

A Critique On Learning Theory

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Abstract: Learning in humans is an extremely complex process. Many theories have been espoused to explain the learning process. However, no single theory can fully explain how learning process occurs. There is no clear cut demarcation between the theories. Their boundaries seem to be overlapping with each other. Cognitive psychologists have explained how learning takes place from different perspectives. The major traditional schools of thought concerning learning include behaviourist, cognitivist, and constructivist schools. Socio-cultural, situated and activity theories of learning have emerged more recently through understanding the ways in which students learn, teachers can help them learn by planning the most effective way to learn. The appropriateness of any learning theory depends on the context. A blend of learning theories is suitable most of the times. [Saxena R Natl J Integr Res Med, 2021; 12(1):95-98]

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Introduction: Definition of a theory is that it is “an ordered set of assertions about a generic behaviour or structure assumed to hold throughout a significantly broad range of specific instances (Wacker, 1998) four components are common in definition of theories 1-definitions, 2-domain, 3- relationships, 4- predictive claims to answer the questions of who, what, when, where, how, why, should, could and would.

Theories are important because they provide a rational basis for real world application. Additionally they are useful for analysing situations and providing plausible explanations for observed outcomes (Wacker, 1998).

Learning is “an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience (Dale H. Schunk, 2013) This definition of learning emphasizes that learning involves change, endures over time and occurs through experience (Dale H. Schunk, 2013). Theories of learning are applicational in instructional design and can significantly help in learning. Many theories have been proposed on how adults learn. Instrumental learning theories focus on individual experience, and include the behaviourists and cognitive learning theories. Humanistic theories promote individual development and are more learner-centered with focus on self-directed learning and self-motivation.

two crucial elements, context and community. Others are Motivational models, Reflective models etc., (D. C. M. Taylor & Hamdy, 2013).

Behaviourist Theories: Behaviourist Theories were proposed by Edward Thorndike, Pavlov, Watson, Guthrie, Hull, Tolman, Skinner. The key principle is that change in behaviour is the outcome of learning process. Edward Thorndike (Ormrod, 2011) suggested the law of effect and the law of exercise; the former specified that learning occurred if it had a positive effect on the individual, and the latter indicated that repetition strengthened the learning.

This was further developed by behaviourists, such as (Binder, 1996) who established that some forms of learning could be shown by a simple stimulus-response model, so that a reward could be used to elicit a desired response to a stimulus.

Skinner showed that there were three elements that strengthened learning, namely frequency (the number of times a stimulus was presented), contiguity (the time delay between the response and the reward) and contingency (the continued link between the stimulus and the reward).

Operant conditioning is central to this theory. A response that is followed by a reinforce is strengthened and therefore more likely to occur again.

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This theory appeals to me due to its direct relevance in health profession education, namely, behaviour modification. The change in behaviour due to learning is measurable and observable and teacher can motivate a student to change his behaviour in the desired direction.

Competencies are important observable knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for public health. The basic principle of this theory, behaviour modification as an outcome of learning forms the foundation for competency based development and therefore consistent with competency based education.

We may adapt this theory in our current teaching –learning settings by using positive reinforcements. Repetition of important / must know areas also facilitates learning. This theory is useful to make student Responsible and disciplined and may get desired change in their behaviour for professionalism and empathy. I am regularly counselling students in my college and I could see the desired change in behaviour after using principles of this theory.

Areas Of Concern: One of the flaws of this theory is that we are unable to comprehend or assess the internal experience of the learner, even though there is an external change in behaviour. Human mind is very complex and multidimensional. It is not necessary that the positive / negative reinforcements will produce a desired behaviour modification at all times.

In fact, Thorndike’s later research (1932a, 1932b) showed that punishment may not be effective in weakening responses. Punishment suppresses a response, but it is often only temporary: The punished behaviour may eventually reappear, perhaps when the punishment stops or when the punisher is absent(McGrath, Back, & Management, 2009)(Jerome, 2010).

Punishment can also have negative side effects, like reducing self-esteem. The teacher must touch student's hearts in order to help impact their minds. It is felt, if a teacher provides a conducive environment for learning, students would be more relaxed and face academic subject matter in a positive climate and associate it with pleasant emotions. In such a setting, a desired change in behaviour could be achieved smoothly.

Humanist Theories: Abraham Harold Maslow proposed Humanistic Theory. This theory focuses on human freedom, dignity, and potential. Learning is a personal act to fulfil individual development. This theory is more learner-centered. The outcome is self-directed and intrinsically motivated individuals who have the capacity for self-actualization.(D. C. M. Taylor & Hamdy, 2013).

