How thinking styles affect learning

Fiona Beddoes-Jones

What are thinking styles?

Thinking styles are simply the different ways of thinking which exist in the world. Often associated with habitual strategies, our preferences for different types or styles of thinking drive how we think, and our subsequent behaviours. Thinking styles are also often called 'cognitive styles', sometimes called 'learning styles' and occasionally called 'personality traits'. There are probably as many as 50+ thinking styles – no one knows exactly how many there are and academics continue to argue amongst themselves as to the underlying theoretical construct and definition of them. To take a pragmatic approach, here are some of the thinking styles my delegates have found most useful in terms of developing

their own understanding of how they may be similar to, or different from, their colleagues. You will see that I have subdivided them by focus: sensory, people or task.

Sensory focus: the ways you prefer to receive and process information via your senses.

- **Visual** Learns by looking and watching.
- **Auditory** Learns by listening, reading and discussion.
- **Kinaesthetic** Learns by doing.

People focus: explores the ways you tend to interact and engage with other people.

- **Internal** Learns by linking information to what they themselves already know to be true.
- **External** Learns by relating information to what other people think.
- **Matching/Conforming** Learns by fitting in.
- **Mismatching/Challenging** Learns by questioning and challenging.
- **Competitive** Learns alone by beating others or their own performance.
- **Collaborative** Learns by working with others.

Task focus: the ways you relate to tasks and activities and your approach to problem solving.
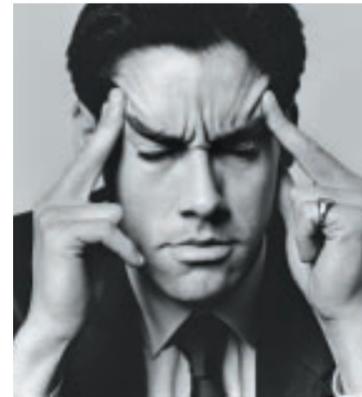
- **Global/General** Learns in general terms, with the overview as a starting point.
- **Detail-conscious** Learns by assimilating details.
- **Towards** Learns by being positive and noticing what works well.
- **Away from/Troubleshooting** Learns by considering what could go wrong and avoiding mistakes.
- **Creative** Learns by making connections between things.
- **Logical** Learns sequentially and systematically, in order.

This is not an exhaustive list, but a starting point for you to begin to learn more, should you choose to do so.[1] Because certain language patterns relate to each thinking style, master trainers flex their language so they can 'speak' to their whole audience.

For example, 'The concepts and examples we are going to be covering today all relate to leadership. We will be exploring in detail some of the characteristics which research has shown lead to effective leadership and also some instances where leadership mistakes have been made.' To deconstruct this linguistically, concepts are **Global**, detail is **Detail-conscious**, effective is **Towards** and mistakes are **Away from**.

How do master trainers flex their language so they can 'speak' to their whole audience?

Master trainers listen and notice language patterns and linguistic triggers. They actively practise to develop their linguistic flexibility and their cognitive fitness. Being 'cognitively fit' means being flexible enough to apply different thinking strategies and to think in a variety of ways – so that you can take a multi-perspective and balanced approach to any situation or context. The process of developing cognitive fitness is outlined below in the Cognitive Fitness Model™. For more information on linguistic triggers, see References 1 and 5.

Five steps to Cognitive Fitness™

1 **Unawareness** State of ignorance. Being unfit.
2 **Awareness** Of self and others, and of the different types of thinking that exist.
3 **Conscious development** Noticing your own and others' strategies. Beginning to practise and develop 'weaker' thinking skills. Frustration.
4 **Refinement** Application and practice.
5 **Cognitive fitness** Integration, embedded learning. Flexible thinking strategies. Can be a role model and coach, and can mentor others in thinking skills and thinking strategies.

References

1 See: www.thinkingstyles.co.uk
2 F. Beddoes-Jones, 'Learning to Think, Learning to Learn', *Training Journal*, October 2001.
3 R. Dunn, 'Learning Styles: State of the Science', *Theory into Practice*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1984, pp. 10–19.
4 See: www.cognitivefitness.co.uk
5 F. Beddoes-Jones, *Thinking Styles: Relationship Strategies that Work!*, BJA Associates, Grantham, UK, 1999.
6 A. H. Buss, *Personality: Evolutionary Heritage and Human Distinctiveness*, Erlbaum Associates, 1988.

