



Listeners, Watchers & Doers

— *Is it the agency or the instructor that's important?*

Text by Steve Lewis
Underwater photos by Kate Clark

So, there we sat—my buddy, a friend of hers, and I. Cups of good German coffee in front of us, the reassuring murmur of passing tourists behind us, and the slightest hint of spring blowing in over the Rhine. As we settled down to relax and work out whether the rest of the day would be spent shopping or sightseeing, my buddy's friend asked that most basic of questions, one that most divers who have decided to venture into more advanced, so-called technical diving ask, "What's more important: a good instructor or the agency?"

I told her the answer is simple. "But," I said, "Do you mind if I ask you a really important question before I answer yours? How do you learn? What type of "student" are you?"
In their most basic form, the triggers or stimuli that change our understanding of a topic and cause us to modify our behavior based on new-found knowl-

edge fall into three broad categories: auditory, visual and experiential. Based on this, we can say that students are either Listeners, Watchers or Doers. I suggested she sip her coffee and allow me to explain in a little more detail, because to answer her question, I needed her to think about mine.

I told her that in academic sessions, each of these broad learning groups identifies themselves as follows.

Listeners

Auditory learners listen to instructions attentively. During classroom sessions, they take notes, sit in the front of the room, avoid outside distractions, and—as my university classmates would confirm—often repeat important points to themselves in a mumble (sub-vocalize) as they take notes.

I explained to her that if like me, she too was a listener, she will rehearse and repeat information out loud some- times read- out loud. She will make



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extensive use of mnemonics, often ones she makes up herself. Listeners do better on a test if they read the questions out loud to themselves much to the annoyance of folks around them. And listeners may memorize key points and terms by thinking how the words sound as much as what they mean.

Watchers

On the other hand, visual learners often make charts or diagrams covering key points. These folks think in pictures. They highlight notes with big arrows, underlinings, stars and asterisks. If you are a visual learner, you doodle on printed notes and handouts, draw boxes around and circle key points. You scribble in the margins of textbooks. You scan those books for diagrams, graphs, charts and pictures and study these before anything else.

You tend to link basic concepts and new information to things and concepts you already know and understand. You may make flash cards to help memorize new ideas. Your books sport Post-it notes, and you often study "the basics" before sitting in a classroom. Oh, and if your pre-classroom studies use the so-called "Cornell Note" system, chances are you prefer this style of learning.



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Doers

Kinesthetic (or experience) learners are doers. They fidget in a classroom setting and get distracted during straight lectures, preferring to ask questions and participate in the discussion. They ask what-if type questions and personalize concepts, often asking for examples of how the topic under discussion applies to them or imagining personal scenarios and asking if they have the "right idea."

During a break, these folks get up and amble about, stretching, bending and generally "shaking out the cobwebs." They do better when classroom sessions are short and sweet, punctuated with hourly "breakout sessions" during which they can bounce ideas around with classmates. If you have one of those squishy stress balls in one hand and a book in the other while studying, chances are that you are a kinesthetic learner.

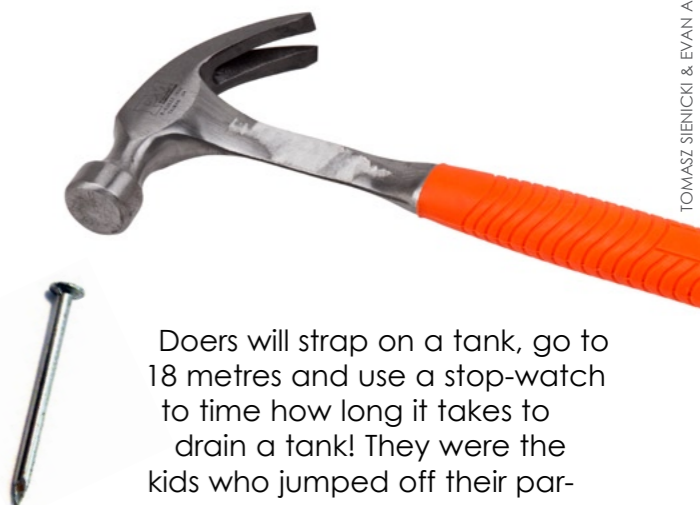
Real world approaches

Once out of the classroom and faced with a challenge to solve—a practical test or having to apply a recently learned concept to real-world circumstances—these three learning types present more distinctive approaches. I gave an example

of how that works. Let's say the "problem" presented to a group of recently certified open-water divers is to go away and research how many litres (or cubic feet) of gas are needed for a 30-minute dive to 18 metres (60 feet).

