

Assignment brief

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria 2019-20



Sample number: One

Unit Title: Teaching and Learning – GB7/3/AA/04G

Overview of assessment task

Write an essay with the following title ‘Analysis of a Learning Theory’

Choose one learning theory from:

- Behaviourism – eg work of Skinner; Bandura; Pavlov
- Cognitivism – eg work of Weiner; Mayer; Ericsson; Piaget
- Constructivism – eg work of Lave and Wenger; Bruner; Vygotsky
- Humanism – eg work of Golman; Kolb; Maslow; Malone; Rogers

The essay should consider the details of the learning theory, the impact on classroom practice and student learning. It must also include evidence that supports and challenges this learning theory from suitable academic sources.

This essay must show evidence of academic research with the inclusion of in-text citations and a reference list, presented according to the Harvard convention.

Word count 250 (=/-10%)

Learning outcomes and assessment criteria

Learning Outcomes	Assessment Criteria
1. Understand theories associated with learning	1.1. Analysis a learning theory

Grading Descriptors and Components 2019-20

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GD 1: Understanding of the subject

Merit	Distinction
The student, student's work or performance: c. demonstrates very good understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study	The student, student's work or performance: c. demonstrates excellent understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study

GD 7: Quality

Merit	Distinction
The student, student's work or performance: a. is structured in a way that is generally logical and fluent	The student, student's work or performance: a. is structured in a way that is consistently logical and fluent

Analysis of a Learning Theory

Teaching and Learning Assignment One

For thousands of years, philosophers have worked to understand human behaviour. However, it has only been in relatively recent times that education and the way humans learn has found focus within psychology. Following the belief by John Locke that every child is born a blank slate, or tabula rasa, empirical theories on education were formed. Empiricism is a viewpoint that a person's knowledge and behaviour is shaped by their surroundings and sensory experiences. Behaviourists fall into this category by suggesting that life experiences shape a child's mind. In the early 20th century, an understanding that experience and behaviours in response to the external environment formed a learning pattern. The ability to observe behaviour as a measurable subject give psychologists data which was scientific in format. When behaviourism was founded, the scientific data collection appealed to its followers as it supplied methodology as well as psychological aspects to the theory. Behaviourism was described by Blaine and Gray (2015, p, 213) as;

'A learning theory that focuses on objectively observable behaviours and discounts activities of the mind – how a child thinks, feels or interprets an event.'

But how can theories that were born in the early 1900's still be applicable to modern day education? This essay will analyse the learning theory of Behaviourism and theorists that follow it, including detailing its strengths and weaknesses, and how behaviourism is used in classrooms today.

In order to understand the processes that form the behaviourist theory, the work of Ivan Pavlov must be considered. Although this subjects in his studies were canines, he discovered classical conditioning as a by-product of another experiment. Carried out in the 1890's his research into underlying mechanisms in the digestive systems in mammals unearthed the realisation that the preceding events before feeding time caused salivation. He termed the food and response from the dogs as unconditioned, as doges are not taught to salivate, and this was an automatic response to the stimulant. Pavlov discovered that he could condition the dogs to salivate by introducing a stimulus before the food, sometimes a bell would ring, or the dogs would see a

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black square. Through repeating processes, the preceding stimulus was enough to cause salivation. A stimulus had produced a response, classical conditioning had been discovered.

At the beginning of the 20th century, John B Watson founded behaviourism. Writing an article entitled 'Psychology as the Behaviourist views it'. This article is commonly referred to as the 'Behaviourist Manifesto'. Watson based a lot of his research on the work of Pavlov, believing that his work on conditioning animals could be extended to humans, one of Watson's most well-known experiments involved conditioning fear in a small child. Known as 'Little Albert', the experiment subjected a child of 11 months to fear a range of objects due to a loud noise being produced to startle the child whenever one of the objects were revealed to the child.

This helped prove to Watson that the behaviours and actions of a child are completely malleable by experience and observation, stating in 1930 that;

'Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to taken any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of this talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.'

