

Experiential Learning – An Effective Approach for Gathering Knowledge and Capabilities in Professional Career

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Abstract

Experiential learning, from the direct practice, is a relatively new andragogical approach in Romania, which refers to the accumulation of knowledge and experience through analysis and reflection, for better knowing the socio-economic and / or institutional realities and seeing the requirements and problems in practice. This approach will play an important role in harmonizing knowledge and capabilities necessary for career and business processes development. In order to promote in Romania this new methodology, which is already established in developed countries, our research aimed primarily to study the rational process of experiential learning and the ways in which it should be managed in order to facilitate by practice the processes of identification and pragmatic assessment of business opportunities, and the creation and development of success businesses.

Keywords: *accommodative learning style, assimilation learning style, convergent learning style, divergent learning style, experiential learning, learning process, learning styles.*

JEL classification: L26, M10

Introduction

The international researches in psycho-pedagogy and andragogy have shown that experiential learning, from direct practice, is one of the most effective and efficient methods of adult education in all fields, because subjects are actively and emotionally involved in the learning process. Active and emotional involvement is an important factor in experiential learning processes, because in this way skills and capabilities are acquired and retained for long-term, unlike traditional learning, where mechanically stored knowledge is gradually diminished on short term.

Under these circumstances, we believe that an important factor in increasing the effectiveness and success of entrepreneurial training programs is the

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experiential approach to learning, which can stimulate and develop entrepreneurial skills faster. Therefore, our research mainly aims to study the rational process of experiential learning and ways in which skills and entrepreneurial capabilities of the subjects can be pragmatically evaluated, which would eventually lead to the launch and development of successful entrepreneurial organizations. The research is divided into 3 parts, as follows: the first part has a theoretical-methodological character and is a documentary study on the concept of experiential learning and its application methods. The second part presents characteristics of learning styles and their link with the formation of knowledge and capabilities necessary to carry out business processes, and the last part presents some conclusions drawn from the research conducted on the correlation between experiential learning, learning styles and gathering knowledge and capabilities useful in professional career for the successful development of business processes.

1. Experiential learning – theoretical approaches

Research in psycho-pedagogy showed that learning is not the same for everybody; it differs from individual to individual depending on a number of personal characteristics and experience. Moreover, it appears that at a physiological level, structures responsible for learning can give rise to tendencies to adapt on different situations that subjects found repeatedly in practice, adjustment called experiential learning. Experiential learning is done in 4 successive and interrelated stages: concrete experience, observation (analysis and reflection), generalization (forming the abstract concepts) and application (testing in new situations), as shown in the model presented in Figure 1.

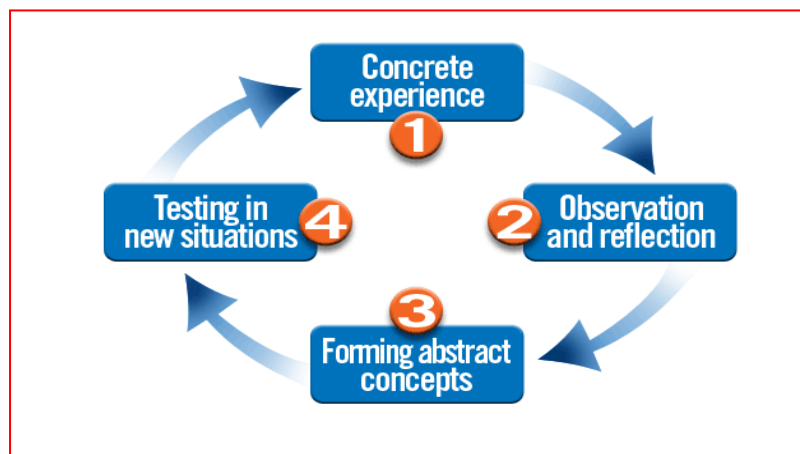


Figure 1. Experiential learning model

According to Kolb's theory, the trigger element of adult learning in practice (also known as andragogy) is the experience that can be represented by an event in professional or personal life, an action, a task or a way to solve a problem,

