

THE IMPACT OF LEARNING STYLES ON VOLUNTEERING FOR  
CHURCH ACTIVITIES

by

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PREVIEW

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# The Impact of Learning Styles on Volunteering for Church Activities

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The purpose of the present study was to determine the relationship between learning style preference and volunteering for church activities. It was hypothesized that people with certain learning styles would be more likely to participate in certain volunteer jobs and that learning style preference would be related to overall propensity to volunteer.

A survey instrument containing the How I Like to Learn Survey and a list of volunteer jobs available in churches was distributed to adults over the age of 40 in 14 protestant churches across the United States. A total of 511 subjects answered the questionnaire. A factor analysis established that there were four learning style preferences: the personalizing collaborator (learns through small groups and discussion), the analytic evaluator (learns by evaluating information and being thorough), the hands-on experimenter (learns by experimenting), and the innovative explorer (learns by taking risks and adapting to change). Factor analysis also indicated four categories of volunteer jobs: people-oriented jobs, detail-oriented jobs, hands-on jobs, and heading-up jobs.

Multiple regression analyses revealed some statistically significant findings. The innovative explorer and personalizing collaborator learning style preferences had the highest overall propensity to volunteer and were the two learning styles most likely to volunteer for people-oriented jobs. The hands-on experimenter and

personalizing collaborator learning style preferences were the most likely to volunteer for hands-on volunteer jobs. The analytic evaluator and hands-on experimenter learning style preferences were the most likely to volunteer for detail oriented jobs. Finally, volunteer jobs involved with heading up a program or event were most likely to be done by people with the innovative explorer learning style preference.

Males were more likely to volunteer for hands-on jobs and head jobs, whereas females were more likely to volunteer for detail oriented jobs and people oriented jobs. Additionally, females had a higher overall propensity to volunteer than males. Findings also indicated that age has an inverse effect on volunteering in that as age increases propensity to volunteer decreases.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION	1
Rationale for the Study	1
Significance of the Study	2
Problem Statement	3
CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Learning Style Theory	5
Definitions of Learning Style	5
Adult Learning	8
Research on Older Adults and Learning Style Preference	13
Volunteerism	15
Overview of Volunteerism	15
Volunteering with Religious Organizations	16
Older Adults and Volunteerism	17
Motivation of Volunteers	19
Personality and Volunteerism	20
Learning Styles, Volunteerism, and Careers	23
Summary	25
CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY	27
Assumptions	27
Limitations	27
Definition of Terms	28
Description of Instruments	28
Learning Type Measurement	28
Volunteer Jobs Measurement	33
Hypotheses	36
Summary	36
Sample	37
Data Collection Procedure	38
Data Analysis	38
CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS	40
Description of the Sample	40
Factor Analysis	40
How I Like To Learn Factor Analysis	41
Volunteer Jobs Factor Analysis	46
Regression Analyses	50
Hypothesis One	50
Hypothesis Two	50
Hypothesis Three	53
Hypothesis Four	53
Hypothesis Five	56

CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION	58
Discussion of Hypotheses	58
Summary	63
Implications	64
Suggestions for Future Research	65
REFERENCES	69
APPENDICES	78
Appendix A – Glossary of Terms	78
Appendix B – Survey Letter of Informed Consent	81
Appendix C – Survey on Learning Styles and Volunteering for Church Activities	83
Appendix D – Recruitment Script	87

## LIST OF TABLES

1. Learning Style Labels	32
2. Hypothesized Groupings of Learning Styles and Volunteer Jobs	35
3. Factor Loadings of Learning Style Preferences	43
4. Mean Scores for Learning Style Preferences	45
5. Factor Loadings of Volunteer Jobs	47
6. Mean Scores for Volunteer Jobs	49
7. Regression of Overall Propensity to Volunteer on Learning Styles	51
8. Regression of People Oriented Volunteer Jobs on Learning Styles	52
9. Regression of Hands-On Volunteer Jobs on Learning Styles	54
10. Regression of Detail Oriented Volunteer Jobs on Learning Styles	55
11. Regression of Head Volunteer Jobs on Learning Styles	57



## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Rationale for Study**

With the large numbers of older adults and the increasing number of Baby Boomers approaching retirement age, there is a growing interest in how to best utilize the invaluable resource of older adults. Today people are living longer, remaining healthy, and taking early retirement. Volunteer efforts are an increasing interest among older adults.