The listeners will call a more experienced buddy and ask for his or her advice. They may call a shop or drop in and speak face-to-face with an instructor to learn how to solve the problem. These folks best respond to the administrations of mentors.

Seeing learners will go online and use Google. They may go to a dive shop, but their preference would be to find a book on dive planning. They might find a YouTube video that explains the concept via charts and diagrams. These folks do best studying alone.



Doers will strap on a tank, go to 18 metres and use a stop-watch to time how long it takes to drain a tank! They were the kids who jumped off their parents' garage roof trying out their new glider design.

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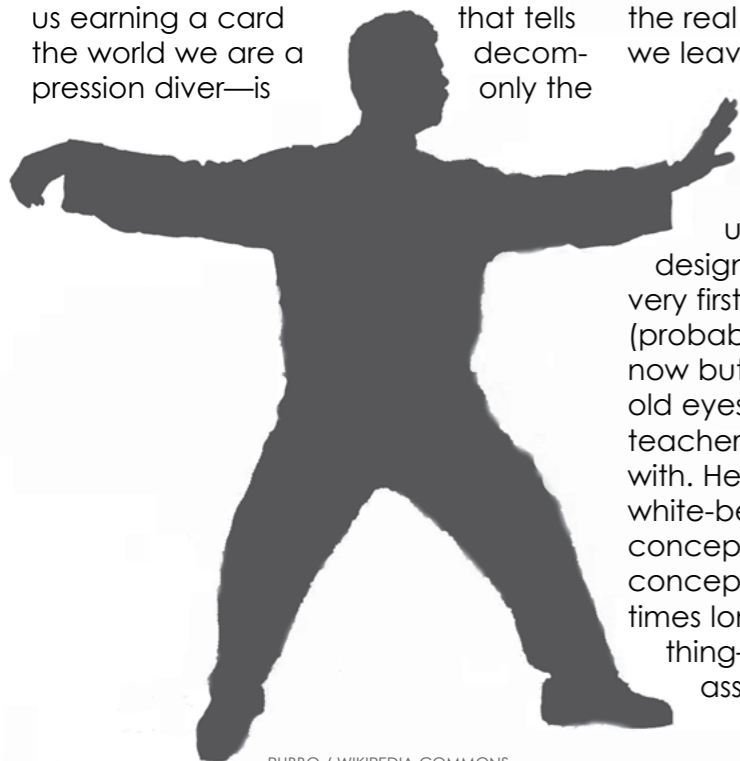
tech talk

Of course, to add a level of complexity to the situation, most of us are a mixed breed and have a little of each type of learner in us. But, in general, I told her that the first step in providing an answer to her question would be to identify which learning type she is.

Optimization

The whole point of identifying one's personal learning style is that once it is defined, there are ways to improve one's uptake and optimize one's future learning. For example, by knowing our weaknesses and trying to enhance skills in these 'soft' areas, we can improve our ability to soak up information next time we want to learn something.

It might also do some good for those readers who are asking the instructor-agency question to understand that a scuba program—let's take as an example a course that will end with us earning a card that tells the world we are a decompression diver—is only the



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FILE PHOTO: KATE CLARK

beginning of the journey into becoming an accomplished deco diver. At the end of the program, you have simply earned the right to continue your training. And by definition, that training will be mostly self-directed. In effect, the real learning process begins when we leave the class; it does not end there.

10,000 hours

Around 40 years ago, I signed up for the first of many classes designed to teach me Tai Chi. My very first teacher was an old dude (probably a little younger than I am now but he looked old to my 23-year old eyes). He was possibly the best teacher/instructor I've ever worked with. He instilled in us—his enthusiastic white-belted charges—two valuable concepts. The first is the 10,000 hours concept. It takes that long, and sometimes longer, to become expert at anything—including martial arts, and by association, the collection of

basic skills required of scuba diving. Therefore, if one is looking for instant gratification and "gain without pain" look for another pastime.