etc. For learning process to trigger, is need the chaining of some stages combined and interconnected. Thus, the next step in learning is reflection on the experience. By this stage, subjects analyze their experiences and observe the way of action and the consequences of these actions. Following these reflections, observations can be made on practical experience and traveled on this basis to the next step, generalization, which is to develop procedures that will be applied in relatively similar situations in practice. Thus, it is valorized the pragmatic perspective gathered and the subject can move forward to finding a theoretical / conceptual frame for the studied situation, by consulting the specialized literature. This is made the conceptualizing of problems drawn from practice and finding the general applicability rules so that students, graduate students and young people learn to relate with theoretical concepts and pragmatic methodologies, methods and techniques that meet the requirements of practice, through scheme procedures or new behaviors.

The effects of this learning process is the implementation and active experimentation, which means adapting and applying new information and capabilities gained from experiential learning process embedded in other situations and particular new contexts. As an efficient and effective methodology for adult self-education, experiential learning has a number of advantages for practitioners who want to improve their skills in order to obtain higher professional performance and for those who want to retraining, because experiential learning is:

- Targeted to each subject's self-interest in terms of management individual situations, meaning that each person manages her own learning situation, according to experience, knowledge and capabilities gained and held;
- Oriented to meet an immediate need, given that motivation to learn is greater when is associated with an immediate need in the individual activity;
- Participatory, whereas the role of the individual in learning is active, involvement being the first phase of the learning experience;
- Reflective, as learning involves reflection on initial experience and, on this basis, formulate findings and establish procedures to be applied in similar new situations;
- Source of feedback as learning also serves for correction and support in future activities.

Next, for highlighting the correlations between learning styles and experiential learning process, are briefly explained the characteristics of the four basic learning styles, well-known in international psycho-pedagogy.

2. The Learning Styles

Studies conducted by experts on psychological traits of subjects led to the conclusion that people's psychological typologies are not fixed traits but depend on the result of combining genetic information and social environment of each

individual. The stability and strength of these psychological states of subjects came from both genetic qualities and general characteristics of human resources and the influences from their social environment. Therefore, it is assumed that the stability and sustainability of human psychological traits are the result of the merge between the individual and the environment in which he lives and perform his daily activities.

These psychological traits have a significant influence on learning styles and thus on the efficiency of conducting experiential learning. Next will be presented the main features of the basic learning styles and the correlations between them and personality traits, as a result of: personality type, level of specialized education, career, current job and level of adaptability to various new particular situations.

2.1 Characteristics of the basic learning styles

Heuristic analysis of learning styles suggests that a major factor for determining individual learning styles is the basic structure of the learning process. Over time, subjects have developed various ways to structure the learning process so that discrepancies between perception / understanding and assimilation on long term are consistently solved in a specific way. As a result of our hereditary characteristics, of the past experience and of the requirements of the current environment, most people develop learning styles that emphasize the development of new skills useful in current activities at the expense of some older ones, which aren't currently used anymore. Through social experiences from family, school and workplace, it has been solved conflicts between being active or reflective and between impulse react or analyze situations in a typically way. Thus, subjects learning styles are based on one of the four basic forms of knowledge: divergent, assimilation, accommodative and convergent (Figure 2).

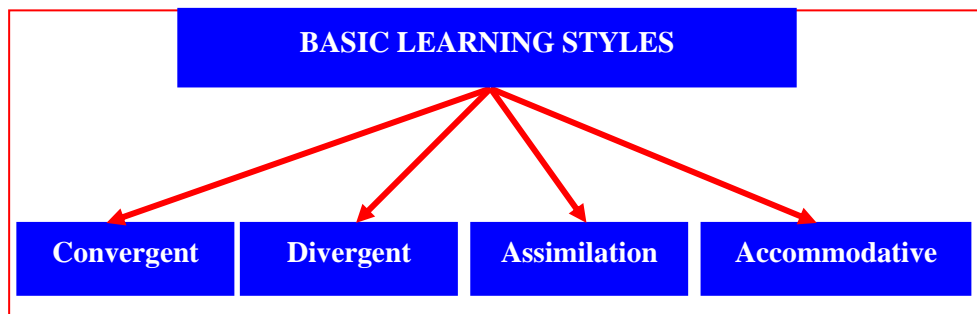


Figure 2. Basic learning styles

Below are presented the main characteristics of the four learning styles

➤ Convergent learning style relies primarily on learning skills characterized by abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The main

