TEACHING WITH RESPECT FOR DIVERSE LEARNING STYLES

PURPOSE
This workshop has four primary aims: to address common misconceptions and misuse of the concept of "multiple intelligences," to introduce participants to several methods of categorizing learning styles, to help participants identify and mitigate two risk factors in their teaching ministries, and to help participants apply learning styles to their teaching ministries.

TIME FRAME: 2.5 hours with a 15-minute break

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

I   Introduction (*10 minutes*)

II   Why Not Multiple Intelligences? (*15 minutes*)

III   Introducing Three Systems of Framing Learning Styles (*15 minutes*)

IV   Identifying Two Risk Factors (*35 minutes*)

Break (*15 minutes*)

V   Putting Learning Styles to Work (*45 minutes*)

VI   Closing (*15 minutes*)

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS
You will need:
• newsprint or posterboard
• overhead or PowerPoint slide (optional)
• 4 different colors of yarn (optional)
• chalkboard and chalk (optional)
• study resources (Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, study Bibles, theological resources, and church history books)
• paper and pencils
• shoe box or large envelope for evaluations

In preparation for leading the workshop:
• Review the workshop and prepare items, such as the workshop outline and reflection questions for presentation on newsprint, overhead, or PowerPoint slide.
• Prepare or secure a volunteer to prepare drinks and snacks for the break.
• Prepare two continuum charts (1: "Reflective Observation ↔ Active Experimentation" and 2: "Abstract Conceptualization ↔ Concrete Experience") using the information on Appendix 1. See "Activity Instructions" in Section IV B (Your Preferred Learning Style) for more information.
• Make one photocopy of Appendix 2, cut along the cut lines, and fold to create table tents.
• Select several topics for lesson development. These can be Bible stories and select texts, worship elements (the Lord's Prayer or the order of worship), theological concepts (forgiveness, repentance), or a person or event related to church history or your denomination. Select one topic for every three people you expect to attend the training event.
• Gather resource materials for researching the topics you select (Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, study Bibles, theological dictionaries, and church history books).

CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

I   Introduction (*10 minutes*)

Once all participants have gathered, introduce yourself and explain where the facilities are, giving the participants permission to take personal breaks as needed. Review the outline of the workshop and note that there will be a 15-minute break for refreshments about half-way through.

A) Explore Characteristics of Learning
Invite the participants to take some quiet time to think about their experiences as learners, considering the questions below. Emphasize that for the first two questions they can consider any learning experience—school, church school, or even a workshop or training experience.

> • What learning experience had a positive effect on you?
> • What learning experience had a negative effect on you?
> • What experiences have been most powerful in forming you as a disciple of Christ?

Post three sheets of newsprint with three different titles: positive, negative, and formative. After a few minutes, ask the participants to share the *characteristics* of their experiences, identifying if the characteristic they speak of relates to a positive, negative, or formative experience. Encourage the participants to share characteristics, rather than tell stories. Ask for three volunteers to write the characteristics on the appropriate newsprint sheet.

When the participants have finished sharing, spend some time reviewing together the characteristics. See if you can draw conclusions or identify principles of learning from the lists of characteristics. You will be referring to these results in Section II "Why Not Multiple Intelligences?"

B) Introduce the Topic
Read or paraphrase the following points:

> • It has long been recognized that people have different preferred ways of learning.
> • Attention to learning styles honors the richness of what it means to be human.
> • Attention to learning styles is crucial for Christian education since multifaceted teaching allows for learning that changes not just what we know, but who we are and how we live.
> • In recent years, the theory of multiple intelligences has become very popular within Christian education and curriculum development. Unfortunately much of this usage has been a misappropriation of the theory, so before we look at learning styles, it will be helpful to address the issue of multiple intelligences.

II   Why Not Multiple Intelligences? (*15 minutes*)

Distribute copies of Handout A, "Multiple Intelligences Are *Not* Learning Styles" (2 pages), and allow time for the participants to read it through. Allow a few minutes for discussion. It is quite possible that there will be some resistance and confusion since misconceptions about M.I. theory have been proliferated and reinforced in training programs, curriculum series, and books. Remind the participants that this workshop is about learning styles and suggest that those who want to explore M.I. more fully should read *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* by Howard Gardner, rather than reading secondary sources that claim to use M.I. Encourage the participants to visit Gardner's Web site at www.howardgardner.com.