(Watson cited in Blaine and Gray 2015)

The experiment was reversed four years later by a student of Watson, Mary Cover Jones, who used the same concepts of classical conditioning to reverse a phobia of white fur in a toddler. This reversal of a phobia, acquisition unknown, was later termed 'systematic desensitisation'. A technique requiring a subject to experience juxtaposed emotions to eradicate the relevant unwanted emotion. For example, in Jones' experiment, the toddler's anxiety over his phobia was superseded by relaxation. The child was conditioned out of this phobia.

In current times the focus on anxiety in children is becoming a larger focus for schools. A report on mental health in schools in the Independent Newspaper led with the damning statistic:

'Two in five teachers know of primary school children showing signs of mental health issues including anxiety, panic attacks and depression' (Busby, 2018)

This data, amongst many other reports has led to developments in schools to support mental health issues and to focus on student wellbeing, from 2009 the subject of Personal Social

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Health and Economic (PSHE) was made a mandatory part of the curriculum starting at primary foundation level. Schools are now considering external factors of a student's life in the assessment of their educational needs, something that behaviourism does not encompass.

A Department of Education report in November 2012 looked at the correlation of emotional wellbeing, and mental health issues such as anxiety, and academic achievement. The report stated:

'Children with better emotional wellbeing have higher academic progression from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2, even when other dimensions of wellbeing are taken into account.'

(Morrison-Gutman & Vorhaus, 2014, p37)

Modern child psychologists use systematic desensitisation in modern practice, usually combined with play therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, younger children can be desensitised to an anxiety. This can also be applied in schools; anti-anxiety activities and assessments are circulated by the NHS and charities such as Barnardo's to help support staff to implement an open culture where children can access help without judgement. Removing the stigma and promoting positive environment will remove the negative correlation with the issue and promote positive wellbeing.

The work of Watson on conditioning and methodical behaviourism was accepted yet challenged in practice by the theorist Edward Thorndike. Thorndike was an educator by practice and was one of the pioneers of active learning - when a learner takes on responsibility in their educating. When it came to conditioning, Thorndike enhanced the theory of studying a 'trial and error' approach, and how through failure and the following negative consequences, a learner may adjust their behaviour to succeed in the future. For example, in a spelling test, a child may score low and the negative consequence of this would be the feedback of a low mark. Thorndike's studies would argue that the low mark consequence would condition the child to perhaps study more for the next spelling test, in order to gain positive consequences. According to his 'law of effect' positive resources, like a highly scoring test, that were followed by a satisfactory result, praise from the teacher, were most likely to be a response a subject would endeavour to repeat. The law of effect theory is described in a recent book on learning theories in childhood as:

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‘acts which produce negative consequences weaken and disappear, whereas acts which produce pleasurable outcomes are strengthened and maintained’

(Blaine and Gray 2015, p. 54)

This particular part of Thorndike’s work was the basis that Burrhus Frederic Skinner, a psychologist who studied behaviourism a few decades later, used to build his own category of managing behaviour, operant conditioning.

Operant conditioning was developed by Skinner, in response to the work of Watson’s principles of methodical behaviourism. Skinner built on the theories that preceded him by studying the effects of positive and negative reinforcement, alongside positive and negative punishment. Skinner developed Pavlov’s ‘Stimulus-Response’ theory, creating ‘Stimulus-Response-Reward’. He was a strong believer that psychology should be regarded as a science, with many of his experiments carried out in laboratory conditions with rats and other test animals. His most famous study, that of the ‘Skinner’s Rats’ confirmed his theory that consequences shape behaviour. With his rat subjects either receiving positive reinforcement by hitting a lever to receive food, or negative reinforcement, removing an electrical current in the cage by hitting a similar lever. He focused on learned behaviour as a central theme to operant conditioning, rather than the involuntary responses from classical conditioning studied by Watson. His work on behaviourism theory was termed ‘Neo-behaviourism’. The main differences in this theory was the introduction of the acceptance that a subject’s behaviour may be shaped by some biological components, such as genetics. He agreed with previous work that genetics cannot explain a person’s behaviour, but such things should be taken into consideration.

