

Assignment brief

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria 2019-20



Sample number: Two

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

This essay will be analysing one of the main learning theories that exists in the education system currently. It will investigate where it has come from, who are the main researchers and promoters of the theory, and will examine the impact on classroom practice and student learning throughout. There are four main learning theories to choose from; behaviourism, cognitivism; constructivism, and humanism. All approaches have had a significant impact on teaching and learning, however some individuals are more inclined to use ideas and techniques from one in particular. Although arguably techniques from all the learning theories can collaboratively work together to achieve positive results. This essay will be investigating the theory of behaviourism, and analysing its impact on teaching and learning.

To begin with, what is behaviourism? Behaviourism is the idea that both humans and animals alike learn and react to actions with a suitable response, otherwise known as stimulus and response. Behaviourists believe that humans can be conditioned this way, and as a result learn and retain information. They argue that behaviours are reflexes, and that thoughts and feelings do not come into play regarding learning. A lot of behaviourists believe that humans learn by observing others' action, and emphasise the role that environmental factors have on human learning.

Behaviourism can be broken down into two sub-categories. They are classical conditioning, and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning refers to the stimulus and response idea. This type of behaviourism explains that the humans are biologically wired to respond appropriately to certain stimuli. This theory of classic conditioning was introduced by the Russian physiologist Ian Pavlov. Arguably the experiment he is most remembered for is that of his dogs. During the experiment, Pavlov rang a bell every time the dogs were due to be fed. This meant that the dogs linked the smell of the food being prepared with the neutral sound of the bell ringing. Over time as the dogs began to make the association between the bell and receiving food, the bell alone was enough to yield a response, and the dogs began to salivate. This is a classic example of stimulus and response technique.

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Operant conditioning focuses on responses also, however takes into consideration consequences. The idea is that if a stimulus gets a certain response that is positive, the individual is more likely to repeat the action. However if the response is negative it is very unlikely that it will be repeated. This technique can be used with regards to learning. For example, if a person realises that if they press a button and receive food, that is positive reinforcement. Similar to this, if there is a constant loud buzzing that can only be stopped by pressing a button, the individual will press the button, therefore taking the negative thing away; this would be known as negative reinforcement. Positive means adding a stimulus, where negative means to take a stimulus away. One advocate of operant conditioning would be B.F. Skinner. He preferred to study observable behaviours rather than internal thoughts, seeing this as being more productive. He believed that the best way to understand behaviour is to look at the causes of an action and its consequences. His experiments used many different animals (mainly rodents) which he placed into a box. Skinner placed a hungry rat inside the box, where it discovered a lever. Upon pressing the lever, food was dispensed. The rat then began to understand that pressing the lever relieved its hunger, and as it came to this conclusion, it proved that the conditioning had been a success, as the rat learnt this behaviour through the positive reinforcement of receiving food. Through this experiment, Skinner identified three types of responses that can follow behaviour. The first is a neutral operant, which are responses from the environment that neither increases nor decrease the probability of a behaviour being repeated. The second are reinforcers. They can be positive or negative, and increase the likelihood of a behaviour being repeated. The third and final one, are punishers. These decrease the likelihood of behaviours being repeated and in fact actually weakens behaviour itself.

Another advocate of behaviourism is Albert Bandura. His experiments support the idea that humans are social creatures and learn from observing surroundings. Bandura was the founder of social learning theory, which states that observing, imitating and modelling others' behaviour is how humans learn. This theory is also very prominent within the cognitive learning theory, because of the use of the individual's insight. His popular experiment of the Bobo doll is regularly used to support this theory. The aim of the experiment was to understand aggression in children, and whether the aggressiveness was more or less prominent when a child had observed aggression, or

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even when they were presented with what would be considered “aggressive” toys e.g. a toy hammer. The children were split into 3 separate groups. One group were given normal toys, another were given aggressive toys, and the third and final group (the neutral group) were given a mixture. The results of the experiment did in fact prove that children replicate what they see, with the majority of the children from the group shown hostility reacted in exactly the same manner and were violent towards the doll.

These experiments were all ground breaking within the field of psychology, however they also had an enormous impact on the understanding of teaching within a classroom environment, and how some of the techniques could be implicated throughout the education system in order to positively affect children as they grow into adults.