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Direct attention to the five insights that appear at the end of the article in Handout A (also listed below). Encourage the participants to discuss these insights in light of the characteristics and principles they identified in the introductory activity.

> • People are gifted in a variety of ways and need to be nurtured in contexts that allow them to discover their giftedness and live out their faith in ways that are unique to them.
> • Single measures, such as Scripture memorization, good behavior, or right answers to religious questions, are unfair and inaccurate "tests" of spiritual development.
> • Christian faith has many contents, which include Scripture, theology, worship practices, and ethics, but its ultimate content is a relationship with God that is lived out in all aspects of life.
> •Therefore Christian education requires using a wide range of methods that honor diverse learning styles and
> • the most powerful educational tool is the experience learners have with other Christians—Christian faith is not formed by lesson plans but by the witness of authentically Christian teachers, friends, families, churches, and denominations.

III   Introducing Three Systems of Framing Learning Styles (*15 minutes*)

Read or paraphrase the following points:

> • The traditional classroom, whether in general education or Christian education, has long favored those who learn well by listening to instruction in an authoritarian context and are able to memorize and give verbal or written responses.
> • In this biased context, learners are rewarded or neglected or even punished based on whether or not they have a certain style of learning.
> • While we use the language of *preferred* learning styles, the reality is that learning style is not a choice; it is the biophysical reality of how an individual's brain processes information.
> • Planning for diverse learning styles is essential for a teaching ministry that is both fair and effective.
> • There are several systems of identifying and classifying learning styles, and we are going to review three common systems.

Distribute Handout B, "Three Approaches to Learning Styles" (2 pages), and invite the participants to divide into small groups to review together the three systems, focusing on the descriptions, as you will be working with techniques and approaches later.

After a few minutes, invite feedback on these three systems. Note that some people will be more comfortable with one system than the other. Emphasize that all systems of naming are heuristic devices. There is nothing "sacred" about the terminology or a given system. What is sacred is the truth that God created us wondrously with diverse abilities. What is important is to be committed to using a variety of teaching methods that honor the diverse ways people learn.

IV   Identifying Two Risk Factors (*35 minutes*)

Explain that while it is helpful to be tuned in to the needs and strengths of learners, it is not necessary to assess learning styles of participants to effective. Introduce two key risk factors we all share as we approach the teaching task as:
> • the tendency to teach the way we were taught
> • the tendency to teach according to our own learning style preferences

A) How You Have Been Taught

Distribute Handout C, "My Risk Factors."

Use a chalkboard, if one is available, because it can help participants reconnect with childhood learning experiences. If not, post newsprint and ask participants to write down the ways in which they've been taught in school and in the church. These words and phrases should represent how material was presented (e.g. lecture) and how knowledge was expressed/assessed (e.g. verbal recitation, written expression, fill in the blank).

Spend some time discussing what they've come up with, especially asking participants to consider the ways in which their church education has differed or not differed from general education. Ask them to identify for themselves their "experienced style," that is their primary way of having been taught, and fill in the appropriate box in Handout C. They may use terms, such as "verbal, linguistic, lecture" phrases, or sentences to describe their experienced styles.

Invite the participants to join into groups based on similar experienced learning styles. It is quite possible that most in the group will have had similar experiences, so you may carry out the following discussion as a whole group. Ask them to brainstorm ways in which they might mitigate the risk of relying on the teaching methods that they experienced. Invite any who feel more comfortable with personal reflection to spend quiet time thinking about the question. Mention that there is a reason some people enjoy brainstorming and some don't—and it has to do with learning styles.
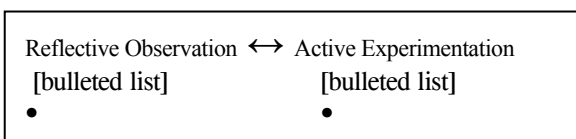
While the participants are working in groups, set up for the next activity.

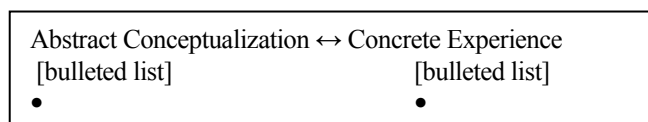**B) Your Preferred Learning Style**

Activity set-up instructions:
In this activity, the participants will be identifying their styles based on Kolb's system. You will need to post two continuum charts on the wall, based on the content found in Appendix 1. (See the example below.)

