

Learning and communication theories



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Critically examine a range of theoretical approaches to learning and communication. Discuss how the learning and communication theories apply to your own teaching and promote inclusive practice.

Theoretical approaches to learning and communication are abundant, with a number of these having their roots through the centuries. Because of the level of depth within key educational theories, it can be extremely difficult to compare a range of these within an inquiry such as this. Therefore, the cognitivism approach, which encompasses, Piaget, Vygotsky and Halliday, alongside the Humanist approach, including Maslow and Kolb will be critically examined in some detail, whilst another school of thought, behaviourism will be examined in brief.

Within Cognitivism theories, social constructivism as a school and particularly Vygotskian theory remains popular today. The roots of the school are evident in constructivism, which is mainly based on the Piagetian notions of how children learn. Piaget originally proposed (1950) that children not only accommodate their existing thinking but also assimilate new experiences, therefore creating cognitive, or intelligent adaptation (McGregor, 2007, p. 51). For many years, child-centred education has remained one of the lynchpins of the educational structure within many societies, and the constructivist teacher is one who amongst other identifiers, will expect learners to show initiative, ask questions that may be reflective and demanding and expect learners to develop abstract explanations (McGregor, 2007, p. 52).

The popularity of Vygotsky is probably because he removed multiculturalism as an issue in development and learning – by re-centering learning theory from an individual perspective to the sociocultural perspective. Within this perspective, psychological tools are key. These psychological tools are what help individuals to improve and master their own psychological functions such as memory and perception, and depending on the culture, these psychological tools differ (Kozulin, 2007 p. 15-17). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is what characterises these psychological tools that are emerging, but are not yet fully developed. Definition of the ZPD varies with which of Vygotsky's works is examined, in the earlier works it is presented that the ZPD is an assessment of children's intellectual capabilities, whereas his later work demonstrates the concept that more practitioners will be aware of – the ZPD determines the lower and upper boundaries in which teaching should be aimed. However, both explanations focus on the role of the teacher in enabling the learner to do what they cannot yet do on their own (Wells, 1999, pg. 313-315).

From this, the role of mediation evolved (Vygotsky, 1978, Feuerstein, 1990) and the role of the human mediator, or teacher, is that of the individuals that interact with children. These interactions become internalised, i. e. psychological functions will appear twice in the development of a child, firstly through interaction with the mediator and secondly through their own internalisation. Therefore, teachers are key mediators in guiding individuals through the learning process, particularly through the “ scaffolding” as described by Light and Littleton (1999). This concept is to allow a scaffolding structure to show what a complete building will look like once built, and that

the scaffolding can be easily removed on building completion to leave the finished structure (McGregor, 2007, p. 57). Social constructivist teachers become scaffolders by prompting and guiding learners to find solutions, and as a scaffolder, there are many strategies involved.

Within the classroom, this style of mediation is one of the many ways in which differentiated learning can be applied, particularly with groups of mixed ability learners. With small groups of learners in the classroom, the teacher can individually assess how well the group are communicating and approaching the task at hand and from this decide how much guidance or cues need to be given to that group to allow them to complete the task, As the teacher then moves onto the next group, the same assessment can be made and so on, if necessary changing the scaffolding structure, or mediation to best suit an individual groups requirements. It may also be that to approach a complex task, it is first broken down into sub-tasks. The learner can then complete the sub-tasks that will then complete the one complex task.

The scaffolder or teacher should also consider how tasks are carried out, what questions are asked, in what way, how much detail of a task is provided to the learners, which should be enough to focus them on their own psychological development without making the task “ too easy”. The role of the teacher at this point also assists the learner within their ZPD, it is at this point that guidance or instruction may benefit the learner the most – when they are between what they can achieve unaided and what they can achieve with assistance (Wells, 1999, p. 297). It is important that the role of peers in

this construct not be forgotten either, and this approach to learning also ensures that the learner is at the centre of the learning process.

The linguist Halliday strengthened the role of communication and linguistics within learning and educational theories. A number of theories were devised, including Systemic-Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Hasan 1985). This firmly placed both semantics and functions as the basis of any communication activities. It was highlighted that “ Knowledge is transmitted in social contexts, through relationships..... that are defined in the value systems and ideology of the culture”, placing the emphasis upon learning as a social process carried out in a social environment, often, but not necessarily always, the school. The theories continued to build on the cognitive approaches of Vygotsky and others, again, strengthening the links between learning and communication.

Dialogic exchange, whereby learners both describe their ideas and communicate their reasoning contributes to effective processing of thoughts, and raises awareness of mental activity. This then allows creation of organised meaning and logic (McGregor, 2007, p. 56). Therefore, how individuals talk, or communicate can reflect the effectiveness of the social construction (Mercer, 1998). It is also important to note that not only is communication through language essential (Costa, 2001), but also communication through mediums, for example, how an individual responds to what another individual says or does (McGregor, 2007 p. 57). The importance of communication cannot be underestimated in either constructivist or social constructivist models, and it must be remembered that without communication, social constructivism cannot occur effectively.

