

Learning Theories in the Classroom

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LEARNING THEORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Abstract

Classrooms are extremely diverse across United States. In the last century educational research has led to the discovery of strategies and continues to lead to discoveries that help teachers everywhere in their unique classrooms. Learning theories have been one of the more recently debated and researched topics. There are four major learning theories: Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, and Social Constructivism theory. There are three more recent theories as well named 21st Century Skills, Humanism, and Choice Theory. The three learning theories highlighted in this paper are humanism, behaviorism, and 21st century skills. They will be defined in the text and examples are provided regarding their application in the classroom. The second half of this paper will talk about my own educational philosophy and how it ties in with the three learning theories mentioned previously.

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Behaviorism is one of the learning theories most commonly applied in classrooms. It is a combination of rewarding students for good behavior and punishing students for misbehavior, also known as operant conditioning. It uses extrinsic motivation for student behavior. An example in a secondary classroom would be to give detention to a student who disrespects a teacher in class. Usually the consequences are given immediately and are not always given in private. This learning theory is effective for short-term results, but according an article by Kerri Ulluccl, “I quickly learned that this approach wasn’t *teaching* anything. It wasn’t changing the behavior of my “problem children” in any long-term way” (Ulluccl, 2005). She noticed with the behavioristic learning theory, teachers had to be careful about which battles they were choosing with students as well. While behaviorism is effective and is good to use on some occasions, it is best to not rely on it as the only application for classroom management. It should be paired with other learning theories.

A theory that would pair well with behaviorism is called humanism. Humanism is also seen as a student-centered learning. It “ means recognizes students as individuals, respecting their differences, and trying to help them in their personal, social, emotional, and academic lives” (Matus, 1999, p. 305). Teachers who apply this theory often move their students towards intrinsic motivation and are able to establish deep meaningful relationships with their students. Schools in urban communities with low socioeconomic status are often greatly benefited by teachers who use this method in their classroom. Low SES students are usually working outside of school, from broken homes, or have family issues of some kind. This is of course not always the case, but when it is, a teacher must be able to see the student for whom they are and not punish them when homework is turned in late. For example “a student who must work full-time,

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often the only choice is between going to school unprepared (and suffering the consequences) and missing school” (Matus, 1999, p. 305). Meeting the student where they are at to help them learn is what humanism is about.

While the first two theories have been around for a while, 21st century skills are a new theory of the day. With all of the changing technology, culture, and careers, students must learn skills to prepare them to be contributing citizens in society. The four major areas of 21st century skills are: communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. These are all skills sought after by employers and give students the ability to thrive in many situations. The other three: character/citizenship, computing/technology, and cultural and global competencies are more specific and provide a student even more for their future. All seven of these areas can be “hidden curriculum” for students. This means no specific lesson is taught about these skills, but the teacher will give lessons with these skill embedded into the curriculum. A couple examples of ways this could be done are through a project-based learning assignment or group projects. Teachers may even be teaching these skills without being aware. Overall, these skills have become important for students to be successful.

Every good teacher wants to be effective. To be an effective teacher I will need to establish healthy relationships with my students. The best way to do this is to treat them as human beings. This seems obvious, but being kind and understanding takes patience and dedication. I want to make sure students in my classroom feel safe and know they are valued and important. Incorporating humanistic ideas will help me to meet my students where they are and help them become the best they can be. Every student will come into to my classroom bringing different experiences and struggles. Humanism embraces their potential as individuals and addresses each of their needs. One way I will incorporate this in my classroom is by giving

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students a chance to explain their behavior if they act out in class. I do not want to call them out in front of their peers, but calmly speak with them after class. This avoids embarrassing the student and also respects the time of other students. It is important for me to self-reflect on how I am treating my students and ensure I continue to provide a student-centered classroom.

While it is important to work towards intrinsic motivation with students through humanistic techniques, some students will still require extrinsic motivation. This is when behaviorism will become an important learning theory. I will sometimes use rewards such as bonus points or a dropped quiz to encourage student participation. In regards to behavior, a detention or loss of points on unfinished homework might be the most effective way to get a student to do their assignments. I never want behavioristic techniques to be my only way of motivating and punishing students, but I will not deny the power a stern look or proximity can have in the classroom.

The 21st century demands a lot from students. The skills outlined in the 21st Century Skills Theory are essential for students to become extremely successful once they graduate and go out into the world. The difficult part about these skills is they are not often taught as a specific lesson, but are embedded into the various lesson plans. I want my students to ask questions to help increase their critical thinking and be creative. I will also assign group work to improve collaborative skills, use technology for technological competence, and have interdisciplinary lessons for cultural and global awareness. I want all of my students to see how important the world around them is and desire to be a contributing citizen to society. I believe having a focus on 21st century skills, especially as a science teacher, will benefit my students immensely.

Teachers have the power to make a difference in the lives of everyone they encounter. All of the learning theories have wonderful aspects to be used in the classroom. The most effective

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teachers take what they know about these theories and their individual educational philosophy to determine how to best serve their students. Behaviorism help with the extrinsic, humanism encourages the intrinsic, and 21st century skills enable students with the ability to be successful in and out of school. I have high hopes for my future in the classroom, and I cannot wait be a caring and dedicated teacher for my students.

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