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Abstract

My disposition toward adult learning is very much situated toward behaviorist adult learning theories and the notion of learners being engaged with the material and the instructor in classroom practice. Through active engagement with the subjects at hand, critical thinking skills are applied and I actually have their attention. This is accomplished through varying activities, as well as debate and discussion fuelled by logic and reasoning; the emphasis on positive learning behaviors and developing them is at the heart of my teaching.

In my own study of adult learning and adult education, I have come across many different ways of working and learning. I am tremendously dedicated to helping people, and it is my utmost wish that the people around me feel comfortable coming to me for said help. The issue of adult education is a complex one, filled with many different theories and strategies for effectively conveying knowledge to adult learners. Adult learning is especially important now more than ever, with an increasing need for media literacy and a relaxation of literacy standards in America today. Today, it is much easier to find oneself without an education, while many no longer feel the need to have one - as a result, we find ourselves with much higher adult illiteracy levels and a decided lack of involvement in learning.

In the past century, the practice of educational psychology has itemized these theories into concrete disciplines, each with their own ethos and methodology. One of the most prevalent adult learning theories used today, and one that I subscribe very closely to, is the behaviorist theory. Despite

the benefits and detriments of myriad theories of adult learning, behaviorist adult learning theories are the most prevalent and effective, due to their emphasis on operant conditioning to change ill-advised behavior and is not conducive to learning. Behaviorist adult learning, to me, is the best way to improve literacy and learning, as it not only brings people to learn, but it makes them want to learn. The basic tenets of behaviorism drive my own attitude toward adult learning - I want to make people want to learn, as that is the only way in which they will engage with me and with the material.

In behaviorist adult learning theories, activities and strategies are created based on a stimulus-response principle; in essence, behaviorism assumes the passivity of the learner, who is responding to his or her environment - they are not at fault for their actions, and there is no internal mental process to consider. The learner is shaped through reinforcement or punishment, whether positive or negative, to alter their behavior for the better. All behavior stems from one's reaction to external forces, and so adult learning curricula are formed with the goal of changing people's behavior. Operant conditioning is used to change adult learning behaviors; changing the response to certain stimuli can change the behavior for the better. Essentially, the definition of learning for a behaviorist is the change in the behavior of the person who is learning.

My own personal ethos meshes well with the behaviorist school of thinking - I think that I must do whatever I can to change the behavior of my students to make them more conducive to learning, and sometimes that means compromise. I have to adjust my personality and my way of interacting with

my students according to what I believe they need - if friendliness and joviality brings them comfort with me and the material, I will do that. If adult learning students need discipline and hard work, I will make sure that they get it done. More often than not, I attempt to create a positive opinion for discussion - the most important part of the debate and discussion process is critical thinking, and those who disagree with me are exercising that. If I can talk to them and get them to engage with me and assert their well-informed opinion, then I will have done my job. This is the most influential factor that makes adult learners want to learn - feeling like they are in control of their learning. Many adult learners did not learn as children because they felt like they were being lectured or scolded by their teachers; it did not respect them as people. By using debate and discussion, they have the chance to change my mind, and they have to search for good reasoning and logic with which to do so. This engages them in a fantastic way, and I absolutely love the chances I have to do that.

Behaviorism was created by J. B. Watson, who stated that learning was a series of responses to stimuli, showing cause and effect relationships that could be observed (Allen, 2007). Because feeling and thoughts cannot be measured, they cannot be manipulated into creating better learning. According to behaviorist learners, current behavior is what should be emphasized instead of the past, since that may not inform what happens in the future. The only things that matter in education are what is measurable, and behavioral education announces the expectations and the results of instruction before it happens to ensure proper performance (Allen, 2007).

The overall goal of behavioral education is to change the way students participate, think and learn; this helps to emphasize stimulation and provide active learning through the use of games and activities. By rewarding students for good behavior, they will also see that their behavior (in this case, learning the material and doing well in class) will continue to bring them positive reinforcement. On the other end of the spectrum, doing poorly on an exam will lead them to be discouraged from doing so again. This aspect of behavioral learning emphasizes retention of the material in exchange for tangible rewards (Spurgeon and Moore, 1994).

The behaviorist model provides several assumptions that are vital to creating testing and teaching strategies in individuals: learning happens by gathering discrete units of knowledge; learning has a very strict, hierarchical sequence; every objective has to be explained explicitly in order to facilitate effective transfer of information; the frequent use of tests would make sure that learners have mastered one objective before moving to the next; the use of tests is synonymous with learning; and motivation can only come externally, with positive reinforcement being used to increase said motivation (Shepard, 2000).

For behaviorists, " learning [does] not imply conscious intent but rather [is] seen as the autonomous outcome of the formation of S-R bonds stamped in or out by reinforcement contingencies with no need for conscious intent" (Brown, p. 5). In this way, behaviorism is seen as a somewhat robotic method of learning, as the student does not necessarily need to want to know the information. Through the requirement and discipline provided

through reinforcement, behaviorism offers results in conveying information to students who may not necessarily be intrinsically motivated to receive it.

Behaviorism is the primary adult learning theory that I pull from when developing teaching strategies. My primary goal, first and foremost, as a teacher is to get students involved in the material. I do not allow my students to glaze over and just let the information pass by them; through discussion, debate, and active participation, I make adult learners confront the information that is in front of them and figure out how it applies to their own lives. The best outcomes are those adult learners who genuinely learn something; even better than that are adult learners who are able to convince me of some idea or notion I hadn't thought of before. I like to think of myself as fairly perceptive, so when a student is engaged enough to change my mind on a subject, I consider that a success. This kind of behavior is what I strive to instill in my students.

References

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