Author

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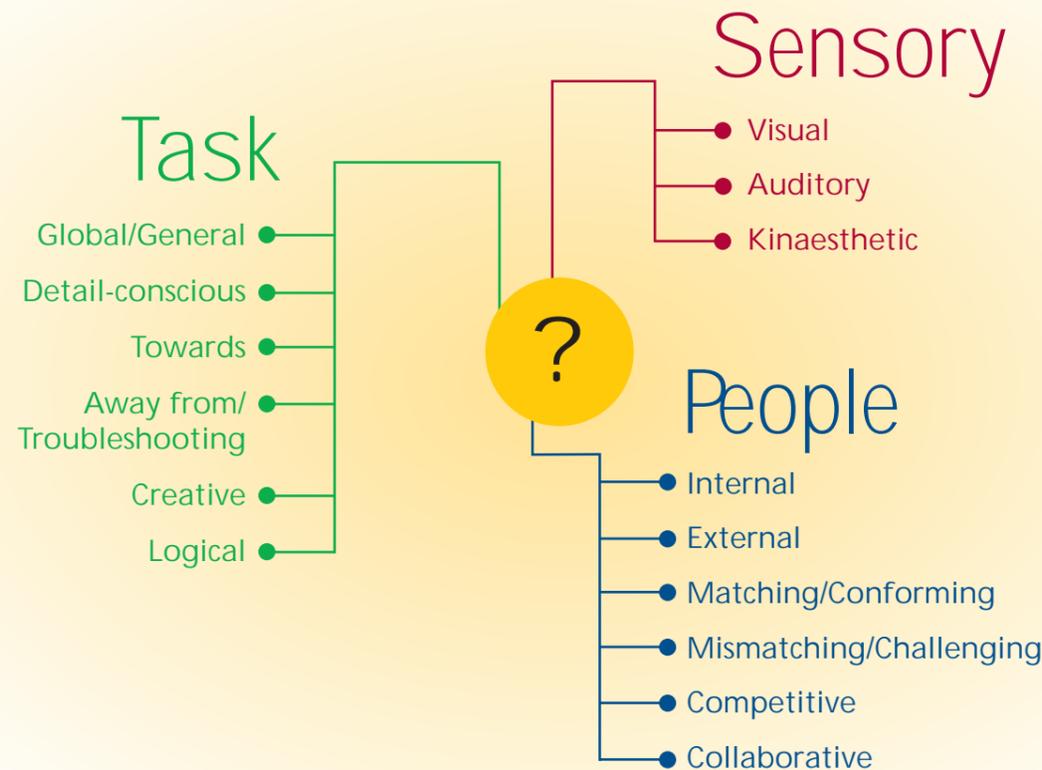Telephone: 01476 861010 • E-mail: fiona.bj@cognitivefitness.co.uk • Websites: www.cognitivefitness.co.uk

Tip

Words such as *examples*, *relate*, *exploring* and *characteristics* are relatively 'clean' language and do not directly relate to any specific thinking style. When you use them in your training, you will find that they mean different things to different delegates. Each person will filter their meanings through their own preferred thinking styles and so, by using them, you will be 'speaking' to everyone in your audience.

How are thinking styles relevant to training and learning?

When you read the list, you may notice that your own thinking preferences (or combinations of preferences) drive your personal learning style. Research suggests that people will learn best (that is, most easily, most quickly) when they filter their learning through their preferred thinking styles, although this doesn't mean that they can't learn in other ways.[2, 3] Although you are probably not aware of it, the ways in which you train, and your general training style, will be a reflection of your own thinking style preferences. As a trainer, you will be helping your delegates to learn and remember your training content by delivering it to them via their preferred thinking style channels. This means that it is extremely useful to have a way of knowing which thinking styles are most meaningful to each delegate in a learning context. As a trainer and consultant, I always use thinking styles to do this – in fact, one of the reasons I initially developed thinking styles as a diagnostic tool was to help trainers develop their skills, knowledge and understanding within the training and learning context.