Looked at from a slightly different perspective, but sticking with the martial arts theme, Bruce Lee is quoted as saying: "I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once; I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times." If we subscribe to this philosophy—and I do—practice is key to any training regimen and any success.

Owning it

The second concept was about owning a skill. It follows on from the 10,000 repetitions or 10,000 hours idea. My martial arts teacher told a story—one of those Zen or Chan parables. A student of martial arts was enjoying some success, and was asked to go away and practice by his master. A couple of years later, the student returned and the master asked how he was doing.

"Fine," he said, but he admitted that a couple of the moves caused him problems.

"I think I am doing them a little differently to the way you do them," he said. So the master sent him away to practice some more. A couple of years later, the student returned and when asked, admitted that things had gotten worse. "Now there are several more moves that I am doing differently. Not sure what's going on," he said. This cycle of going away and doing more practice, and coming back to his master went on for several more years until finally, the student sat at his master's feet and explained that he no longer did anything exactly the way his master originally taught him. "It is all completely different, he moaned. The master asked the student to go through the exercises, and when he was finished the master stood up, bowed to him and congratulated him. "You are now a master," he said.

Either way you look at it—skills devel-

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...neither can we!

Photo courtesy of Jill Heinerth



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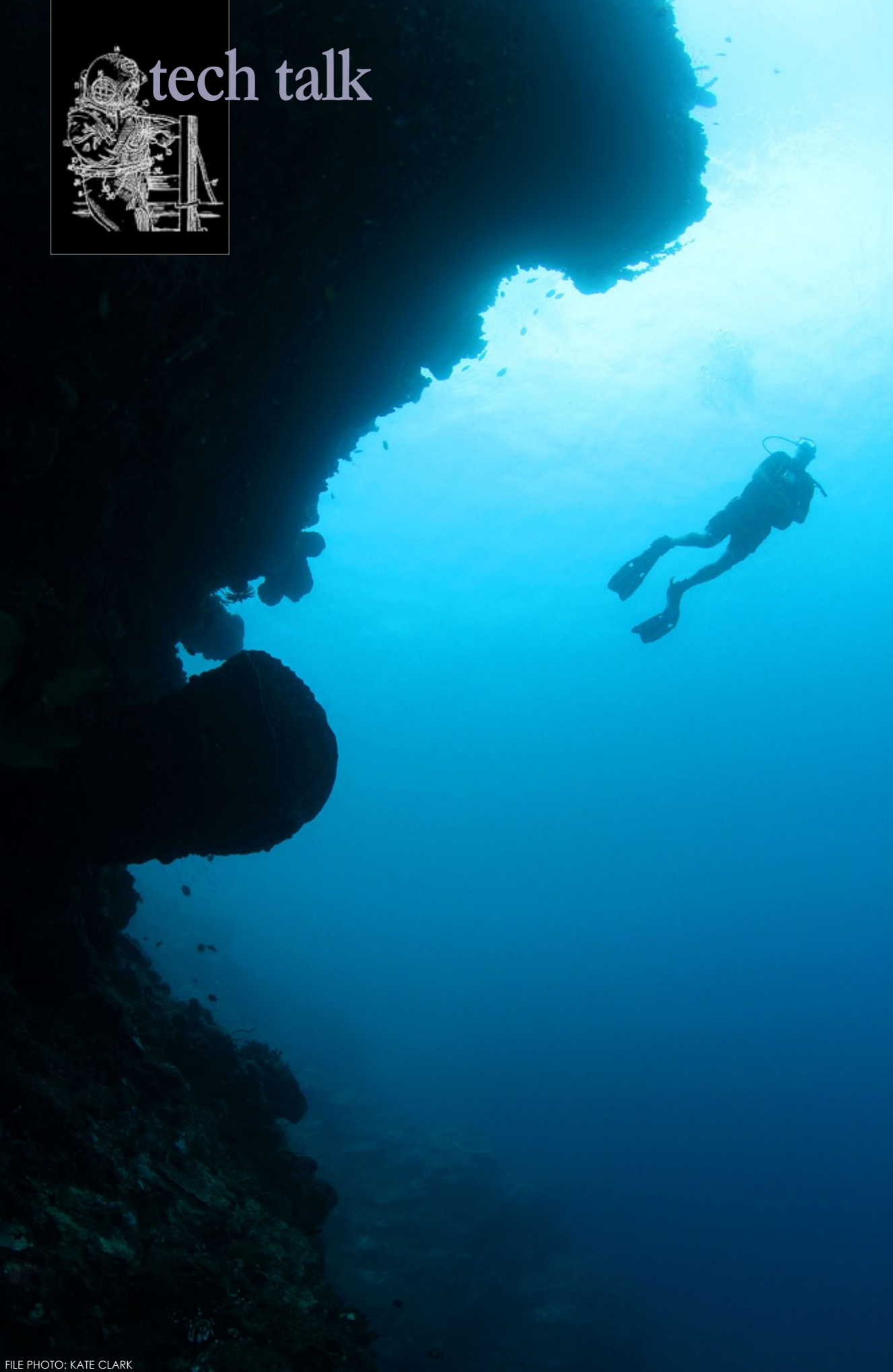
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opment—a five- or six-day zero to hero program, regardless of the agency, and to some extent even the instructor, is not going to achieve much. In truth, training—which is at the core of my friend's question—is not at all about the instructor nor the agency.

