

Managing your own learning

Write a 2,500-word report that shows your reflection on and evaluation of your personal style and the methods available of enhancing learning.

There are many different theories of learning, but there are three fundamental forms of learning theory, these being behaviourist, cognitive constructivist and social constructivist. In this study I will explore briefly these theories and a number of theories that branch from them. I will then apply them to myself and evaluate my learning abilities and personal style with reference to them.

Behaviourism is an approach to psychology devised by John Watson focusing on variables we can manipulate, natural reflex's and reactions, and purely on the premise that the human mind is not in any way independent and regards all human actions to be merely reactions to previous habituation.

Behaviourists believe that the way people behave is derived from learning and that learning alters a person's behaviour. Learning is defined by behaviourists

as the gaining of new behaviour.

Highly influential in the earlier part of the 1900s, behaviourism maintains that the way we behave is a reaction to environmental stimuli. Behaviourists use the term 'conditioning', meaning the learning of a new behaviour through unnatural stimulus.

Classical conditioning happens when a natural reflex is provoked by a stimulus, a famous example being Ivan Pavlov's experiment where he changed a dog's normal response to food. Normally, a dog will salivate when food is in its mouth. Pavlov conducted an experiment to see if he could achieve this response with a different trigger. At first, he rang a bell (a conditioned stimulus), and then gave the dogs food. Then after a time, he rang the bell but didn't give the food (the unconditioned stimulus). The dogs started salivating because they knew that the ringing of the bell was followed by the supply of food.

This response to conditioned stimuli is called classical conditioning.

Operant conditioning however is when a reaction to a stimulus in

strengthened. This is when a reward is given if the response to the stimulus.

This makes response to the stimulus more likely to happen in the future. B.F

Skinner used this to train rats. He put a rat in a 'Skinner Box', a cage where

the animal needs to press a lever to obtain food. At first, the pressing of the

lever will not happen regularly, but after a while the animal 'learns' to press

the lever more and more receiving more reward or 'reinforcement'. Therefore

Skinner says that our actions are not determined by our feelings, but simply

by our experiences, our rewards and our punishments.

There were many studies carried out by behaviourists but one of the most

productive was that of Albert Bandura with his 'Bobo Doll' study. For this, he

filmed a young woman hitting, punching and kicking an inflatable doll,

shouting 'sockeroo' at it. He showed this film to a group of young children,

then sent them into the room with the Bobo doll in. The children imitated what

the woman had done, assaulting the doll, using the same language that she

had. Without reward or orders, the children changed their behaviour to fit with

what they had seen the woman. This, Bandura says, teaches us that we learn

from observation and experience, calling this finding the 'Social Learning Theory.'

Many alterations happened with this experiment, the bobo doll even being replaced by a live clown. Usually, a child is unlikely to start assaulting a clown, but after seeing the woman do this, they immediately attacked the clown as the woman had done.

From this, Bandura formulated that there are particular measures to learning effectively. The first is attention. Bandura said that attention is the foremost important factor in learning and remembering.

He said that we pay more attention to a drawing for example, if it is colourful and eye-catching, pleasing to the eye, or relates to ourselves or someone we know, we will pay more attention to it.

Secondly, it is important to be able to store the information learned. We store things in our brain through oral accounts or mental images.

Now, the images of accounts have to be converted into actions and behaviour. This is 'reproduction'. Bandura found that our ability to perform actions is improved when we watch or even imagine doing them and that our

ability to imitate improves if we do them frequently.

Cognitive Constructivism

Constructivism was very popular in the 1930 and 1940s, based around two types of 'construction'. The first being that we learn by constructing fresh knowledge in our heads from information learned, not from having it 'given' to us. Secondly, we learn exceptionally well when we are 'constructing' information that has sentimental meaning to us.

Jean Piaget devised this theory. Piaget said that we cannot be assigned information and understand it, we must 'construct' our own understanding from the information given, intellectual growth. Experience is how we learn and through experience we can develop 'schemas'.