Volunteerism has been found to improve the life satisfaction of older adults and have a positive effect on one's health (Van Willigen, 2000). For some older adults, volunteering is a way of compensating for the loss of work and family roles. There also seems to be a cohort effect in that men and women born before World War II have been engaged in civic affairs their entire lives and they are continuing this pattern into retirement (Quadagno, 2000).

Older adults participate in a variety of different volunteer activities including tutoring, working with their hands, fund-raising, serving on committees, and driving a car or van (Caro and Bass, 1995). Seeber (2003) reported that between one-third and one-half of older American volunteers are participating in activities in their churches. He also stated that religious groups make up the largest providers of volunteers in American society. According to Bradley (1999), nearly half of all volunteer activity in society is by persons who are active in and recruited through faith-based communities.

Numerous studies have looked at the motivation to volunteer, and churches have used a variety of inventories to recruit volunteers. These inventories have sought to link

personality type with volunteerism; however, very few studies have investigated the relationship between individual learning style preference and motivation to volunteer for church activities.

Learning style theory states that individuals have certain preferences for processing instructional messages, and that learning style preference can be identified. Learning style preference is increasingly used to not only determine how people learn best, but to also help increase productivity in the work environment (Withnall, 2001), improve health education (Theis & Merritt, 1992), and deal with communication apprehension (Dwyer, 1998). In terms of volunteerism, LeFever (1995) states that volunteers should be asked to do jobs that fit their preferred learning styles.

### **Significance of the Study**

Recruiting and retaining volunteers is an on-going issue for nearly all organizations that utilize volunteers. Volunteers enhance a sense of community, eliminate extra expenses that would be required to pay someone, and provide expertise that may not be found elsewhere.

Churches have always relied on volunteers to accomplish their goals. Churches that have volunteers do not have to pay people to do the necessary jobs of coordinating the Sunday school, directing the choir, staffing the nursery, leading the health ministries, and maintaining the grounds. In terms of cost to the churches, they are worth an average of about two-fifths the amount of monetary contributions (Hoge, Zech, McNamara, & Donahue, 1999).

Even outside the religious sector, volunteers are an essential component of many organizations. Because of budget constraints on federal and state programs, volunteers

are in demand to keep these community service programs afloat. Volunteers have become such a key part of many groups that agencies will often hire a volunteer coordinator to direct and manage all of the volunteers and their various duties.

Obviously, all volunteer jobs are not alike. Some tasks are very hands-on while others may be advisory or administrative in nature. Older volunteers can get pigeon-holed into jobs of “stuffing envelopes” while in fact many could be utilizing their talents in leadership roles. Tailoring volunteer jobs to fit a particular learning style preference could help to ensure volunteer satisfaction and correct volunteer placement. Because of the ever growing need for volunteers, it is important to determine what learning style types are more likely to volunteer and what volunteer jobs they choose.

### **Problem Statement**

Learning style affects how a person processes information in any given situation. McCarthy (1993) suggests that in addition to the traditional teacher, parents, leaders, and coaches must all consider learning style preference when they are communicating. Doing this will enhance the understanding of the children, employees, and players. A number of studies have looked at learning style preference in relation to the work environment, but very few studies have investigated the effects of learning style preference on volunteer motivation.

Knowing how to enlist volunteers is an increasing interest among many organizations. Studies have found that people choose to volunteer for a variety of reasons including a desire to learn new things and wanting to do something worthwhile (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991). Other studies have found that certain personality types tend to volunteer while others do not.

There are not many studies that specifically look at older adult volunteers and personality or learning style preference. It has been noted that many older adults spend part of their retirement years volunteering. If this is true, then understanding older adult learning style preference and how this affects volunteerism would be of importance to those organizations that need volunteers.

The purpose of the present study is to test a series of hypotheses concerning the relationship between learning style preference and the volunteer jobs a person chooses. The next chapter reviews the literature of volunteerism and learning style theory.

## **Chapter Two**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Understanding the background of learning style theory and the adult learner creates a foundation for looking at the research on older adults and learning style preference. Volunteerism and how it relates to religion, older adults, personality, and learning style is explored in the last part of this chapter.

#### **Learning Style Theory**

##### Definitions of Learning Style Theory

Research in the area of learning styles has gained popularity and has been highly studied for the past four decades (Cassidy, 2004). A variety of academic disciplines outside of psychology and education have become interested in learning styles. Medical and health care training, management, industry, and vocational training are just a few of the fields that are seeking to apply learning style theory. It is commonly accepted that individuals have specific preferences for processing messages, that learning style preference can be identified, and that academic achievement is better when a student's learning style is taken into consideration.

