

Personal Theory of Learning

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### **Personal Theory of Learning**

A learner shapes their behavior through the response their behavior receives. Behaviorist B.F. Skinner, coined one of the most prominent forms of behavioral learning, operant conditioning. According to an article written by Cindy Nebel, Skinner believed that operant conditioning is when “an organism behaves in order to elicit a reward (reinforcement) or stops behaving to avoid a punishment” (Nebel, 2017). This means that a learners’ behavior can be encouraged or discouraged by the responses they receive, thereby allowing the learner to adapt their behavior or keep it as is. Reinforcement, when implemented, can encourage the learners behavior and the behavior is more likely to be repeated. Punishment, when implemented, can motivate and encourage the learner not to do the behavior. This is important because if a learner could discover the forces acting on their behaviors, it will help them to understand why they behaved in such a way. Furthermore, if a learner can understand why they behaved a certain way, they can continue it or change it in order to receive a more positive result.

Behaviorism is not the only theory of learning. Learners also acquire knowledge through the experiences they encounter throughout their life. The process of acquiring knowledge is defined by the term “schema,” which is a “cognitive framework or concept that helps organize and interpret information” (Cherry, 2019). Learners are constantly acquiring knowledge and an individual's schema is malleable, always evolving. Theorist Jean Piaget believed that people constantly adapt to the environment or situation they are in and they take in that new information and learn from it (Cherry, 2019). When information is absorbed and new experiences are gained, people can add this information to their pre-existing schema through a process called assimilation. For example, if a student at school notices another child acting out who normally makes good choices, they can take that new information and assume that maybe that child is just

having a bad day. The child's observations didn't create a whole new schema. Rather, it added new information to their pre-existing schema. Learners can also use what they have learned from experiences and alter their pre-existing schemas or create new schemas through a process called accommodation. For example, a person may have stereotypes or beliefs about a person's culture set in their mind for a long period of time. When that person is presented with new information that may contradict or conflict with what they always believed, they may use their findings in order to alter their existing schema and make sense of what was learned. Whether it is a bad experience like a car accident or good experience like taking a trip, people can use these experiences and the knowledge acquired from them, to either add to or change their pre-existing schemas.

Building social emotional skills can have a major and critical effect on learning. Some of the most important social emotional skills to develop are maintaining cooperative relationships, making responsible decisions, managing strong emotions, communicating clearly, solving problems effectively, recognizing emotions of oneself and others, and having empathy for others" (Committee for Children, 2019). Developing skills such as these opens a learner's mind to understanding and appreciating other perspectives, encourages a learner to reach out for help when they need it, and helps a learner understand their own strengths and weaknesses. If learners do not develop important social emotional skills early on in their educational journey, it can hinder their ability to learn for the many years that follow.

Learning happens when the learner is in control. Learning is a cognitive process that encourages seeking out information for yourself, rather than having it be explicitly taught to you. In an article written by Paul A. Kirschner and Jeroen J.G. Van Merriënboer, they discuss the idea that in recent years, the "Internet Revolution" has caused an increasing amount of information,

true and false, that has become accessible to learners. They believe that people are “self educators” that “can self regulate and self direct their own learning, seeking, finding, and making use of all of the information that is freely available to them” (Kirschner & Van Merriënboer, 2013). With the plethora of information available on the internet in this digital era, a learner has the opportunity to “search, find, select, process, organize, and present the information they receive.” A learner develops skills to make sense of the information they receive: decide what to believe and what not to believe or decide on what is true and what is false. Even when a teacher teaches content in a classroom, a learner has the opportunity to explore what they learned, and decide on if it is true or false.

Learning is hindered by the inability to recognize, understand, and embrace mistakes. Oftentimes, learners view mistakes as failures, feeling immediate shame or embarrassment. An approach that requires one to address mistakes while learning is called metacognition. A metacognitive approach requires a learner to “focus on sense-making, self-assessment, and reflection on what worked and what needs improving” (Bransford et al., 2000). When a mistake is viewed as a victory, it can have an everlasting impact on the learning that took place. The experience of making the mistake, learning what went wrong, and fixing it, is exactly how a learner grows.

There is no “one-size fits all” or perfect way of learning. There are many ways to learn, and it is each person’s individual responsibility to take charge of their learning and discover their own path to learning. Learners can develop the ability to teach and learn from themselves (Bransford et al., 2000). It is the learners job and individuals of society to embrace each person’s path to learning and encourage each other to continue on and become better versions of oneself. A learner can find their path to learning by recognizing and tapping into their own learning style.

A learner may prefer linguistic, visual, logical or many other learning styles, or even a combination of several. Understanding one's learning style enhances the learning process.

Learning develops, expands, and evolves over time. Learners have the ability to evolve from a novice to an expert in any subject they learn, if they choose. A novice learner is a learner that focuses on memorization or using general strategies, while an expert can “acquire extensive knowledge that affects what they notice, how they organize, represent, and interpret information in their environment” (Bransford et al., 2000). When a learner evolves from a novice to an expert, they will have a deeper understanding of what they are learning. Being an expert in one subject or topic, can help a learner continue an expert mindset to other subjects or topics. Experts can carry the knowledge, skills, and abilities they have learned such as reasoning, problem solving, and recognizing meaningful patterns to another learning experience. Being able to carry knowledge, skills, and abilities across many learning situations and domains, proves that a learner is developing, expanding, and evolving over time.

As a first grade teacher, I have witnessed how powerful a passion for learning can be, and the many factors that can enhance or delay the passion for learning. There are many factors that cause a delay of learning whether that be a poor learning environment, the inability to learn from mistakes, or being unable to tap into your own learning style. With these factors present, it can be difficult to have a passion for learning. Conversely, a positive learning environment, the ability to learn from mistakes, and the ability to tap into your own learning style can all contribute to a passion for learning. A passion for learning can be powerful because many times a learner learns without even knowing it. When a learner learns without knowing it, it may not feel like learning it all.

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