Continuum Chart #1

| Reflective Observation ↔ Active Experimentation |
| [bulleted list]   [bulleted list] |
| •   • |

Continuum Chart #2

| Abstract Conceptualization ↔ Concrete Experience |
| [bulleted list]   [bulleted list] |
| •   • |

Set up four tables with copies of Handout D, "Summary of Kolb's Learning Style Types," and place one of the table tents (made from photocopying and cutting Appendix 2) on each of the tables.

Introduce this activity as follows:

• Point out the two posters on the wall.
• Invite the participants to visit each poster and for each one, decide which of the two orientation columns best reflects them.
• For *each* poster, they will identify *one* orientation and fill in Handout C accordingly. It is essential that they understand that they are to select one orientation from each poster—either Reflective

4

Observation or Active Experimentation **and** either Abstract Conceptualization or Concrete Experience.

[Note: If you have a creative streak, you may opt to color code the orientations, so people take a piece of colored yarn from the orientations that they choose and create a two-color bow to wear. The tables can then be labeled with yarn combinations along with the table tents.]

Once the participants have found their two orientations, invite them to go the table that is labeled with their combination. Once all have gathered at the appropriate tables, they are to complete the following tasks:
1) Write in their orientations on Handout C.
2) Read together the description of their style (based upon their two orientations) on Handout D.
3) Discuss what teaching methods they will naturally be drawn to.
4) Discuss ways to balance this natural inclination.

Break (*15 minutes*)

Before the break, explain that the remainder of the session will be spent developing learning activities. Review the topics that you've selected. Explain that when the participants return from break, they need to gather into groups around the topic they wish to develop lesson activities around. Those who prefer to work alone rather than in a group may choose any of the topics, even if a group is already assigned to that topic. If many people want to work on the same topic, they can dedicate their work to two different age groups.

Remind the participants where the facilities are and point out the drinks and snacks. Identify the time when you expect everyone to return from break.

V   Putting Learning Styles to Work (*45 minutes*)

Once the participants have returned and selected their topics, review the process as follows:

• Working in groups (or alone for those who prefer), they will be given 20 minutes to develop learning activities around their topic. If two groups wish to cover the same topic for two different age groups, that's fine also.
• They need to decide what age group they are gearing their lesson toward. They can choose closely graded (e.g. grades 1–2, young adults, senior adults), broadly graded (early elementary, older elementary, teens, adults), or intergenerational.
• They need to plan lessons that reflect what they've learned about learning styles.
• Handout B can help stimulate their thinking about techniques and activities; however, they are encouraged to be creative and come up with their own ideas.
• Each group or individual will be given a couple of minutes to share some of the ideas they came up with and some of the challenges they experienced.

Invite the groups/individuals to share. Keep a close watch on time so that everyone gets a chance to share. Listeners may ask questions, but it is not their job to critique each others' work. Once everyone has had a chance to share, offer a round of applause to everyone.

VI   Closing (*15 minutes*)

A) Meditation

Begin to move to closure by asking the participants to close their eyes and take a couple of nice, slow, deep breaths. Ask them to allow images of the people they teach to gently enter their minds and consider:

- How might what I've learned today affect the person who comes to mind?
- What might this person say to me about my teaching, if I had ears to hear it?

Now ask the participants to take another deep breath and allow the images of their learners to be replaced with the image of the Master Teacher, Jesus. Slowly talk them through the following meditation:

Picture Jesus walking down a dusty road with his friends. He's talking and laughing with them. He points out trees, fields, and flowers, offering lessons about God's love. They find a quiet spot near a sycamore tree and sit together. Jesus takes bread, gently tears it, and passes it around the gathered friends. See yourself seated among Jesus' friends. Smell the dusty air and feel the gentle breeze. Look into Jesus' eyes and feel his warm, deep love for you. When the bread comes to you, stroke its grain in your fingers. Nibble on its goodness and hear Jesus say, "I am the bread of life." Allow Jesus to teach you through his words, through the bread, and through his loving presence.