strength of this approach is the easiness of solving problems, making decisions and applying the ideas in practice, being useful for management positions within the firm, involving making decisions, applying pragmatic ideas and solving the problems occurred. This is called convergent learning style, because someone who has this style stand out best in situations such as conventional intelligence tests, where there is only one right answer or one solution to a question or problem. In this style of learning, knowledge is organized so that, through deductive reasoning, they can be focused on specific issues. Studies have shown that people with convergent learning style are controlled by emotion. They prefer to deal with technical tasks and problems rather than with social and interpersonal tasks, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Convergent learning style characteristics

➤ Divergent learning style strengths are diametrically opposed to convergent style, being based on concrete experience and reflective observation. The main strength of this guidance is the imaginative ability and awareness of meaning and values. Individuals who hold divergent styles have the ability to view concrete situations from many perspectives and coordinate multiple relationships in one direction. The emphasis in this approach is on adaptation by observation rather than by action. This style is called divergent because someone who have it, stand out better in situations and positions where have to generate alternative ideas and implications such as "brainstorming" sessions. These styles are specific to individuals with creativity and imagination, but also for sentimental / sensitive ones, as shown in Figure 4.

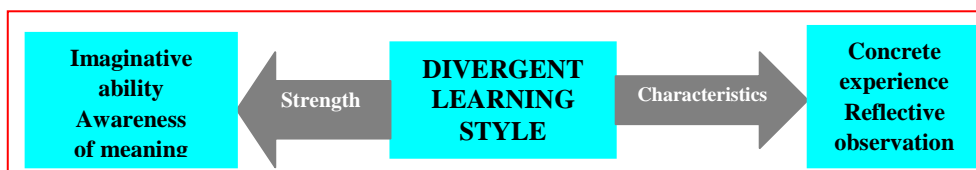


Figure 4. Divergent learning style characteristics

➤ Assimilation learning style is based on abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. The main strength of this learning style is represented by inductive reasoning, the ability to create theoretical models and the ability to integrate disparate observations into a complex explanation (theory). As

convergent style, it is less focused on interpersonal relationships and more on ideas and abstract concepts. However, ideas are not valued according to their practical applicability, but it is important that theory be logical and relevant, as illustrated in Figure 5.

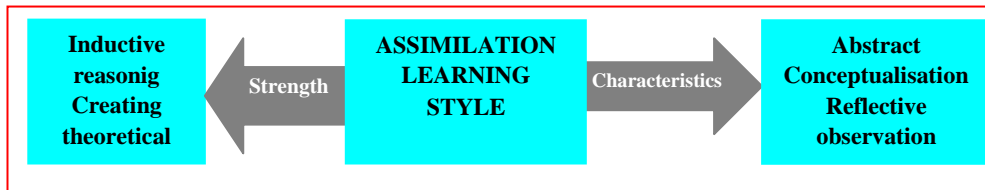


Figure 5. Assimilation learning style characteristics

➤ Accommodative learning style strengths are diametrically opposed to the assimilation one, emphasizing concrete experience and active experimentation. The main strength of this style is the ability to make plans and tasks and to engage in new experiences. This style is focused on finding specific job opportunity, taking risks and action and it is specific to those situations in which the individual must adapt immediately to emerging and changing circumstances. Where theory or plans do not fit the facts, individuals with accommodative style will tend to drop the plans or theories and continue the procedures according to the new circumstances. People with an accommodative orientation tend to solve problems through an intuitive process, heavily relying on information from others, rather than from analyzing situations. People with accommodative learning styles are sociable, but sometimes are considered impatient and "pushy". People with an accommodative orientation have the best chance to become successful entrepreneurs, as shown in figure 6.



