A Philosophy of Education: Exploring Learning Theories

Kathryn Briggs

Abstract
To understand learning, we need to understand the different theories, and the foundations behind them. Learning is no longer the passive absorption of information with the teacher as the information-deliverer; learning involves actively engaging with information. Theories of learning derive from different historical views and have influenced diverse areas of research and practice in education. This work will explore some of the most prevalent learning theories together with a number of influential theorists of learning. The paper will conclude with a personal reflection on teaching and learning.

Keywords: Learning, educational theories, learning theories, teaching methods.

Introduction
There is no universal description of learning. In fact, different types of learning exist and as a consequence there are a number of different theories which develop principles that describe how the process of learning occurs. Schunk defines learning as “an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience” (2012, pg. 3). This definition encompasses three principles: learning involves change, learning endures over time, and learning occurs through experience (Schunk 2012). The first principle is based on learning as behavioural, the learner moves from incompetence to competence, the second is centred on what a learner learns will last, and finally, learning happens as a result of experience not theory. To understand learning, we need to look at the various learning theories and the foundations behind them.
Literature Analysis on Education Theories

Learning is a complex issue, there is no single theory of learning. This literature analysis will explore some of the foremost learning theories including behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. Each of these approaches to learning has much to offer; each with advantages and disadvantages. John B. Watson (1878-1958) was the first to study how the process of learning affects behaviour, and is considered to be the founder of Behaviourism (Harzem 2015). Behaviourism is based on the theory that new behaviour or changes in behaviour are learnt through relations between stimuli and response. Key behaviourism theorists, B.F. Skinner (1904 – 1990) and Ivan Pavlov (1849 – 1936), express learning as the acquisition of new behaviour based on observable environmental conditions.

In teaching, behaviourist theory, involves the transfer of information from teacher to learner, allowing the teacher to use rewards as reinforcement; this is seen as a controlling style to education with the teacher shaping what is learned and how and when learning happens (Pugsley 2011). Behaviourist models of learning are helpful in understanding and shaping what learners do, but do not prepare learner for problem solving or creative thinking. For this we look to constructivism, which is a theory of learning focused on how learners actively create knowledge from experiences.

John Dewey (1859-1952) argues that in order for education to be successful, content must be presented in a way that permits the learner to relate the information to past experiences (Dewey 2007). In teaching, the teacher becomes a partner in the learning process, guiding learners to independently make sense of the subject. In a constructivist teaching, learning is constructed and active. Students are not blank slates to etch knowledge, they already possess formulated knowledge and ideas, this aforementioned knowledge is the raw material for the new knowledge they will create. The student is the person who creates new understanding for themselves. The teacher teaches and instructs, but allows the students to ask questions and investigate.

Kolb, building on Dewey’s work, offered a four stage model known as the experiential learning cycle, where ultimately the more frequently a learner reflects on a task, the more often they have the chance to adjust and enhance their efforts (Kolb 1984). Individuals can understand their experiences and can modify their behaviour accordingly, this process can begin at any
stage and is continuous. Experiential learning is a type of constructivist learning that perceives the student doing and reflecting upon what was done and in what way (Learning Theories and Student Engagement 2014). This theory implies that without reflection, individuals will continue to repeat their mistakes (Gravells 2011).

The constructivism theory asserts that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences; it is active rather than passive. Key constructivism theorists are Jean Piaget (1896-1980), cognitive constructivist, and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), social constructivist. Piaget believed young children were little scientists, who independently create knowledge for themselves (Bentham 2002) concentrating on what happens within the minds of individuals (learn by doing). On the other hand Vygotsky saw knowledge as being taught by experienced teachers who would teach the inexperienced (Bentham 2002).

There are two key concepts defined by Vygotsky which has significance to teaching; scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development. Scaffolding a learner gives them support, bit by bit the scaffolding can be reduced until ultimately it can be removed because the learner can complete the task independently. Thus, learners are driven to be actively involved in their own course of learning. The Zone of Proximal Development is the gap between what an individual can learn on their own and what an individual can learn with the aid of others (Bentham 2002). Social constructivists such as Vygotsky, stress the importance of social interaction in inciting learning.

Within a constructivist learning environment it is anticipated that the learner plays a more active role in, and takes more accountability for their own learning. Constructivism assumes that all knowledge is constructed from the learner’s previous knowledge, irrespective of how it is taught. Therefore, listening to a lecture involves active efforts to construct new knowledge. Constructivist approaches in the classroom encourage learner initiative and autonomy (Lunenburg 2011). There is commonly a conflict in teaching between constructivism, the learner’s perspective, and instructionism, the teacher's perspective, since they are mutually exclusive and teachers generally support one or the other (Tangworakitthaworn et al. 2011). Instructionism is based on the notion of the teacher teaching, typically according to a fixed schedule; passive learning, rather than learners learning at their own pace from their own experiences, learner-centred and active.
A crucial feature of effective learning is the development of higher-order thinking. The origins of higher-order thinking is derived from Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), which classifies learning objectives into specific levels based on intellectual behaviours, serving as a framework for classifying learning objectives. The most advanced level of learning is using existing knowledge to create new knowledge whilst the most basic level is remembering facts. The four levels in between include; understand, apply, analyse and evaluate (Bloom 1956). In an ideal world, a teacher can take a learning objective and develop it by moving analysis and activities further up until the most advanced level is reached. Learners move from the basics of memorizing information to developing their own original work. Spending as much time as feasible at the highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy will take learning to a complete new domain of relevance.

Higher-order thinking is not simply an educational endeavour; learners must be able to solve problems and think critically going forward. Bloom's Taxonomy offers a basis for us to examine our course objectives and assessments to see if we are engaging learners in appropriate levels of lower level and higher order thinking. For learners to be competent in their future profession and to deal with the complexities in real life situations, teachers should be aiming for the more advanced levels. When preparing courses, teachers should look critically at learning objectives and outcomes, testing them to make certain all levels of thinking are addressed, as this is what we expect learners to learn as a result of our teaching.

**Conclusion**

There is no clear, universal way to define learning. Different types of learning exist and as a consequence there are many theories of learning based on the views and expectations of how we learn. Behaviourism centres on changes in observable behaviour, what occurs in the mind cannot be measured. Cognitive and constructivist approaches both see learning as an active ongoing process that is dependent on the learner wanting to learn. In many ways I consider myself a constructivist. I am drawn toward teaching methods that are problem-focused, learner-centred, and social: core principles of the constructivism theory.

As a librarian I am an educator. My role as an educator is to assist in the discovery of information, since my expertise is in information; finding, retrieving, analysing, and using information. I teach information literacy skills through formal instruction, I create research,
information guides and other learning objects to assist learners achieve their educational objectives. Learning theories are crucial to understanding how learners learn and engage in their learning. Active learning is based on the constructivism theory of learning, which puts emphasis on learners constructing their own understandings, the opposite of passive learning. Using game based learning and active learning are examples of the constructivist theory which inspires me; I believe that people learn best by being active participants.

Academic libraries provide supportive learning environments which actively encourage independent learning; the instruction sessions delivered provide learners with challenging and varied tasks that allow them to think critically. Experience is a crucial to the learning process, which aligns well with library instruction as it comprises practical experience in order to make sense of learning (Ha and Verishagen 2015). Nevertheless, it must remembered that learners learn by various methods and most learn through a combination of learning styles; thus it makes sense that we use a variety of styles and tools in library instruction.
References


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