A schema is a basic rule in our brains that is developed over time. New information is processed in how it fits in with these schemas. Schemas are used to interpret actions and events as well as predict situations and their consequences, for example when you can finish someone's sentence for

them because of the previous knowledge you have about the subject. Another example is, in early life, a child cannot find an object if a cup is put over them without them seeing, but can find it if the cup is put on the object in front of them. Piaget's uses this example to state that at this point in its life, the child cannot comprehend the existence of two objects in the same place at the same time. But as it gets older, the child learns that this is possible and the schema is built on.

Schemas are enlarged and developed through the processes of assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation is when the person attempts to apply a schema or action to a new object they are not familiar with, effectively 'assimilating' a new object into an old schema, thus developing their schema in that field. For example, when driving a car unlike your own, at first it may feel strange and harder to drive. In time though, you will 'get used' to it and therefore your schema is enlarged. This is called accommodation.

Social Constructivism

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a developmental psychologist from Russia. He proposed that environment and culture surrounding children profoundly influences their development. He agrees with a more 'discovery -orientated' way of learning as opposed to 'strict information feeding.'

Vygotsky describes this as the 'Zone of Proximal Development'. This is the space between the learner's present level of development and their potential level.

' the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, 1978)

Vygotsky maintained that we draw our knowledge from our experiences, both

within our environment and our interactions socially.

All of us learn in different ways. There are many different learning styles and many ways of enhancing them we can adopt.

The Experimental Learning Theory

Devised by David A. Kolb, this theory states that after experiencing something, the subject will reflect upon it and make a conclusion about it, then from this conclusion, decide how to react to that situation or one like it in the future.

Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, who went on to define four learning styles, developed this theory:

activist

reflector

theorist

pragmatist

They said that every person is more able in one of these categories, but has the potential to better themselves in the others.

Activist:

An activist is a person who learns through actions. They revel in new experiences and learn best when they are involved in something challenging.

An activist will often be very enthusiastic to work in competitive teamwork situations, but become easily unresponsive when already learned information must be executed. They are constantly looking for new things to do and get bored when the novelty of something wears off, causing them to lose

enthusiasm quickly.

They learn best when put in situations where they can lead a group, taking charge, role-play situations and when they can publicise their views without contradiction or criticism. An activist will struggle to learn in a solitary environment and when given information in a repetitive manner.

Reflector:

A reflector is someone who prefers to observe and evaluate situations from a variety of perspectives, reaching a conclusion only when they have analysed the information and observed others' views. Tending to stand back and remove themselves from involvement in situations, this caution can be observed as reluctance to contribute and indecisiveness.

Reflectors learn most effectively on the occasions that they are given time to analyse situation and consider their attitude. They prefer to contribute only after others have concluded a general point of view.

Reflectors will struggle to learn when put in situations where they must lead or directly input their ideas.

Theorist:

A theorist is someone who prefers to learn using models and theories, using steps as a rational and clear method of coming to conclusions. A theorist will often discount emotion when thinking and will be intolerant of emotive responses and indecision.

Theorists will learn most effectively when in a situation involving clear fundamental ideology and with a distinct composition. They enjoy being intellectually challenged, but this can become a problem when there is indecisiveness within the group. They do not find situations involving emotions, intuition or spiritual ideas easy to deal with, preferring ideas that have been proven and are logical observations.

Pragmatist:

A pragmatist is a person who prefers to test theories and ideas. They are practical and enjoy problem solving. They like challenges and will often be

very enthusiastic towards the task and apathetic towards anything else, like the people involved. Unconcerned with the basics and origins of ideas, a pragmatist will prefer to get stuck into the practical aspect of an assignment. A pragmatist will find it difficult to learn when a practical aspect to an idea is not available or instigated quickly. They also will become frustrated and lose interest if a conclusion to a problem is not acquired promptly.

Honey and Mumford advise learners to decide which learning style describes them the best, and then work on the others to improve their learning skills to their potential.

After studying the different types of learners, I have concluded that I am an activist learner. I enjoy group work in which I often take the lead, also role-play, in which I am known to have a lead role in. I dislike working on my own, finding I get easily distracted and bored. I prefer a range of activities used as methods to learn, rather than one style, like a lecture or a long-term project.

I aim to improve all aspects of my learning, including the styles I am less capable with.