Figure 6. Accommodative learning style characteristics

2.2 Behavioral models associated with learning styles

Patterns associated with these four learning styles differ greatly from one individual to another, from the type of personality to skills and environmental influences. In this context, we examine these models based on combining five parameters integrated into the behaviors of individuals: personality type, educational specialization, professional career, occupied positions in the current job and adaptability to new situations.

a) Personality type

Experiential learning theory asserts that experiential learning styles vary from individual to individual depending on personality type. It is noted that people who have introverted personality characteristics, also have learning styles which don't focus on interpersonal relationships, but rather on theories and abstract conceptualization, and those who have extrovert personality characteristics have interpersonal learning styles, are orientated towards putting ideas into practice and adapt to the circumstances of each situation.

Thus, an introverted person will mostly have convergent or assimilation learning style, being better in solving conventional intelligence tests with one solution to a question or problem.

Introverted people are controlled by emotion. They prefer to deal with specific technical tasks and problems rather than social and interpersonal problems (Figure 7). On the other hand, an extrovert is more likely to have divergent or accommodative learning style, as they focus on concrete experience and reflective observation.

Extroverted people will cope best in situations that call for generating alternative ideas or situations involving communication and interpersonal relationships (Figure 7).

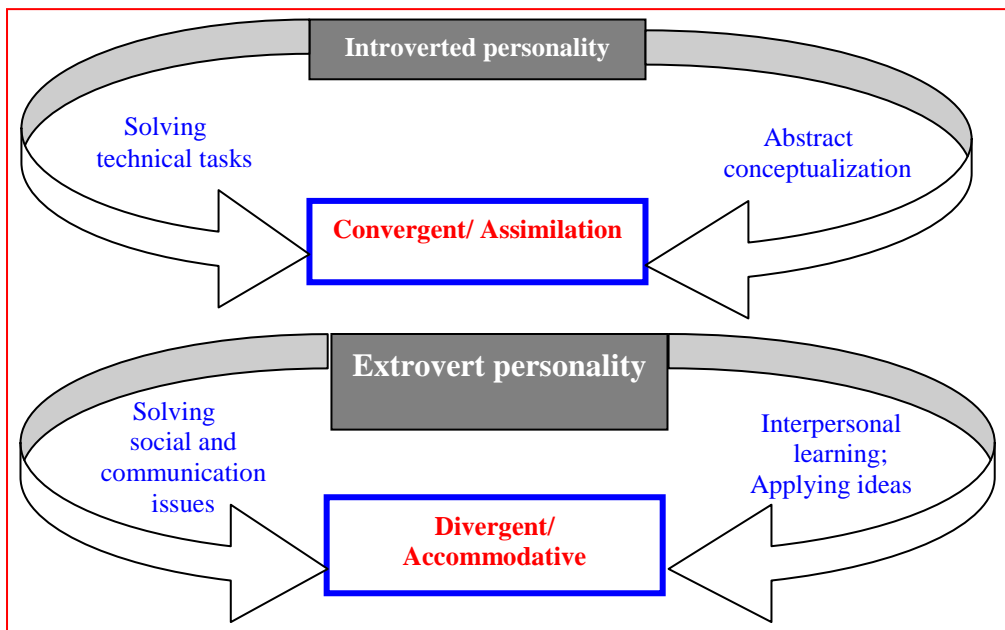


Figure 7. Extrovert personality influence on learning styles

b) Educational specialization

A major function of education is to train pupils and students so as they have a positive attitude towards learning and a thirst for knowledge and effective learning skills development. Early educational experiences contribute to individual

learning styles formation, as students are focused on how to learn effectively. Although the first years of education are mostly devoted to generalities, there is a growing specialization process, which begins to develop during high school and continue in college. This is real specialization, so there is a strong relationship between individual learning styles and training methods used early in a particular specialty or discipline.