A criticism of Skinner’s work would be his documented link between the results of his studies on animals and the relation of those results to suggested behaviours in humans. The presumption that his laboratory rat subjects represent the complexity of human behaviour is short sighted. Especially considering Skinner’s viewpoint that there may be internal mental processes and genetics to take into consideration also.

Aside from this criticism, operant conditioning is used throughout modern education in many forms. It comes in the form of a token economy, sticker charts, behaviour stamps, pupil of the week. Primary schools have procedures in place to ensure children are rewarded for good work and behaviour. An article on the Times Educational Supplement website states:

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'Reward systems are one of the most effective ways of establishing a positive classroom environment. They promote good behaviour and incentivise students' (Haughton, 2018)

The long-standing use of rewards for good behaviour in schools is ingrained in school culture, however there are critics of the use of reward systems coming forward. The use of reward systems in schools may have the same regulations and procedures for every child in one class, however this doesn't consider different abilities and learning styles. An argument could be made that children may become reliant on the motivation of the reward and, rather than learn behaviour due to positive reinforcement, exhibit good behaviour purely for a reward. Without this understanding of the reinforcement, the behaviour then reverts back to Pavlov's basic classical conditioning where the receiving of the reward becomes the only focus.

The foundation of the operant conditioning has also formed a behavioural management tool entitled 'ABC' where the acronym stands for antecedents, behaviour and consequence. The theory of ABC is used by educators to understand behaviours and assist them with the management of them. By looking at the antecedent (the preceding action or circumstances) to an action or behaviour, an educator could learn and adapt to change the circumstances shaping behaviour, in turn this may change the consequence of the behaviour also.

Another behavioural theorist who shaped behaviourism is Bandura. His work on the theory formed social learning theory. He stepped away from observing behaviour in relation to a stimulus and focused on the observations made by the learner which may shape their actions/learning. His famous 'Bobo Doll' experiment was a study of whether observed behaviours and interactions initiate imitation of the behaviour. His bobo doll experiment helped solidify his production of the social learning theory, and although the experiments desired model behaviour was focused on violence, the theory can also be applied into education. Peer modelling occurs in classrooms every day. A child may observe another student receive praise for good behaviour and, in striving to receive the same praise, adapt their own behaviour to emulate what they have observed. This can also work in reverse, negative or disruptive behaviour in classrooms need to be properly managed by the educational lead, as any positive reinforcement (a student turning up late to class, that does not receive discipline) may put positive connotations on negative behaviour. It is important to note that although social learning theory provides reasoning for behaviour, it cannot answer for the behaviour entirely, as the theory requires input from another person or group. The theory, much like behaviourism in general, does not consider the individual.

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Behaviourism as a theory is the study of observable behaviour, it is action orientated and offers explanations for behaviour without the consideration of other factors. The theory provides clear data and statistics and can be scientifically tested on human subjects by observing behaviour. Behaviourism was one of the first learning theories and has stood the test of time by still having a large role in education today. However, with other learning theories such as humanism and cognitivism assessing learners as individuals, there must be a criticism of behaviourism in some form. There is a higher level of understanding of learning styles and assessment of special educational needs in educational settings, therefore, Thorndike's theory that there are mental processes that must be considered is more prevalent now than in the past. The theory is very deterministic and does not consider emotion, in fact the empiricist view of the theory makes it short sighted in the evaluation of human behaviour. It assumes there is no free will, that there are no differences between human and animal learning, thus the use of animal experiments to directly assume human behaviour.

However, the limitations of the behaviourist theory are what in part makes up for its strengths, as it is not humanistic and easily applied to large groups. In classrooms, where an educator may have up to 35 class members, simple reward systems and behavioural management may offer a class-wide solution if used sparingly. In conclusion, behaviourism must still be a consideration in the world of education, alongside theories that focus on individual needs, it will assist an educator to shape behaviour and also learning.

References

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Student Work 2019-20



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