According to Keefe (1987), elements of learning style appeared in the literature as early as 1892. Most of the early research on learning styles looked at the relationship between memory and teaching methods. Since that time, learning style has primarily been observed as having three different dimensions including a cognitive dimension, an affective dimension, and a physiological dimension.

There are many different definitions for learning style presented in the literature. Smith (1982) defined a learning style as an individual's characteristic ways of processing

information, feeling, and behaving in learning situations. A style has also been defined as any pattern we see in a person's way of accomplishing a particular type of task (Schmeck, 1988). Sims and Sims (1995) said that style is a component of many factors such as personality, brain hemisphere dominance, prior learning, aptitudes, abilities, and other factors. According to Filipczak (1995) a learning style, "... is the way individual people begin to concentrate, process, internalize and remember new and difficult material" (p. 44). Murphy (1993) says that learning is viewed as an individualized process, and the individual styles of learning describe people's various approaches to learning a task. Keefe (1987) says that styles are, "... qualities in the behavior of individual learners that persist regardless of the teaching methods or the content experienced" (p.5).

Often learners are thought of as being visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. The visual learner is one that learns by seeing and watching demonstrations. This learner recognizes words by sight, thinks in pictures, and visualizes in detail. Most visual learners problem solve by planning in advance and writing down solutions. A person with an auditory learning style learns through verbal instructions from others. Auditory learners usually enjoy dialogue and like to avoid lengthy descriptions. An auditory learner solves problems by talking about them. The kinesthetic learner learns by doing. This learner excels when doing something hands on. A kinesthetic learner solves problems by attacking them physically and often selects a solution that involves the greatest activity (Filipczak, 1995).

Learning style and cognitive style have often been used synonymously in the literature but they are not the same thing. As was mentioned previously, cognition is one

component of an individual's learning style, but it also includes his or her affect and biological processes. The cognitive component of learning has to do with the "information process habits representing the learner's typical mode of perceiving, thinking, problem solving, and remembering" (Messick, 1976, p.7). Cognitive learning theories are explanations for learning that focus on the internal mental processes people use in their effort to make sense of the world. "From a cognitive perspective, learning is defined as a change in individuals' mental structures that gives them the capacity to demonstrate changes in behavior" (Eggen and Kauchak, 1992, p. 306). The focus is on internal structures or mechanisms within the learner's head in addition to observable behavior. For example, the learner may consciously think of his need to pay attention and then use mental imagery to remember the content. Cognitive learning can be used for something as simple as remembering a phone number or as difficult as solving a detailed math problem.

The affective dimension of learning has to do with attention, emotion, and valuing. Affective style is the result of motivational processes. Environment, parents, friends, school influences, and personality factors are all components that contribute to an individual's motivation to learn (Keefe, 1987). The affective dimension encourages the learner to develop a liking of the topic and to want to do something with the material on his or her own.

The final component of learning has to do with physiological styles. According to Keefe (1987), these are "... biologically-based modes of response that are founded on sex-related differences, personal nutrition and health, and accustomed reaction to the physical environment" (p. 13). For example, someone who has skipped breakfast may

not be as quick to learn something new as someone that has already eaten. In addition, a room that is too hot or too cold can make learning more difficult.

In summary, learning is an internal process that in some way results in a change of behavior. Numerous definitions for learning style have been suggested. Perhaps the most comprehensive definition is suggested by Keefe (1987). “Learning styles are characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment” (p.5).

### Adult Learning

Learning style preferences have been extensively researched with children and young adults and more recently have been looked at in relation to the adult learner. Knowles (1975) is considered one of the leaders in adult learning theory, and he makes a distinction between teaching children and teaching adults. He highlights this difference by distinguishing between the terms pedagogy and andragogy.

Pedagogy has come to be defined as the art and science of teaching, but its tradition is in the teaching of children. The body of theory and practice on which self-directed learning is based has come to be labeled andragogy...Andragogy is defined, therefore as the art and science of helping adults (or, even better, maturing human beings) learn (Knowles, 1975, p. 19).

Typically, adults are volunteers in the learning enterprise. Because of this they are likely to remain a part of educational experiences that they find valuable, enjoyable, and relevant (Peterson, 1983). Knowles (1998) outlines six assumptions on which the



andragogical model is based. The first thing to consider is why in fact the adult needs to know the material. Tough (1979) found that when adults undertake to learn something on their own, they will invest time and energy into finding out the benefits they will gain from learning the material and the negative consequences that will result if they do not learn it. The second consideration is the adult's self-concept. Once an individual reaches adulthood he has a need to be seen by others as being capable of self-direction. In the traditional, pedagogical setting, the student is seen as a passive participant in the learning process. Adults may take on a role of dependency in the learning environment rather than being self-directed in their learning endeavors. A third component is the varied experiences that the adult brings into the learning situation. Knowles (1998) suggests that the "richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves" (p. 66).