Thus, people who choose to follow technical and economic specialization generally have assimilation and/or convergent learning styles. Those who choose to study business have accommodative learning style and those who choose humanities specializations have mostly divergent learning style (Figure 8).

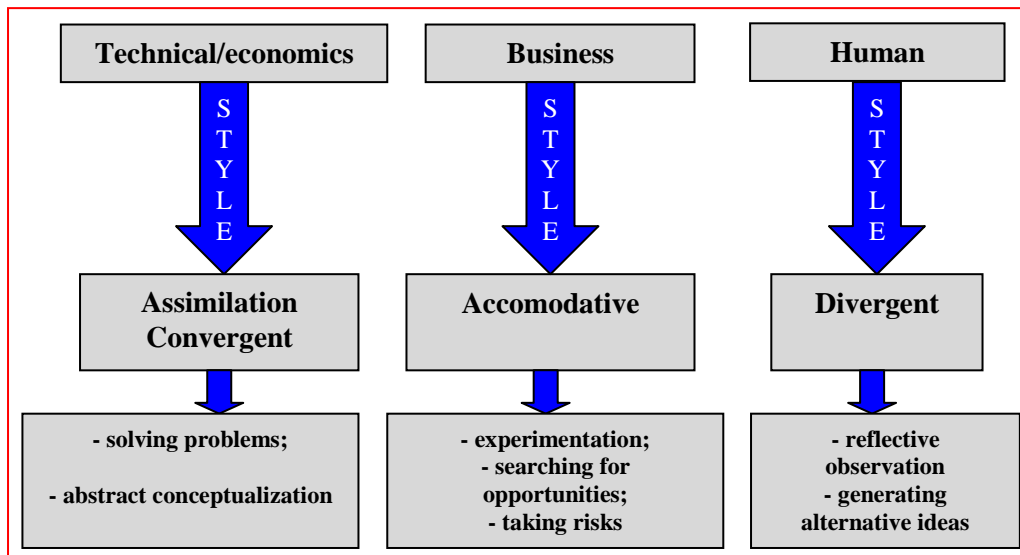


Figure 8. Educational specialization influence on learning styles

c) Professional career

A third vector, which form the learning style result from the professional guidance for career choice. Career choice involves not only exposure to a specialized learning environment, but implies also the generic problems of different specializations such as social services, which require accommodative orientation. In addition, a person becomes a member of a reference group of colleagues who share the same mindset on professional, a common set of values and beliefs about professional conduct. Professional orientation forms learning style habits acquired from profess time and pressures that sometimes occur in different situations of their duties. In engineering, for example, profession involves an attitude of scientifically and objective adaptation to the problems. In contrast, health care may involve compassion and caring for patients. Another example, in management, professional orientation should be based on relevant decisions and pragmatism.

The well-known studies found that, in general, learning styles of adults are more oriented towards active learning, rather than the reflexive. Socially oriented professions such as education, health care, social assistance, etc. bring together people who have an accommodative learning style. Scientific or technical oriented professions such as accounting, engineering, medicine, management etc. bring together people who have a convergent learning style. Social and medical practitioners can be both divergent and adaptive.

Some of these variations could also be due to the position occupied currently at work by subject.

d) Current job role

The fourth level factor that influences learning style is the individual's current job. Requirements and job pressures tend to shape the orientation of a person's learning style. Executive jobs such as general management, requires a strong orientation toward making decisions in uncertain situations, requiring accommodative learning style. Employment oriented to human resources, such as counseling or human resource management, which requires the establishment of personal relationships and effective communication with others, requires a divergent learning style. Employment on information, such as planning and research, involving data collection, analysis and conceptual modeling requires an assimilation learning style. Specific technical jobs such as engineering and production, involving technical skills and problem solving requires a convergent learning style.

e) The adaptability

The fifth level factor that forms specific learning style is the specific task or problem the person is engaged at work. Each task facing us requires a set of skills for effective performance. Effectively solving of various requirements and tasks require adaptability. The concept of competence is a new approach for improving the performance and it refers to connect people with job requirements and job profiling. Previous approach, which focused on personnel selection based on general skills proved to be a failure, despite efforts for this method to be viable. The basic problem with this approach was that the tested skills were too general and therefore did not refer to specific tasks and functions required for jobs and were not strong correlations between skills and performance. In addition, most of the time, skills measure was not proportionate to the job requirements.