Give the participants a minute or two of silence, then quietly ask them to take a slow, deep breath, feel their feet on the floor and become aware of their surroundings, then open their eyes.

B) Prayer
Show the participants where the paper, pencils, and shoebox are and ask them to write an evaluation of the workshop: what was valuable, what wasn't, what they suggest changing, and so on.

Ask them to stand, and offer a brief word of blessing on their teaching ministries, such as:

Lord of Life, Teacher of Teachers,
Bless the ministries of these who have dedicated themselves to walking with others on the journey of faith. Give them insight into the needs of their learners, patience for the challenging times, and confidence that Your Spirit is with them as they teach.
Amen.

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Descriptors for Kolb's Categories
Charts, Activity IV B

[Orientation Continuum Chart 1]

← • →

Reflective Observation: watching others and reflecting on what happens

• watching
• careful observation
• reflective
• reserved
• understanding vs. practical application
• impartial description
• the meaning of ideas
• reflection vs. action
• thoughtful judgment
• implications
• different points of view
• reliance on own thoughts and feelings

Active Experimentation: jumping in and doing

• influencing people
• changing situations
• practical
• pragmatic vs. absolute truth
• doing vs. observing
• accomplishing
• risk-taking
• objectives
• impact and results
• experimentation
• responsible
• application vs. reflective understanding

[Orientation Continuum Chart 2]

← •   • →

Abstract Conceptualization: thinking, analyzing, or planning

• analytical
• evaluative
• logical
• conceptualization
• rational
• thinking vs. feeling
• ideas and concepts
• general theories
• scientific vs. intuitive or artistic
• systematic planning
• abstract symbols
• quantitative analysis
• precision
• discipline

Concrete Experience: experiencing the concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world

• experiences
• personal involvement
• immediate/real situations
• feeling vs. thinking
• intuitive vs. systematic
• unstructured
• receptive
• feeling
• accepting
• intuitive
• present-oriented
• relational
• uniqueness and complexity vs. generalizations
• intuitive decisions

Concrete Experience + Reflective Observation =
Diverging

Abstract Conceptualization + Reflective Observation =
Assimilating

Abstract Conceptualization + Active Experimentation=
Converging

Concrete Experience + Active Experimentation =
Accommodating

Multiple Intelligences Are *Not* Learning Styles

The terminology of Multiple Intelligences (M.I.) has become very popular in Christian education circles, with a proliferation of presentations on using the intelligences in lessons, discussions of multiple intelligences in introductions to curriculum series that label activities according to "which multiple intelligence they use," and even whole books that explore how to use the intelligences in teaching. M.I. is well-researched theory that provides ground-breaking information that challenges our culture's marginalization of those who are not "smart" in the traditionally valued linguistic and mathematical-logical senses. The attention given M.I. in Christian education endeavors, however, generally represents an unfortunate misuse and misappropriation of the theory.

In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, which introduced the world to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, the author seems to anticipate misapplication of his theory:

I, and sympathetic readers, will likely be able to think . . . that we here behold "the linguistic intelligence," the "interpersonal intelligence," or "the spatial intelligence" at work and that's that. But it's not. These intelligences are fictions. . . . And so as we turn our attention to the specific intelligences, I must repeat that they exist not as physically verifiable entities but only as potentially useful scientific constructs. [1]

It is important to remember that the intelligences as identified by Gardner relate to specific *content*. Linguistic intelligence, for example, can be mobilized through sound, sight, and even touch. While the intelligences can secondarily be spoken of as means for acquiring information, we never use a single intelligence when learning. Additionally, speaking of the intelligences as means for learning almost always ends up in refashioning them—taking Gardner's intelligences and turning them into learning styles. As Gardner writes:

Much work needs to be done on the question of how the intelligences can best be mobilized to achieve specific pedagogical goals. Educators are prone to collapse the terms intelligence and style. For informal matters, that is not great sin. However, style and intelligence are really fundamentally different psychological constructs. Styles refer to the customary way in which an individual approaches a range of materials. . . . Speak of styles, speak of intelligences, but don't conflate the two . . . [2]

Teaching music theory, practicing on a musical instrument, listening to music to appreciate the harmonies—these things enhance musical intelligence, the *content* of which is all things related to music. Using a song to teach the names of the books of the Bible is not using musical intelligence. It is using music to teach terms and the memorization and recitation of terms primarily reflects linguistic intelligence.

