

Learning Theory

By Mark Kavanaugh

So how do people really learn? We have a number of ways to think about how people learn. It is important to think about how YOU perceive people learn because it will impact the way you design your instruction, the expectations you have of your students, and the ways in which you will evaluate if learning has really happened.

LEARNING THEORY describes the assumptions we make about how experiences translate into relatively permanent behavior change. A full exploration of the various theories of learning is beyond this particular course, but brief descriptions might serve to help you identify which ones you relate best to. For each of these I'll also identify ways in which these theories may be applied in class.

Behaviorism

- The basic premise of Behaviorism is that learning occurs due to a system of association and/or a system of reinforcers and punishers in the environment. The learner plays a relatively passive role in learning
- In the classroom we may apply Behaviorism as we use grading, incentives, praise, recognition, etc.

Cognitive Information Processing

- CIP theories focus on the processes of memory (sensory memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory)
- In the classroom we may use CIP as we design engaging media to deliver our content, we use written notes and summaries to encourage chunking of items for better memory retrieval, and we use quizzes and tests to encourage rehearsal and retrieval of data and information.

Meaningful Learning and Schema Theory

- Although it sounds a bit complex, this theory is fairly intuitive. According to this model we learn when we encounter information that runs counter to how we thought the world worked...faced with this conflict we either ignore the new data or we change our understanding of the world.
- We may apply this in the classroom when we use examples to dispel commonly held myths and when we use "non-examples" (examples of what a concept is NOT).

Situated Cognition

- Theorists from this standpoint identify that learning takes place in a context...a work context, family context, and/or classroom context. That we learn by DOING, not simply by reading about.

- We use this theory when we incorporate "real-world" experiences into our teaching, when we have internships and practicum, and when we utilize Community Service and Service-Learning as part of our instruction.

Interactional Theories

- Closely aligned with the "Situated Cognition" approach, interactionists concern themselves with the social context in which learning occurs. We learn best when we are in social groups and when we are exposed to the knowledge of masters of the information we are to learn.
- We utilize this in the classroom when we, as instructors, talk about our own knowledge and experience as masters of our craft, when we exemplify mastery, and when we have our students work in groups.

Constructivism

- Constructivism is likely the most difficult to explain clearly. The word implies that something is "constructed"...this something is knowledge. In this theory knowledge is SUBJECTIVE...that which you sent out as an instructor is received by the learner and changed...it is mixed in with previous knowledge, biases, personality, etc and the ultimate end product is different for each person.
- We use constructivism in the classroom when we ask students' opinions, when we have them relate their past experiences with what they are learning now, and when we engage in critical thinking.

As you can see, there are a number of very practical ways in which Learning Theory is applied in the classroom.