Fourth is the adult's readiness to learn. Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope with their real-life situations. A fifth factor closely linked to readiness to learn is the adult's orientation to learning. They will learn new knowledge and skills most effectively when they can immediately apply them to a real-life situation. Finally, motivation is a key factor in adult learning.

As was mentioned, the first element of adult education is establishing a need. Determining the educational wants and needs of adults and especially older adults is a quest for anyone who plans educational opportunities for older adults. McClusky (1974) identified five categories of educational needs unique to the older adult population. The first of these is coping needs that often result from the natural aging process. These include changes in finances, health, occupation, position in society, and marital status. Peterson (1983) says, "An educational program designed to address coping needs would

be based on a response to changes in the condition of the individual and to overcoming obsolescence in dealing with societal change” (p. 135). Expressive needs make up the second category and involve the enjoyment that results from participating in the activity. Often thought of as leisure activities, these educational pursuits might include the arts, sports, or other academic interests. Also included in this category are social relations. Development of personal friendships through shared activities provides great satisfaction and comfort to older persons (Thorson, 1978).

Contributive needs refer to the altruistic desire of most people to assist others with their problems. Education is often the way in which older adults become aware of the way that they can contribute. Similar to contributive needs, the fourth category is the need to influence. This need suggests that older people want to be involved with the larger issues of citizenship and social concerns. Peterson (1983) suggests that because older adults typically have more discretionary time, the opportunity for participation in this area is great. The final category of needs identified by McClusky is transcendence needs. These are needs for gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of life, the review of one’s life, and the acceptance of the physical declines of the body. For example, a transcendent need would be met through a class that helped older adults explore the purpose of their life by writing their autobiography.

Tough (1979) has been another leader in the field of adult learning. He led a group of researchers in Toronto in studying the deliberate learning efforts of adults. Specifically, his research looked at the learning projects in which adults participate. The focus of his work has been on the efforts that an adult learner makes in trying to change

himself. Tough expands the view of learning to include more than the traditional classroom or workshop setting. He says,

Men and women learn in many ways: by reading books, magazines, and newspapers; by watching television and movies; by seeking subject matter and advice from friends, relatives, neighbors, or fellow workers; by consulting a doctor or lawyer, a salesman or librarian, an extension agent or financial expert. They may also attend discussion groups, lectures, and private lessons. (Tough, 1979, p. 3)

Through open-ended interviews, Tough (1979) found that adults choose to learn for a number of reasons including the intention of using the knowledge, imparting the knowledge to someone else, and gaining personal self-esteem and confidence.

Elderhostel and Oasis are both educational programs that emphasize lifelong learning among older adults. Elderhostel was started in the 1970s and provides week-long programs of instruction, often accompanied by travel experiences. Oasis was founded in 1982 and it seeks to offer lifelong learning and service opportunities that benefit the lives of older people and the communities in which they live.

Another significant contribution to the field of adult learning is David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. Adult learning is often characterized by experience, and according to Kolb, should be a continuous process. Kolb (1984) said, "Ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience" (p.26). Kolb's theory has been adopted in management, psychology,

health, and business fields as a way of understanding and assisting adults in the learning process.

Kolb distinguished four distinct learning modes. Divergers learn by combining concrete experience with reflective observation. They tend to be imaginative, trust experience, and can identify problems and potential solutions. Assimilators combine reflective observation and abstract conceptualization. They like to put information in a logical form. The converger learning type combines abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Convergers like to find practical uses for information by finding solutions to problems. Accomodators learn by combining active experimentation and concrete experience. They like to do things hands-on and tend to be people-oriented.

McCarthy added to Kolb's work and developed four learning style preferences that she used in the public schools. The Type One learner prefers to learn by listening and sharing ideas. They perceive information concretely and process it reflectively. The Type Two learner learns by thinking through ideas. They perceive information abstractly and process it reflectively. The Type Three learner learns by testing theories and applying common sense. They perceive information abstractly and process it actively. The Type Four learner prefers to learn through trial and error. They perceive information concretely and process it actively.

The older adult learner brings a variety of needs, motivations, and past experiences to the learning environment. This makes identifying their personal learning style a challenge as it has been shaped and refined over years of varied learning experiences. Initially, learning styles were studied with children and youth and then later with adult employees. However, few studies have sought to identify the learning style