The modern approach based on individual skills focus on competences that are consistent with the requirements of the potential job. From the study of the relationship between learning styles as a way of acquiring general skills, and specific skills associated with each of the four styles resulted a "circle of competence" that describes specific skills by association with the adaptability and learning styles. Accommodative learning style is associated with specific competences: engaging in achieving the targets, searching and seizing the opportunities, management skills, interpersonal involvement and socialization. Divergent learning style is associated with value characteristics and skills: empathy, ability to listen and understand, collecting information etc.

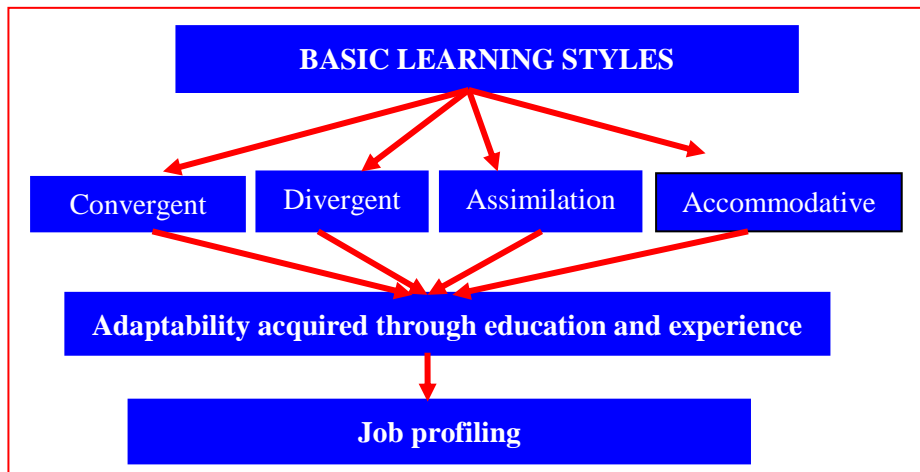


Figure 9. Learning styles influence on job profiling

Assimilation learning style is associated with thinking skills: good organization of information, creating conceptual models, testing theories and ideas, analyzing the data collected. Convergent learning style is associated with decision-making skills: creating new ways of thinking and acting, experimenting with new ideas, choosing the best solutions in different problem-situations, setting goals and making decisions. As seen in Figure 9, this approach is another vision that can shape the premises on which to perform job profiling, depending on the individual characteristics of those who are professionally oriented towards professions and jobs with specific skills and capabilities. Those are the ones who meet the strengths required for successful tasks assignments of the job.

Since these skills and capacities to adapt to different situations are defined as a blend of personal skills and requirements of work, as shown in Figure 9, it can be concluded that most competencies are acquired according to the prevailing learning styles of subjects.

In the modern approach for the selection of human resources, job profiling depends mainly on the specific skills and thus on the learning styles, which are generating capabilities.

3. Case study – Identifying the predominant learning styles, for guiding in the appropriate professional career

Next, a survey was conducted on a sample of 188 students from a graduate program for developing entrepreneurial skills, held in cooperation with a leading UK university. The students received a learning styles questionnaire calibrated and internationally agreed. The questionnaire is adapted from the model developed by Honey and Mumford (1992) and is designed to identify the predominant learning style of individuals in educational and experiential activities. The questionnaire is divided into 80 questions covering a range of personality characteristics and work

and assimilation techniques used in the individual learning process. By centralizing responses of YES / NO for each respondent it was revealed their predominant learning style.

According to the concepts and experience of the two authors (Honey and Mumford), they identified four predominant learning styles, which are: Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist.

In our research, we made the following correlations between the types of learning styles identified by Honey and Mumford and basic learning styles identified by Kolb: Activist – Accommodative; Reflector - Divergent; Theorist - Assimilation, Pragmatist - Convergent.

