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Psychological Theories and Classroom Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Psychology is the scientific study of the mind, brain, and behaviour, exploring thoughts, feelings, and actions in humans and animals to understand how we function individually and socially, bridging natural and social sciences with diverse applications from mental health treatment to understanding consciousness, using empirical methods to investigate everything from brain chemistry to social dynamics. It's a broad field encompassing various sub-disciplines, with professionals called psychologists working in research, education, and more, aiming to improve well- being and solve complex human problems. Psychological theories provide frameworks for teaching, with major ones like Behaviourism (reinforcement), Cognitivism (mental processes like memory), Constructivism (building knowledge through experience), Social Learning (observation), and Humanism (self-actualization) guiding strategies such as rewards, information processing, hands-on activities, modeling, and student-centered approaches to boost engagement and understanding in the classroom.

Introduction

This study emphasises that a teacher should develop a sound philosophy of education, insight about the process and awareness about social values. It is also suggesting teacher educators to develop the acumen of an artist and a scientist because teaching is creation of new knowledge and creation is subject-

neutral. This study inferred that psychological theories provide customisation of instructional design. It also provides a path to see through the learner's unique psyche and elevate it up to the meta-cognition level.

Classroom instructions for students focus on respect, readiness, and responsibility, including rules like raising hands to speak, listening to the teacher, being prepared with materials, keeping hands and feet to yourself, and respecting others and property, all while fostering an environment of active participation, honesty, and positive language to ensure smooth learning and respect for all.

Several ideas and priorities, then, affect how we teachers think about learning, including the curriculum, the difference between teaching and learning, sequencing, readiness, and transfer. The ideas form a "screen" through which to understand and evaluate whatever psychology has to offer education. In the case of issues about classroom learning, for example, educational psychologists have developed a number of theories and concepts that are relevant to classrooms, in that they describe at least *some* of what usually happens there and offer guidance for assisting learning. It is helpful to group the theories according to whether they focus on changes in behaviour or in thinking. The distinction is rough and inexact, but a good place to begin. For starters, therefore, consider two perspectives about learning, called behaviourism (learning as changes in overt behaviour) and constructivism, (learning as changes in thinking). The second category can be further divided into psychological constructivism (changes in thinking resulting from individual experiences), and social constructivism, (changes in thinking due to assistance from others). The rest of this chapter describes key ideas from each of these viewpoints. As I hope you will see, each describes some aspects of learning not just in general, but as it happens in classrooms in particular. So each perspective suggests things that *you* might do in *your* classroom to make students' learning more productive.

Key Theories & Classroom Applications

Behaviourism (Skinner, Pavlov): Learning is a change in observable behaviour shaped by consequences. **Classroom Use:** Positive reinforcement (praise, rewards) for good work; negative reinforcement (punishment) for disruptions; clear routines and drills. **Cognitivism (Piaget, Bruner):** Focuses on internal mental processes (memory, problem-solving) and how information is processed.**Classroom Use:** Organizing material for easy absorption, using varied media, chunking information, encouraging critical thinking.**Constructivism (Vygotsky, Piaget):** Learners actively build new knowledge by connecting it to prior experiences.**Classroom Use:** Facilitating discussions, project-based learning, real-world connections, scaffolding (Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development).

Social Learning Theory (Bandura): Learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling others' behaviours.**Classroom Use:** Teachers modeling desired behaviours, peer tutoring, group work, discussing role models.**Humanism (Maslow, Rogers):** Emphasizes personal growth, motivation, and meeting emotional needs for self-actualization.

Classroom Use: Creating a safe, supportive environment; giving students choices; fostering intrinsic motivation; addressing affective needs.**Connectivism (Siemens, Downes):** Learning happens through connections within networks, especially digital ones.**Classroom Use:** Integrating technology, online research, collaborative digital projects (wikis, forums).

Classroom management is paramount to effective teaching. It sets the stage for a productive learning environment where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. The psychology behind classroom management is rich and varied, and draws from multiple theoretical frameworks that offer insights into how to shape student behaviour and create a positive classroom culture.

Two prominent psychological perspectives that significantly influence classroom management are behaviourist and humanistic theories. While these approaches differ in their methodologies and underlying philosophies, they can be harmoniously integrated to create a balanced and comprehensive classroom management strategy.

Positive reinforcement is one of the most widely used behaviourist techniques in classroom management. It involves providing a reward or positive outcome immediately after a desired behaviour is exhibited, thereby increasing the likelihood of that behaviour being repeated in the future. For example, a teacher might praise a student for meeting their expectations, or the teacher may use a token system where students earn points or other incentives for adhering to classroom rules. The key to effective positive reinforcement is consistency and immediacy. Rewards should be given as soon as possible after the desired behaviour occurs, and the criteria for earning rewards should be clear and consistently applied. This approach not only motivates students to behave appropriately but also helps them develop a positive association with good behaviour.

While reinforcement focuses on encouraging desirable behaviours, punishment is used to discourage undesirable ones. Punishment can be either positive (adding an aversive consequence) or negative (removing a pleasant stimulus). For instance, a teacher might assign extra homework (positive punishment) or take away a privilege like free time (negative punishment) in response to disruptive behaviour. However, the use of punishment in classroom management is often debated. Critics argue that punishment can lead to

fear, resentment, and a negative classroom environment. Therefore, when used, it should be carefully considered, applied consistently, and balanced with positive reinforcement to avoid an over-reliance on punitive measures.

