

- Watch other sailors closely before taking part.
- Mentally rehearse tacking or jibing before beginning the procedure.
- Like to look at man overboard drill diagrams before starting the drill.
- Important that they know everyone's role before docking maneuver.
- Like to relate every lesson toward safety or enjoyment for the crew.
- Like to imagine themselves on their new boat or in their new sailing lifestyle.
- May need prodding to act and make decisions.

Logical Learners:

- Read textbook thoroughly before the sail.
- Refer to textbook during the sail.
- Ask questions, but prefer textual back-up for captain's explanations.
- Like to have all their questions answered before trying a maneuver.
- May lack confidence; needing a push to both select an anchorage on their own, then to direct the anchoring process.

Practical Learners:

- Read up on sailing before the trip.
- Ask questions of captain to gain assurance of captain's abilities.
- Like to try things on their own before receiving detailed explanations.
- Test the strength of the lines (ropes) before using them.
- When equipment fails, are quick to find an alternative method as a solution to the problem.
- May be impatient with debriefings to understand what worked and what didn't after docking practices.

	FEELING	FEELING	
DOING	***Enthusiastic Learners:*** • Eager to take the helm. • Important for them to get to know fellow crewmembers. • Like to try the lines, wheel and gear shift before receiving directions on how to use them. • Like to "try it by myself" first, then discusses "it" with crewmates, then receive formal directions on "it." • First to volunteer to climb the mast to retrieve the lost halyard. • May get too involved in conversations with crewmates during important maneuvers, such as docking.	***Imaginative Learners:*** • Watch other sailors closely before taking part. • Mentally rehearse tacking or jibing before beginning the procedure. • Like to look at man overboard drill diagrams before starting the drill. • Important that they know everyone's role before docking maneuver. • Like to relate every lesson toward safety or enjoyment for the crew. • Like to imagine themselves on their new boat or in their new sailing lifestyle. • May need prodding to act and make decisions.	OBSERVING
DOING	***Practical Learners:*** • Read up on sailing before the trip. • Ask questions of Captain to gain assurance of captain's abilities. • Like to try things on their own before receiving detailed explanations. • Test the strength of the lines (ropes) before using them. • When equipment fails, are quick to find an alternative method as a solution to the problem. • May be impatient with debriefings to understand what worked and what didn't after docking practices.	***Logical Learners:*** • Read textbook thoroughly before the sail. • Refer to textbook during the sail. • Ask questions, but prefer textual back • up for captain's explanations. • Like to have all their questions answered before trying a maneuver. • May lack confidence; needing a push to both select an anchorage on their own, then to direct the anchoring process.	OBSERVING
	THINKING	THINKING	

Captain Joan Gilmore, M.L.S., is an ASA Instructor Evaluator and certified Myers-Briggs Practitioner. She has presented her research at conferences including the International Association for Psychological Type and Midwest Qualitative Research conference. She manages Sail Away Sailing School, LLC in Minneapolis, MN. www.SailAwaySailingSchool.com Contact captainjoan@mac.com with comments or questions.