Classical conditioning is popular in schools, however a lot of the time it is being used covertly and unintentionally with both the students and the teachers being rather unaware. It is often used alongside operant conditioning to reinforce learning. For example, if a teacher’s classroom has a positive and encouraging atmosphere, students will associate this pleasure with the specific class, and will be more likely to attend. In classical conditioning, the entire class or individuals can be rewarded or punished for their individual or group behaviors. However, classic conditioning can also have a negative effect on learning. For example, a student may associate exams and tests with pressure and anxiety. These individuals have been unintentionally conditioned, meaning that they may not perform as well. This can be rectified, but it is different for every individual learner, and with one teacher being in charge of classes of over twenty students on average, it may be difficult to allocate time and effort to resolve the issue. This also supports the idea that the results of classic conditioning are not voluntary, and cannot be suppressed by a student’s will power.

Operant conditioning is the more obvious type of conditioning used in the classroom. This type of learning where the student anticipates a reward or a punishment is very effective for teachers to ensure that what they are trying to teach is being received by students. There are many effective strategies for using operant conditioning in education. Using this technique not only allows the teacher to give the student instant feedback about their behavior, it very quickly establishes who is in charge of the class, and the students react accordingly to how they believe the teacher wants them to. Wanting to avoid punishment and receive praise and reward will be something students

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individually and collaboratively strive for. Operant conditioning techniques within the classroom can be as follows: stickers for desired behavior is an act of positive reinforcement. A teacher ignoring a disruptive student is negative reinforcement as that bad behavior is not being acknowledged. A student getting a detention for not handing in homework several times would be an example of positive punishment, and an example of negative punishment would be a teacher moving a student away from their friend for talking during silent study. Reinforcements increase desired behavior, whereas punishments deter bad behavior.

As effective as operant conditioning is as a tool within the classroom, it also has a downside. It relies on motivation from the students, and their individual wants and desires. Because the response to this type of learning is not an instant reaction like that of classical conditioning, it may be difficult to remain. Over time, the habits may decrease or even completely disappear. They will also change depending on the individual teaching them, as outside factors such as a new unknown individual taking charge of an established class will be tested. Effective classroom management requires a combination of both techniques in order to be successful.

A technique that would support this learning theory that is used in classrooms today can be found within social learning theory. As stated above, social learning theory refers to the fact that students learn from observing and replicating what is happening around them. In a classroom environment, teachers often use peer models to encourage others to learn. Setting up positive models in a classroom is an important teaching method for good behaviour and can help ensure that the aims and objectives of the lesson are understood and completed. Another strategy that supports the behaviourism learning theory, is that not only are students individually and collectively rewarded for being correct, they are also encouraged when incorrect. Using praise is a powerful tool and is received well from learners of all ages and levels. Encouraging learners and reassuring them even when they are incorrect is beneficial to their understanding and their self-worth. This can also be related to the humanistic approach of learning theories, Maslow's hierarchy of needs in particular. This states that in order for motivations to be maintained and achieved, all humans must reach every step on the pyramid. Starting from basic needs like food and water (step one), through safety

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and security (step two), then onto belonging and love (step three), to esteem and feelings of accomplishment (step four). The fifth and final step of the pyramid is that of self-actualization, meaning that the individual has achieved their full potential.

Another behavioural management technique that is used within a classroom environment is the ABC method. 'A' refers to what happened before a behaviour occurred. 'B' is the behaviour itself, identifying it and understanding where it came from. 'C' refers to the consequences of the behaviour. This method helps a teacher understand what chased a behaviour (stimulus) and what consequences reinforced it (response). For example, if a learning is being disruptive in class, and classmates are laughing, the disruptive learner will see that as a positive response from their negative behaviour. The teacher can recognise this and then rectify the troubled learner's surroundings accordingly in the hopes of being able to get them on the right track.

To summarise, the behaviourism learning theory is well established in learning environments, and many experiments over the years from popular accredited psychologists fully support its findings. Behaviourism does not take into account emotions or thoughts, it relies solely on the fact that humans will react to stimulus, and whether it is positively or negatively depends on the circumstances surrounding it. However, the responses can be changed using the techniques discussed in this essay so that individuals can become effective learners. A combination of all four of the most popular learning theories are regularly used systematically within learning environments, taking in to consideration everybody's learner types and individual needs. This allows the best results to be achieved for both the teacher and the learner alike.

Student Work 2019-20



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Hirst, K Nutbrown, C. (2005) *Perspectives On Early Childhood Education Contemporary Research*. Sterling: Trentham Books LTD, pg. 161.

McLeod, C. (2018) *Maslows Hierarchy Of Needs*. Available at:

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html> (Accessed: 30/01/2019)

Renner, R. (2018) *How To Use Operant Conditioning In The Classroom*. Available at:

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Williams, L. ((2017) *Positive Behaviour Management In Early Years Settings: An Essential Guide*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pgs. 53 – 59.