

Three types of learner

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There are many ways we can differentiate and contrast learner preferences, styles and behaviours, and to this list I will add another, from my 35 years of observing both group and individuals in a learning context – I will focus my thoughts on the latter, group based events.

Without further preamble, the three types are: talkers, thinkers and processors.

None of these are pure in terms of one or none of the others.

Talkers

These are the people we are often glad of, as they provide energy and interaction. We don't want a whole group of them, as that can make things very hard to manage, but without any of them days can seem very long, and hard work.

From a learning perspective, talkers are really good news, as we know what's going on for them because they are making it clear. What they say is a function of what they are reflecting upon (albeit sometimes fleetingly), and we are given a constant flow of insights, interests, and indications of impact. We can engage with talkers, as they are making clear and evident their opinions, we must however be careful not to allow their views and enthusiasm carry us away from consideration of the needs of the less audible majority.

The trouble with talkers is that when they are talking they are not thinking, at least not to the quality of those less noisy. They can if not managed well, suppress contributions from less forthcoming people, and as I have seen many times, at extremes, when they are not talking, they are thinking only of what next to say.

Thinkers

In retrospect often less memorable than the talkers, the thinkers may be learning a lot more than them – it all depends what they are thinking about. In my decades of delivering group based learning, I have spent many days in the company of engaged looking, attentive, note taking people who don't say an unprompted word all day.

This used to worry me, back in the days when I thought people who say a lot are by their contributions showing they are getting stuck in, and that I have something tangible as evidence of 'reaching them'. It took a while for me to see that people who weren't like me by personality (a factor), were often learning a lot more by observing, listening, reflecting and consciously planning application of learning back to the workplace.

Just as an extreme talker may be spending too little time reflecting, so too may an extreme thinker lose out from testing their thoughts, seeking opinions of others, and enhancing their thoughts through discussion and debate.

Processors

For me, a mix is the best option. Talkers who think, thinkers that talk – wonderful.

In the imperfect world in which we operate, this blend is too rarely seen – at least by me. If only those who want to make known every opinion reflected more, and if only we heard more of what are often the more considered and worthwhile thoughts of the thinkers.

Those that gain the most from any form of learning, from one to one coaching to group based with bigger numbers than are sensible in terms of creating real learning over apparent cost effectiveness, are I believe those that consciously, or by natural instincts, both think and talk. To be without the contribution of thinkers can seriously devalue the worth of any event. If talkers dominate and thinkers over-reflect and feel disinclined to speak up, so much is lost. For this reason, Processors that listen, (something talkers don't do sufficiently), and that have thought about what they say are an asset and a resource that is too often neglected and even discouraged.

Implications

From a facilitation perspective, I feel we must not be over-influenced by the talkers.

Thinkers should not spook us, just because they are quiet doesn't mean they are not drawing learning value from any event.

Talkers tend to be robust, so will respond without offence at if needed, some direct encouragement to give others airtime.

Thinkers need more subtle management, and will need to be given respectful space in which to add valuable input and issues well beyond talkers.

Sometimes it is not possible to do more than restrain the talkers – thinkers may choose to keep their thought to themselves whatever opportunity is given, no matter how sensitively

Beware the impact of the talker – they can often gain more favourable treatment in terms of for instance further learning options entirely by their prominence and apparent enthusiasm.

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