Sensory

- Visual
- Auditory
- Kinaesthetic

Task

- Global/General
- Detail-conscious
- Towards
- Away from/Troubleshooting
- Creative
- Logical

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People

- Internal
- External
- Matching/Conforming
- Mismatching/Challenging
- Competitive
- Collaborative

Case study 1: What kind of a trainer are you?

(Adapted from F. Beddoes-Jones, *Learning to Think, Learning to Learn.*[2])

Julia and David are both experienced trainers working as internal consultants within a large blue-chip organisation. David specialises in technical training and Julia focuses more on the softer, more people-oriented skills training. They are frequently required to co-train with each other, which necessitates the careful design and structuring of the programme to ensure a cohesive and seamless delivery. David is a meticulous, detail-conscious, sequential thinker who likes to plan in advance every minute of his training session. He always thinks about what may go wrong, and makes contingency plans accordingly. He very much dislikes deviating from his plan and prefers delegates to stick to his agenda. Julia, by contrast, feels that training sessions should be flexible. Although she usually has an agenda, her outcomes are general and broad rather than specific. She always leaves it to the last minute before planning any of her training sessions, and simply assumes that her experience and positive approach will enable her to handle any questions or situations which might come up. In fact, she relishes the opportunity to 'go off at a tangent' and explore the learning opportunities inherent within the session.

Unfortunately, they experience the following problems:

- David wants Julia to plan her session exactly and not deviate from the plan, which she refuses to do.
- Julia accuses David of being inflexible and rigid. He retorts that she is unstructured, disorganised and unreasonable.

Neither of them enjoys having to share time with each other within a training programme, and some delegates have complained about the rather chilly relationship between them.

After mapping their thinking styles using two-way profiling, each was better able to understand that it was the cognitive dynamics, the different ways in which they thought, that was influencing the ways they approached their training role. By understanding the relative benefits of each person's thinking and training style, they were better able to accept – and, moreover, respect – each other's approach as adding value to the training and learning dynamic within their organisation.

Exercise 1

Select six thinking/learning style preferences from the list. You may find it easiest to select your own six highest preferences. How would you organise and deliver your training to facilitate the learning strategies of your delegates if you knew that they shared these thinking and learning style preferences? As more of a challenge, select the six thinking styles you yourself are least likely to favour. You can be pretty sure that at least some of your delegates will have your lowest preferences as some of their highest ones.

Exercise 2

From the case study above, identify the strengths and weaknesses of both David's and Julia's particular cognitive styles for their roles as internal trainers. Remember that David is sequential and ordered, pays attention to detail, and thinks through potential problems; whereas Julia is less structured and is flexible, positive and creative. As a trainer, are you more like Julia or David? What could you do to develop your flexibility?

Why are some thinking styles more important than others?

Most people have a mixture of high, moderate and low preferences when it comes to their thinking styles. Our research and experience have identified that often people's highest preferences also become their values, so be very careful to respect these values and do not trample on them inadvertently. If you take the time to think about it, or if someone were to ask you, you would probably be able to identify at least some of your highest and lowest preferences. Academic and pragmatic research seems to suggest that some cognitive style preferences are inherited, whilst others are developed over time owing to external influences such as parents, teachers, work colleagues or cultural working environments.[1, 6]

How do thinking styles work in combination rather than isolation?

People are complex. We don't just do one thing at a time, or think in only one way at any one time. Your thinking style preferences are likely to be constantly working in harmony and unison to create the symphony that makes up at least a part of your personality. You may have noticed that you are also likely to have a number of dislikes or 'dispreferences' for certain types of thinking, as well as the preferences that you are consciously aware of. It is possible that your highest cognitive style preference may act as a filter through which all other information is directed. This often happens via one of the sensory channels such as Auditory or Kinaesthetic. Research using thinking styles has identified a number of patterns of thinking style in which certain preferences work together to create a recognised personality type.

For example, an Internally Referenced Mismatcher not only believes that they are right, but will be prepared to argue about it. If you ask an Externally Referenced Matcher what they think about a specific issue, they will most probably say that they don't really know and ask what everyone else thinks. A Creative Intuitive type of person will always make intuitive connections between things, and will naturally generate lots of (often impractical) ideas, whereas the Detailed Logical thinker will invariably work systematically, sequentially and very thoroughly through a task from beginning to end – and require at least twice as long to do it as the Creative Intuitive type. Recognise anyone?