Self-motivation

Adult learning is actually about self-motivation. We get the most out of a learning situation if we understand the process of learning, and if we also understand that different situations and environments often require different learning (and teaching) strategies. We get more out of a learning opportunity if we develop the largest possible repertoire of classroom and practical tactics from which to draw. And when we understand, it's up to us to learn and grow.

In other words, a large part of the responsibility to learn and improve understanding—whether the topic is diving or quantum physics—is on our shoulders, and the structure of the curriculum and attentions of the instructor begin to fade into secondary or tertiary importance.

Agency relevance

For an instructor running a business, choosing the “right” agency may have some significance. An instructor has to find an organization that suits her business model and her comfort zone.

But even that is somewhat mitigated by other issues. For example, a decent instructor is going to modify how she presents course materials and what constitutes a pass or a fail based on her personal understanding of what works for her students, the environment in which the programs are conducted, and the best long-term strategy for the student to develop after the course is over.

For a student interested in developing

skills rather than flashing pieces of plastic around, the agency becomes rather immaterial, and the chemistry with the instructor is important—initially that is.

Unfortunately, in an age of instant gratification and the suppression of individuality, a lot of us look for shortcuts and the easy way out—or in. We want to join a club. We are perfectly willing to wear a badge even at the risk of compromising our personal talents and our personal growth. A badge lets the world know we belong. It also does not require us to teach ourselves. The questions are all answered for us in the one-size-fits-all club members rule book. We don't even need to think.

There really is no difference between paying US\$200 for a \$40 sweater because of the logo on the front or telling folks you are an XYZ diver or an ABCD diver. It is in effect, all a fallacy, but people do it because it's an easy sell to themselves and their mates.

So, after more coffee and a lot of prattling on, I finally explained to my buddy's friend: “Before we ask ourselves what's more important—the agency or the instructor—it's important to have some understanding of one's personal

preferences, because people learn most effectively when the strategies used are closely matched with their preferred learning style. Moreover, we can be a little proactive and we can improve the effectiveness of our learning by knowing what our strengths are and, initially at least, putting some bias on what works best for us.”

With a little tap on the tabletop, and the sound of the U-bahn rolling by she said. “Okay, now I get it. It's not about the agency or the instructor. It's about me.”

And that's exactly what I should have said initially. ■

Steve Lewis is an active technical diver and instructor based in North America. He is an author, blogger and workshop host with a special interest in diver education and the development of safe diving protocols. He first tried sidemount scuba as a young dry-caver in the United Kingdom, and now many decades later, carries a TDI sidemount cave instructor rating and is an open-water/overhead environment Sidemount Instructor for PSAI. See Techdivertraining.org



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