Behaviourism

Behaviourism is the doctrine that regards psychology as a scientific study of behaviour and explains learning as a system of behavioural responses to physical stimuli. Psychologists working within this theory of learning are interested in the effect of reinforcement, practice, and external motivation on a network of associations and learned behaviours.

Educators using such a behaviourist framework pre-plan a curriculum by breaking a content area (usually seen as a finite body of predetermined knowledge) into assumed component parts—"skills"—and then sequencing these parts into a hierarchy ranging from simple to more complex. Assumptions are made that observation, listening to explanations from teachers who communicate clearly, or engaging in experiences, activities, or practice sessions with feedback will result in learning; and, that proficient skills will quantify to produce the whole, or more encompassing concept (Gagne, 1965; Bloom, 1956). Further, learners are viewed as passive, in need of external motivation, and affected by reinforcement (Skinner, 1953); thus, educators spend their time developing a sequenced, well structured curriculum and determining how they will assess, motivate, reinforce, and evaluate the learner. The learner is simply tested to see where he/she falls on the curriculum continuum and then expected to progress in a linear, quantitative fashion as long as clear communication and appropriate motivation, practice, and reinforcement are provided. Progress by learners is assessed by measuring observable outcomes—behaviours on predetermined tasks.

Maturationism

In contrast, maturationism is a theory that describes conceptual knowledge as dependent on the developmental stage of the learner, which in turn is the result of a natural unfolding of innate biological programming. From this perspective learners are viewed as active meaning-makers, interpreting experience with cognitive structures that are the result of maturation; thus, age norms for these cognitive maturations are important as predictors of behaviour.

Psychologists working within this paradigm focused on delineating stages of growth and behaviours characteristic of each stage. For example, Erikson (1950) studied the development of the concept of identity and proposed 8 stages, each having a developmental crisis which he felt needed to be worked through for a

healthy self image to result; and, Gesell (1940, 1946, 1956), working with his colleagues Ilg and Ames, studied children at different ages and characterized their behaviours into age dependent stages.

Early attempts to apply Piaget's theory to education were based on this theory. His stage theory was misinterpreted as a maturationist theory, thus learners were assessed with a battery of tasks to ascertain whether they were pre-operational, concrete- operational, or formal-operational. These global stages were seen as hierarchical and used as delimiters and/or goals of curriculum, and instructional methods were prescribed in relation to the stages in generalities such as, "learners need concrete materials when they are in the concrete-operational stage." Models of teaching commonly known as "developmentally-appropriate practice" evolved from this theory, as depicted in the 1988 position statement written by the National Association for the Education of Young Children:

Between 6 and 9 years of age, children begin to acquire the mental ability to think about and solve problems in their heads because they can then manipulate objects symbolically –no longer always having to touch or move them.This is a major cognitive achievement for children that extends their ability to solve problems. While they can symbolically or mentally manipulate, it will be some time before they can mentally manipulate symbols, for example, to solve mathematical problems such as missing addends or to grasp algebra. For this reason, primary age children still need real things to think about…in addition, appropriate schools recognize that some thinking skills, such as understanding mathematical place value and "borrowing" in subtraction, are beyond the cognitive capacity of children who are developing concrete operational thinking and so do not introduce these skills to most children until they are 8 or 9 years of age.

Constructivism

As pointed out by von Glasersfeld in Chapter One, constructivism is fundamentally non-positivist and as such it stands on completely new ground, often in direct opposition to both behaviourism and maturationism. Rather than behaviours or skills as the goal of instruction, cognitive development and deep understanding are the foci; rather than stages being the result of maturation, they are understood as constructions of active learner reorganization. Rather than viewing learning as a linear process, it is understood to be complex and fundamentally non-linear in nature.

Constructivism, as a psychological theory, stems from the burgeoning field of cognitive science, particularly the later work of Jean Piaget just prior to his death in 1980, the socio-historical work of Lev Vygotsky and his followers, and the work of Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner, and Nelson Goodman, among others who have studied the role of representation in learning. It also has roots in biology and

evolution—the logical outcome of the work of contemporary scientists such as Ilya Prigogine, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Ernst Mayr, Murray Gell-Man, Wolfgang Krumbein, Betsy Dyer, Lynn Margulis, Stuart Kauffman, and Per Bak (among others), as attempts were made to unify physics with biology. The remainder of this chapter will present a description of the work of these scientists and then a synthesis will be developed to describe and define constructivism as a psychological theory of evolution and development.

Conclusion

Constructivism is a post-structuralist psychological theory (Doll, 1993)—one that construes learning as an interpretive, recursive, non-linear building process by active learners interacting with their surround—the physical and social world. It is a psychological theory of learning that describes how structures, language, activity, and meaning-making come about, rather than one that simply characterizes the structures and stages of thought, or one that isolates behaviours learned through reinforcement. It is a theory based on complexity models of evolution and development. The challenge for educators is to determine what this new paradigm brings to the practice of teaching.

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