

IT'S ONLY A MODEL!

BY KEVIN LOHAN

There is a scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in which King Arthur rides to Camelot. He and his accompanying knights are all full of admiration for it from afar when they first set eyes on it. "Camelot. Camelot" they cry. Meanwhile, the King's lowly serf mumbles, "It's only a model".

I think of that scene every time I think of the many and various personality profile models in the L&D landscape.

Let us just take so-called 'learning styles' for example.

What I want to know is this: How did that get written into the competency profile for trainers? Why that model and not others? The requirement is for a 'sound knowledge of learner styles'. Leaving aside the debate about just how many holders of the Cert IV actually have a sound knowledge of learner styles, how exactly does that knowledge help us?

I used to run many 'Train the Trainer' and later Cert IV programs and have 'tested' the learning styles of scores of people and what I found is that pretty much everyone is a bland amalgam of all four styles. Maybe ten percent of people had an observable bent towards one or other of the four styles.

So where did that leave me? How did having a 'sound knowledge' of the model of learning styles add value to the experience of the learners in my program?

Ok. I guess I accept that I needed to have a mix of activity, time for reflection, some input about the abstract principles underpinning the learning and some 'So what' stuff for the pragmatists.

But what am I supposed to do about that one person who identifies as some kind of mega reflector? Their score is off the chart on that parameter.

I have designed the program. Is it meant to suit the known probability that most people are that bland amalgam?

Do I really have to make some radical shift in my design just to cater to that one person? What if it turns out they are a mad activist instead and I did not see that coming? Even if I could adapt things, do I do a disservice to the other 11 in the room? Won't I ruin their learning experience by being too focused on that one person?

What to do?

I stopped worrying about it. That's what.

I do not recall ever seeing anyone disengaged because I was not tailoring the learning to their preferred learning style. I mean to say, how would I anyway? Just throw in lots more activity because they are an 'activist'.

Come on. Really?

Nope. It is just a model and I decided this was how I was going to deal with it.

I carried on doing what I thought was best in all things. I designed programs as well as I could, I included stuff for all of the styles and tried as well as I could

to make the program engaging and practical.

Then, if I ever encountered a problem with a learner, I used the model as a problem-solving tool.

If they appeared disengaged or unhappy or something suggesting I should become concerned, I tried a number of models to see if I could understand what the root cause might be. One of the models I might have considered was the learning styles model. I would ask myself if I had any evidence that the person had a strong preference for one or other of the styles. Then if the answer was yes, how could I modify things in a way that would keep everyone else engaged but also perhaps re-orient the disenfranchised person.

Sometimes it was another model that triggered my response and sometimes it was learning styles. So, why is it that one that made it to the competency standards?

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