So what does M.I. theory have to offer to us? The first and obvious answer is that, if we want to identify an intelligence that relates to formation of Christian disciples, we'd have to choose Gardner's "Existential Intelligence," his identified 1/2 intelligence that deals with the big questions of life. It might be more valuable, however, to extrapolate insights from Gardner's response to the question of how his theory might have a positive impact on public education:

Briefly, my theory can reinforce the idea that individuals have many talents that can be of use to society; that a single measure (like a high stake test) is inappropriate for determining graduation, access to college, etc.; and that important materials can be taught in many ways, thereby activating a range of intelligences. [3]

Drawing on that response, I suggest that M.I. offers the following insights for discipleship education:
- People are gifted in a variety of ways and need to be nurtured in contexts that allow them to discover their giftedness and live out their faith in ways that are unique to them.
- Single measures, such as Scripture memorization, good behavior, or right answers to religious questions, are unfair and inaccurate "tests" of spiritual development.
- Christian faith has many contents, which include Scripture, theology, worship practices, and ethics, but its ultimate content is a relationship with God that is lived out in all aspects of life.
- Therefore Christian education requires using a wide range of methods that honor diverse learning styles and
- the most powerful educational tool is the experience learners have with other Christians—Christian faith is not formed by lesson plans but by the witness of authentically Christian teachers, friends, families, churches, and denominations.

1. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books, 1983, p. 70.
2. "Multiple Intelligences after Twenty Years," paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Chicago IL, April 21, 2003, p.11.
3. Howard Gardner: Frequently Asked Questions, http://www.howardgardner.com/FAQ/faq.htm, accessed March 2007.

THREE APPROACHES TO LEARNING STYLES

McCarthy's Styles	Kolb's Orientations	Don't Do Well With	Appreciate
Innovative Learners start with what they see and generalize. They are interested in personal meaning and need reasons for learning.	Innovative learners have an orientation toward **reflective observation**, which focuses on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations. They are good at inductive reasoning and tend to emphasize understanding over practical application. They appreciate different points of view but like to rely on their own thoughts to form opinions. They value patience, impartiality, carefully thought-out opinions, and harmony.	• debates • timed activities • quiet listening without opportunity to interact • perceived superficiality or simplistic answers • common sense-style teaching	• listening and sharing ideas • small groups/cooperative learning • mime and role play • brainstorming • team games • observing and describing situations
Analytic Learners are watchers and listeners, who think systematically. They are interested in acquiring facts in order to deepen understanding.	Analytic learners have an orientation toward **abstract conceptualization**, which focuses on logic, ideas, and concepts. They enjoy listening to lectures and emphasize thinking over feeling. They rely on logic rather than intuition. Their thinking patterns are rational and sequential. They value precision, rigor, and disciplined thought, and tend to defer to authority.	• role play • vague parameters • open discussion • getting "off-task" • anything that seems illogical • dynamic learner-style teaching	• instruction/lecture • being given, and reciting, facts • sequencing stories • competition • demonstrations • independent research
Common Sense Learners are interested in how things work. They are eager to try things out and need to see how what they have learned plays out in real life.	Common sense learners have an orientation toward **concrete experience**, which means being involved in immediate human situations in a personal way. They emphasize feeling over thinking and are intuitive rather than systematic. They value involvement with real situations, relating to others, and open-mindedness. They have difficulty engaging when information seems unrelated to their lives.	• memorization • emphasis on reading • group work • responding in writing • innovative learner-style teaching	• flexibility and relaxed structures • problem solving • debates • independent work • experiments and hands-on activities • practical experiences
Dynamic Learners start with what they can see, hear, touch, and feel. They are interested in self-directed discovery and eager to teach themselves and others.	Dynamic learners have an orientation toward **active experimentation** and are more concerned with what works than with what is "right." They yearn for practical application, rely on intuition, and seek to actively influence situations. They value risk-taking and getting things accomplished, and have little patience for retreating to the safety of ideas or acceptable routines.	• sitting still • authoritarian teaching methods • high pressure/haste • assignments without options • inflexible routines • analytic learner-style teaching	• independent study • case studies • guided imagery • drama • creative projects and exploring possibilities • assignments that encourage originality