Maslow was an American psychologist was known for his theory of "self-actualization." Maslow argued that each person has a hierarchy of needs that must be satisfied. Hierarchy of needs was published in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation". "What a man can be, he must be," forms the basis of the perceived need for self-actualization.(Knowles, 1980) supported this theory by popularizing the concept of "andragogy".

This theory is emotionally appealing to me because it is learner centric. Every individual is unique and having unique potential. As a teacher we should only help them to understand their potential and facilitate them to realize their potential in their own pace as well as in their own leaning style. Learning should not be forced but motivated. The core component of Humanist theories is facilitating the development of the whole person. KYS or 'Know Your Student' in depth will help the teacher in this process.

Areas Of Concern: In the current scenario, with a very low teacher- student ratio, it is not feasible to attend to each and every student at an individual level. Another flaw is that the learners become too self-centered and are unable to take criticisms positively.

Fallacies of the Humanists are that they underestimated the value of other forms of learning such as collaborative learning, memorization, drill, practice and hard work which also contribute to significant learning, knowledge building, and skill development.

Another limitation of self -directed learning is that it fails to take into consideration the social context of learning. Context and social factors are significant in professional education. There are doubts about the extent to which self-directed learning, rather than directed self-learning is truly achievable (Hoban, Cunningham, & Zittel, 2013).

Transformative Learning Theory: Transformative theory learning has two components that at times seem to be in conflict: the cognitive, rational and objective and the intuitive, imagination and subjective (Grabove, 1997). Both the rational and the affective play a role in transformative learning. Although the emphasis has been on transformative learning as a rational process, teachers need to consider how they can help students feeling and emotions both in critical reflection and as a means to reflection. (E. W. Taylor, 2007)

Transformative learning theory explores the way in which critical reflection can be used to challenge the learner's beliefs and assumptions (Cross, 1981). The process of perspective transformation includes (i) A disorienting dilemma which is the catalyst/trigger to review own views/perspectives – "knowing that you don't know" (ii) The context, which includes personal, professional and social factors (iii) Critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991) identifies different forms of reflection in transformation of meanings, structures, context, process and premise. Mezirow's defined Transformative Learning as "The process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" Mezirow, 1991. Premise reflection involves the critical re-examination of long held presuppositions (Kolb & Kolb, 2012).

Broader psychosocial outcomes may include a more aware, empowered, purposeful and discerning, grounded sense of being (living more proactively from the inside-out, and less reactively from the outside-in); also progress towards more holistic expressions of peace, caring, love, equity, community, well-being, meaning and joy (all in the broadest sense). This has most profoundly been described as progressing towards being in a [co-evolutionary] process of mutual synthesis with one's [living and non-living] environment (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004).

This theory appeals as it advocates transformative professional education. It can be regarded as the highest of three successive levels, moving from informative to formative to transformative learning. Informative learning is acquiring knowledge and its purpose is to produce experts. Formative learning is about

socializing students around values. Its purpose is to produce professionals. Transformative learning is about developing leadership attributes. Its produce is to produce enlightened change agents. This theory is useful at the higher level eg; Master's level MD, MS, MDS, MHPE etc

Transformative learning have three fundamentals shift which are very useful for quality health care which is based on Critical decision making; from rote memory to searching, analyzing and synthesis of information for decision making; from seeking professional credentials to achieving core competencies for effective team work in health system (interdependence); and lastly from non-critical adoption of educational models to creative adaptation of global resources to address resources to address local priorities.

In short, think globally and act locally. Adopting a global perspective in local health needs. The educator's responsibility is to create a conducive environment for learning and promote discovery learning through methods like group projects, role plays, case studies, simulations etc., to facilitate Transformative learning. Educators need to critically examine their practice and develop alternative perspective of understanding their practice.

The learners on the other hand must create norms within the class that include mutual respect and responsibility for learning, helping each other instead of self-centered competition and aim for peer collaboration. They should develop critical reflection on assumptions that underlie intentions, values beliefs and feelings. The learner should critically assess their own assumptions.

Areas Of Concern: Most of the times, the egoistic authoritarian approach of educators is seen as an impediment to the Transformative learning process. Transforming teachers is the greatest challenge. This is possible only through continuous professional development programs for educators. The need of the hour is a change in the mindset of the educator as well as learner.

Conclusion: Learning in humans is an extremely complex process. Many theories have been espoused to explain the learning process. However, no single theory can fully explain how learning process occurs. There is no clear cut demarcation between the theories. Their

boundaries seem to be overlapping with each other. Cognitive psychologists have explained how learning takes place from different perspectives. The major traditional schools of thought concerning learning include behaviourist, cognitivist, and constructivist schools. Socio-cultural, situated and activity theories of learning have emerged more recently through understanding the ways in which students learn, teachers can help them learn by planning the most effective way to learn. The appropriateness of any learning theory depends on the context. A blend of learning theories is suitable most of the times.

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