

# Peak Learning Poker

## Learning Style Game

To succeed in adult learning -- as a learner, or as a teacher -- we need to understand that each of us has an individual "style" -- a set of ways we like to use our brain. Here's an exhilarating way in which I give learners the chance to express these individual preferences in learning and thinking. It's a rousing game of Poker in which every player creates, and shares, a personal map of his or her own brain.

As my participants enter the room, they are greeted by the strains of Kenny Rogers singing "The Gambler": "Every hand's a winner, every hand's a loser..." The room is decked out with casino-style décor -- giant playing cards, chips strewn on the tables, etc. Of course I'm wearing my Las Vegas casino-dealer's vest, and trying my best to look like Robert de Niro.

As they take their seats for the session, at banquet-size "rounds" seating 6-8, there's a deck of unusual cards in the center of each table. Each participant is dealt an initial hand of five cards. But these cards each feature a personality characteristic: for example, you might get dealt a hand consisting of these five traits: Decisive, Curious, Sensitive, Precise, and Imaginative.

I announce that by time the game is done, participants will have learned how to "play their cards right" -- that is, to use their talents and abilities to achieve greater success and satisfaction in their life and in their work.

To start the game, each player arranges his or her five cards from left to right, indicating how well each card happens to reflect their personality. Then, they talk briefly about how well their hands match their real strengths. There's an excited murmur throughout the room, as conferees begin to see how many intriguing traits there are around their table.

Now, the pace picks up. Players get a chance to upgrade their hands by trading cards with others. Kenny Rogers belts out: "Every gambler knows that the secret to surviving, is knowing what to throw away, and knowing what to keep!"

They can wheel-and-deal to get rid of those cards that don't reflect their traits, and assemble a hand that best describes it. At this point, creative pandemonium slowly breaks out. (Up to two hundred people can be involved in this session.) Players start jumping out of their chairs, as they see cards they really want! To maintain decorum, I usually have to use my trusty six-shooters! POW! BAM!

Once players have assembled their ideal hand, they are presented with a dilemma -- which dramatizes something we all feel at some points in our lives. They are required to discard two of the traits which they've got in their hand! This reflects the fact that all of us have skills and abilities which we don't get a chance to use. The discussion after this stage of the game surfaces some new emotions, as you can well imagine.

In the finale of the poker game -- though not of the session -- each player is invited to tell a little story from their life or career, in which all three of the traits in their hand came into play. "Last year, my boss suddenly resigned. Overnight, I was shoved into her position. I was never so scared -- but looking back, I can see that what got me through were these my cards here: I was Energetic, Organized, and Patient. Here's how I used those traits..."

These anecdotes are touching, revealing, and instructive. They provide glimpses of the attendees at their best. And participants recognize for the first time how different skills than theirs can make such a difference in people's lives. You may know how useful it is to be Energetic, Organized, and Patient -- but across the table is a person who is proud and successful by being Receptive, Spontaneous, and Impulsive! It makes you think...

Now, based on this very engaging experience, attendees learn what the four "suits" of the deck mean. They signify the four quadrants of Ned Herrmann's "Whole Brain Model" of our mental capabilities. (The card game itself was developed by Ted Coulson and Alison Strickland.)

Then, using colorful, dramatic transparencies and slides, plus read-outs of the group's preferences (by holding up the colored cards), participants see with their own eyes what "styles" predominate -- sometimes with astonishing results. And they work together on how they can use what they've learned to enhance their performance.

"Peak Performance Poker was fantastic -- one of the most profitable conference sessions we've ever had," says Colonel Robby Cahill of the Professional Housing Management Association. "We learned, we had fun, we saw ourselves -- and others -- in fresh, powerful, useful new ways."