TRADITIONAL Learning Style	Techniques
Auditory learners like to hear stories and easily follow spoken directions. They like to talk as well as listen. Auditory learners make up only about 20% of learners.	• Singing and listening to music • Saying participants' names during prayer • Small group discussion • Choral or responsive reading • Listening for key words in a hymn or reading • Sound effects during dramatic reading • Rapping or chanting • One-on-one interviews • Clapping, finger snapping, or foot stomping
Kinesthetic teaching recognizes that about 80% of what we learn comes from what we *do.* Kinesthetic teaching is especially important for younger children and others whose attention is enhanced by movement.	• Dance • Movement prayers • Prayer postures • Role play • Sculpting with clay • Service projects • Using tactile, olfactory, and gustatory elements, such as anointing hands with scented oil and tasting traditional Seder foods
Visual learners represent the most common learning style. Visual learners like to see things and need concepts developed in a visual manner.	• Creating and displaying banners • Using or creating simple symbols • Using liturgical colors • Watching videos • Putting together puzzles • Making murals of stories • Creating journals in words or images • Matching games

Sources

Kolb, David A., *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984).

Kutz-Mellen, Sharon, "Speaking the Word of God in New Ways," in *Different Members, One Body* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 1998).

"Learning Styles and the 4MAT System: A Cycle of Learning," http://volcano.und.nodak.edu/vwdocs/msh/llc/is/4mat.html, accessed 10/18/06.

McCarthy, Bernice, *The 4MAT System: Teaching to Learning Styles with Right/Left Mode Techniques* (Oak Brook, IL: EXCEL, Inc., 1980).

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MY RISK FACTORS

My Experienced Style	My Preferred Learning Style
	Orientation 1:
	Orientation 2:
	Style:

Techniques for Mitigating Risks

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SUMMARY OF KOLB'S LEARNING STYLE TYPES

- **Concrete Experience + Reflective Observation = Diverging**: Divergers look at things from different perspectives and are able to organize many relationships into a meaningful "gestalt." Their greatest strengths are their imaginative ability and awareness of meanings and values. They prefer to watch rather than do, gathering information and using imagination to solve problems. Divergers perform well in generating ideas and identifying alternatives and implications such as in brainstorming sessions. They have broad cultural interests, are interested in people, tend to be emotional, and are generally strong in the arts. They prefer to work in groups. Counselors, organization development specialists, and personnel managers tend to have this learning style.

- **Abstract Conceptualization + Reflective Observation = Assimilating:** Assimilators take a concise, logical approach, and the focus is on ideas and abstract concepts rather than on people. Their strengths lie in the ability to use inductive reasoning, to create theoretical models, and to assimilate disparate observations into an integrated explanation. They excel at understanding wide-ranging information and organizing it a clear, logical format. Ideas are judged according to sound internal logic rather than practical application. These learners prefer readings, lectures, systematic explanations, and analysis, and need time to think things through. This learning style is characteristic of people in the basic sciences and mathematics, and they excel in research and planning.

- **Abstract Conceptualization + Active Experimentation = Converging:** Convergers' greatest strengths are their problem-solving and decision-making ability and their ability to make practical use of ideas and theories. These learners prefer to deal with technical tasks and problems rather than with social and interpersonal issues. They do well on conventional tests in which there is one correct answer or solution. Convergers are strong in hypothetical-deductive reasoning and like to experiment with new ideas, to engage in simulations, and to work with practical applications. Convergers often specialize in the physical sciences, and they do well in fields such as engineering and technical specialties.

- **Concrete Experience + Active Experimentation = Accommodating:** Accommodators' strengths include doing things, carrying out plans, and getting involved in new experiences. This learning style is hands-on and the rely on intuition and trial and error rather than logic to solve problems. When a plan or theory doesn't seem to work, they will accommodate the situation by altering the theory or plan. Accommodators are comfortable with others and like to work in teams, but can seem impatient or pushy as they are ready to forge ahead, trying a variety of approaches to solve a problem. Drawn to technical and practical fields, these learners often work in action-oriented jobs, such as sales.

Note: David Kolb's "Learning Style Inventory" is distributed by McFer and Co., 137 Newbury St., Boston, MA 02116. For those interested in formally assessing their learning style, the inventory and technical manual can be obtained at this address.

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