After centralizing the data collected it was showed that learning styles are not prevalent, so there were at least two types of learning styles characteristic for each subject. Thus, after processing the questionnaires we were able to get the following groups: 57 subjects (30.3%) have Reflector + Theorist learning styles, 55 (29.3%) have Reflector + Pragmatist learning styles, 37 (19.6%) have Pragmatist + Theorist learning styles, 16 (8.5%) have Pragmatist + Activist learning styles, 16 (8.5%) have Activist + Reflector learning styles and 7 (3.8%) have Activist + Theorist learning styles (Figure 10).

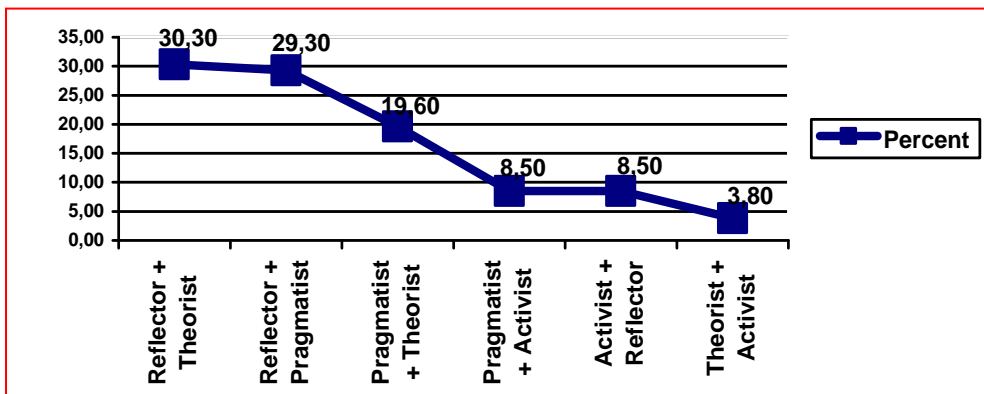


Figure 10. Centralization of predominant learning styles

From the centralization of data gathered and illustrated in Figure 10, it can be seen that the most common learning style is Reflector + Theorist, characteristic for individuals who learn through reflective observation and abstract conceptualization and have the capacity to generate alternative ideas with solid theoretical and methodological basis. Almost as frequently as Reflector + Theorist is Reflector + Pragmatist learning style characterized both by reflective observation and ability to generate alternative ideas and the ability to actively experience the ideas generated. With an average frequency is Pragmatist + Theorist learning style, based on abstract conceptualization ability and at the same time, inductive reasoning, useful for specific technical tasks. The analysis showed that only 8.5% of students have experiential learning styles suitable for the successful

development of entrepreneurial activities (Pragmatist + Activist), characterized by active experimentation of ideas and adapting experience to particular new situations, specific to business processes. Equally rare is the Activist + Reflector learning style, characterized by the subjects ability of learning through reflective observation and adjustment for future situations. Least common learning style in our research is Theorist + Activist, because there are very few subjects that have the ability to learn by assimilation, and adapt to particular new situations in the same time.

Conclusions

Normally, given that the most conducive style to entrepreneurship development is less common, the rational solution for the success and effectiveness of entrepreneurship training programs would be exploiting these tests to determine the learning styles and further recruitment for these courses until will be able to reach a critical mass of over 70-80% students with high entrepreneurial potential.

In such situations, individuals whose characteristics of experiential learning are not tangential to the development of successful business may use other means of professional guidance, appropriate to their learning characteristics and desires for career development, improving in this way their learning styles for being eligible for other professional activities.

For other subjects, who are already engaged in active life and want to advance in their careers, it is recommended to evaluate their skills and capabilities also through learning styles questionnaire, and trying to move to areas and positions that fit and let them achieve superior performances.

It would also be advisable that professional orientation, according to subjects learning styles and skills, to start as early as middle school, offering to the pupils a pragmatic and appropriate guidance of their specific characteristics, which would be a better orientation in further education.

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