

Learning Theories

Ryan Peters

EDU 421

University of Mary

Learning theories are theoretical outlines that define how a student will potentially captivate, process, and preserve material or knowledge gained during their learning. Three important learning theories are constructivism, humanism, and behaviorism. All three of these play a key role in how an understanding of a topic or material is acquired, as well as how any skill or knowledge is retained.

Constructivism, established by Jean Piaget, highlights the significance of an active involvement in a student's learning process, that is headed by the student building knowledge for themselves. The very basis of constructivism is the idea that student's use prior knowledge and prior concepts previously acquired, in order to acquire new information and retain that new information. (Fleury 2014) The theory of constructivism, believes that a teacher needs to have a good understanding for what students already know prior to coming into the teacher's classroom. Using what the students already know, new information is added to that and built off the prior knowledge to form more in-depth and complex knowledge. (Fleury 2014) The teacher acts as a facilitator instead of a lecturer, and will present the students with bits of information for them to further explore on their own, through things such as, discovery learning and active learning.

The learning theory of behaviorism, focuses solely on impartial, observable behaviors. In terms of behaviorism, learning is nothing more than developing knowledge centered around an environmental condition or conditions. (Cohen 1972) Behaviorism is assuming that a student or learner, responds to only external environments, while starting with a blank slate. Moreover, the learner's behavior is shaped through negative reinforcement or through positive reinforcement. (Willingham 2015) Positive reinforcement grants a stimulus, where a negative reinforcement withholds a stimulus. For example, the behaviorist theory would say that rewarding a student for doing something good, would increase the likelihood of the student continuing to do that good

thing. Additionally, using negative reinforcement with a student would be to remove something wrong or bad they did in order to prevent it from happening again. These two strategies are the basis for behaviorism; they are the learner is going to best learn or acquire new knowledge because they are not punishing the learner for something wrong.(Cohen 1972)

Furthermore, the humanism learning theory, is a more “student centered” way of learning. Humanism, places an abundant amount of emphasis on a student’s choice, as well as control over their path of their learning. (Cohen 1972) With this theory, students are encouraged to make their own decisions and choice on every-day activities, as well as more long term goals. By letting the student place their own input on their learning, it allows the student to focus on a particular subject area that interests them. The belief is that it is important for a student to be highly motivated and engaging in any material or topic that is being covered, and in order for this to happen at the most successful rate, a student must be able to choose the topic or material they want to know and need to know. (Willingham 2015)

Moreover, the constructivism theory holds true for many math classes as well as my own teaching philosophy. In the subject of math, it is all just one giant lump of one thing that is broken up into smaller sections that are all related to each other. Constructivism is all about building off prior knowledge. Additionally, in math, in order to progress and advance, a person needs to have some sort of prior knowledge that is used to build off as a stepping stone to get to a new piece of information. However, not only do students need prior knowledge to progress and move on to new material, but the teacher needs to have a fairly accurate idea of what the students know before entering the classroom. In my classroom, I will need to use what students already know to set up a path to which I can apply what they know to a new topic so they can relate the two, build off the old one and learn the new material. Not only will I do this at the beginning of

the year, but I will continually do it the entire course of the year. I will continually take each previous topic learned by the students and build off it, in order to get them to the understanding of the new material at hand. Moreover, I can advance the strategies with constructivism. Instead of just using prior knowledge to lead to new material, I can use prior knowledge to lead to a higher way of thinking of the same topic. For example, after teaching a new topic and the students have an understanding of it, I can give them real world story problems that they can solve on their own through the discover method by taking what they previously learned about the topic and applying it to the real world problem.

Furthermore, behaviorism fits into my teaching philosophy because in my classroom, I do not want to focus on consequences. I believe that positive reinforcement in my math classroom is the best suitable strategy for behavior. I believe this to be true, because math is automatically one of the most hated and scary subjects for the majority of students since they come into it thinking its going to be hard or thinking that they are not good at math. With a majority students coming into my class thinking they are bad at math or that it is going to be really hard, they start off with a negative attitude towards the class. Additionally, homework only worsens this for most students. So, my positive reinforcement would be to “reward” students for completing their homework. I would only grade homework on completion, not based on right and wrong answers. I would however check that the problems were attempted to the fullest and an answer was reached. By rewarding the students for attempting and completing their homework, it is allowing them to try all the problems without the fear of getting something wrong. I believe that grading math homework on right or wrong answers is a punishment since the homework is the first time they are fully attempting the new material on their own and homework is considered practice for the tests. Through this strategy, I believe it will help the students who would normally not even

attempt the homework if it were graded on right and wrong. Those students will sometimes not even bother doing the assignment, because they say they are “just going to get it wrong anyways”. By rewarding them for attempting and completing the homework, it is getting them to think about and use what they learned in class.

Moreover, humanism plays a role in my teaching philosophy because I want students in my classroom to be able to achieve their highest potential. Further, since not all students are the same, I need to look at each student individually and what motivates them best, as well how they learn best. In my classroom though, I will need to have different options of learning in order to give the students some differentiation in how they learn. I plan to do this by already having my class notes on my teacher page the day of class. This way students can either follow along on a device they have, follow along by just watching me and then referencing the notes later, or following along with their own notes. By giving this option, it will allow students control over the path they take to learning.

Overall, the three learning theories of constructivism, behaviorism, and humanism fit in with my teaching philosophy as well as how I will manage my classroom. Ultimately, incorporating a mixture of learning theories will help anyone have a more successful classroom and learning environment. Not just one thing works for everyone, or all the time, so incorporating different learning theories in the classroom will help diversify and expand the learning environment, allowing more opportunity for students to succeed.

Works Cited

- Cohen, Stuart, and Richard Hersh. "Behaviorism and Humanism: A Synthesis for Teacher Education." *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 23, no. 2, June 1972, pp. 172–176., doi:10.1177/002248717202300213.
- Fleury, Stephen, and Jim Garrison. "Toward a New Philosophical Anthropology of Education: Fuller Considerations of Social Constructivism." *Interchange*, vol. 45, no. 1-2, May 2014, pp. 19–41., doi:10.1007/s10780-014-9216-4.
- Willingham, Daniel T., et al. "The Scientific Status of Learning Styles Theories." *Teaching of Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 3, 17 July 2015, pp. 266–271., doi:10.1177/0098628315589505.