I am going to review my learning experiences and examine the goals I have established within my learning experience, both the ones in which I have been successful, and the ones I have not been able to improve my competence in. Subsequently, I will state the relevant changes needed to improve my learning experience and ability.

My personal learning style, I feel, is Activist. Therefore, I must try to improve the others.

Firstly, I must determine my goals in this area to work on.

I decided that one of my main aims in the reflective aspect of my learning was to stop and think. This would, I felt, help me learn new skills, while developing the skills I already have.

To achieve my aim, I was going to have to change my ways dramatically. My current routine was very haphazard, for example, when I think of doing

something, I tend to do it without thinking. In some of my lectures, I was very loud and made conclusions very fast without thinking, for example, in a group situation, often making me wrong. To improve my attitude, I had to improve my reflector qualities. I decided to write down more information in classes, rather than shout out a judgement, then think about the ideas myself and then come to a conclusion. I took more time over tasks, this helping me in my judgement and my understanding of the subject. In group work situations, I would often take lead and boss people about. I was always 'the writer', and I always put forward my view quickly without letting anyone else speak. To stop this, I became a little more quiet and listened to people's views on the subject more carefully, rather than trying to influence everyone else with mine. This move has improved my listening skills, in turn improving my understanding and tolerance of the less contributive members of my group.

I feel I have been very successful in improving my reflective skills. The exercise has made me more vigilant in my attitude to tasks and I pay more attention to others within the situation before reaching a conclusion.

My next aim was to improve my pragmatist side. I am often very verbally contributive in classes and social situations, but not practically. I tend not to input much practical knowledge or be directly involved in the practical side of the problem solving. I prefer to stand back, discussing and informing as opposed to actually taking part in the activity myself.

This needs to be improved. Through improving this, I will learn new practical skills and become more confident in participation in practical activities.

Pragmatists involve themselves in planning the next steps of something and when set a task, get down to completing it immediately, while I tend to discuss it for a long time, often too long, which affects the amount of work I complete.

To improve my pragmatic skills, I decided to become more organised in the way I go about completing tasks, focusing on the completion of the assignment rather than the debate and talk surrounding it.

Thirdly, I attempted to improve my skills as a theorist. A theorist is someone who learns well from things that are solid and scientifically proven. They

disregard emotion or intuition. I feel I am least capable as a theorist. I let emotion get in the way of everything, and this dramatic approach sometimes confuses others, and me, when the problem is quite simply solved with a model, a table or a rational discussion. I tried to become less emotive when learning, not to a submissive stage, but with a more passive attitude. Unfortunately, I always felt I was missing out in some way and this docile approach did not last for long.

Although I feel I did not succeed in the attempt to become more theorist, I felt that overall my learning style was developed through this exercise. I learned to listen more, therefore improving my understanding and the way others treated me in a group situation, this being with more ease.

There are many ways that I can enhance my learning style. Apart from the aforesaid method, I can work on the things that it is said that activists can learn best from.

Honey and Mumford advise activists to take up opportunities to work within a group situation often. Also it is advised that an activist work in a flexible environment where there are few limitations so as to achieve their full potential. Also, it is advised that an activist seek out new experiences and focus on things that challenge them to the best of their ability.

A modern method of learning:

I was advised to look into E -Learning to improve my knowledge and my learning skills.

E-learning is a very popular method of learning that is now used in most institutions in some respect. E -learning is the use of the electronic sources to gain knowledge.

However, Peter Honey recently produced a survey intended to disclose you 'e-learning style.'

He found that Activists do not benefit from e -learning a large amount because they prefer their learning to be a quicker process, learning that they can be

challenged with rather than the 'set you own pace' way in which e-learning teaches. Activists are likely to be less disciplined in their learning when they are in a solitary environment (like when learning from a computer) and they find it difficult to be organised enough to complete the task in hand, without the motivation gained from being in a n alternative environment, namely a group/ teamwork position.

Honey states that Theorists and Pragmatists are more likely to be successful in their e-learning because of their ability to work alone and their attitude that other people being involved is unnecessary, as their time-management skills are superior to that of an activist and a reflector.

However, by improving myself in the fields I am weak in, I plan to become efficient at e-learning, to have more discipline and overall, improve my understanding and knowledge.

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