The importance of communication within the learning environment cannot be underestimated. Communication is taken for granted, with few individuals stopping to think about what makes a good communicator, and how good communication can contribute to learning (Thompson, 2003). The basic model of communication evolved from Shannon and Weaver (1949).

(Adapted from: Thompson, 2003, p13)

The transmitter is the person who starts the communication, in this example the teacher and the receiver is the person who is being communicated to, or the learner. The noise may be physical interferences such as noise itself in the classroom, or it may be any other extrinsic or even intrinsic factors such as anger, boredom etc. The teacher can to a point remove extrinsic noise, but because intrinsic noise can arise from lack of motivation etc, difficulties arise. One possible approach is to adopt a humanist approach to learning in the classroom.

The humanistic approach to education and learning is deep rooted in Ancient Greece, particularly amongst the teaching of Socrates (Aloni, 2001). The Romantic vision of humanism shifted from philosophy to psychology, with theorists such as Rousseau and Froebel developing the approach further. The existentialists support the view that individuals are destined to define and create themselves, which is contradicted by radical humanists who say that education cannot be considered independently from cultural, social and economical contexts. This brief overview of humanism demonstrates the multiple notions that a number of schools of thought have portrayed as

being humanistic notions, and therefore demonstrates the complexity of attempting to apply humanistic theories to education and learning.

Learners should take advantage of their rights as humanistic learners, the theories suggest that because children shape their own minds through their own actions that they are in fact a complete person and have human rights in the same way that adults do (Silcock, 2001). By this token, learners should own and potentially manage the curricula in negotiation with their teachers, whose wider perceptions prevent false assumptions. Revision or assessment preparation sessions are ideal to “indulge” a humanistic approach to learning. Learners should be encouraged to set the agenda for the session, rather than the teacher judging what they think the learners need further support with. This allows learners autonomy because they are setting their own curriculum for further learning.

Humanistic theories can focus upon motivation, and within the field of education, Maslow and Kolb are the two key humanist theorists who examined motivation. Teachers can use Maslow’s motivators, which are identified within his seminal “Hierarchy of Needs” in curriculum design. Firstly, learners need to have their basic needs fulfilled; they need to be warm and comfortable within the classroom, and they need to feel safe amongst their peers. Only when these needs at the base of the “pyramid” are satisfied can learners begin to satisfy their own esteem, intellectual and aesthetic needs, and begin to take an active part in the learning process. The teacher cannot always assume that there is a motivation to learn at the point of first contact, but rather that this is a goal that can be worked towards.

Although many criticisms are still made of Maslow's work, particularly the approach that he took in his studies, it is still an extremely useful tool within the classroom, any teacher who tries to ensure that the physical, emotional and intellectual needs of their learners are met should eventually see motivation to learn within the classroom (Jarvis, 1995). If communication is considered alongside motivation and needs, particularly from Shannon and Weaver's (1949) perspective, with the teacher ensuring that basic needs are met, this will also go some way to removing extrinsic "noise" from the classroom communications. If higher level needs begin to be fulfilled, such as esteem, then this will assist in removing some of the more intrinsic "noises" such as lack of motivation.

Similarly to Maslow, another humanist, Kolb is criticised for a number of his theories. Despite this, they remain popular today. He designated four stages of learning, which run as thus: Once a learner has had a particular (concrete) experience, they then reflect upon that experience. They may then either apply known rules, or derive rules that describe the experience and then finally, construct ways in which the next occurrence of this particular experience may be modified. Thus, the next concrete experience occurs and the cycle starts over (Atherton, 2009). Kolb also built upon the work of the Gestalt theorist Lewin (1942) by categorising four learning styles. These were taken a step further by Honey and Mumford in the 1970's. There are four categorised types of learning styles, and the diagram below shows Kolb's four learning styles and how Honey & Mumford adapted these to define whether a learner is an activist, reflector, theorist or pragmatist.

(Image courtesy of <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm>)

These theories are ideal to apply in the classroom as it allows the teacher to differentiate teaching to ensure that there are appropriate activities for all types of learners. An ideal lesson will contain theory for the theorists, practical experiments/activities for the activists and the pragmatists and the opportunity for evaluation for the reflectors in the group. Even though this is easier to achieve in more practical/vocational based subjects such as science and engineering, it should still be possible for activities to be used in almost every subject within the curriculum.

It was demonstrated with both animals and humans (Skinner, Pavlov) that responses can be used to reinforce particular behaviours, and that both animals and humans can be “conditioned” to display a particular behaviour. This approach is ideal for learning by rote, the teacher reinforces correct answers, and the positive reinforcement that can be seen with younger learners is the “well done” from the teacher for supplying the correct answer. Obvious limitations with a behaviourist approach is that learners are limited by how much they can think, and that any cognitive activity is implicit rather than explicit (McGregor, 2007, p. 61). But, behaviourist approaches still plays an important part in some types of education, particularly higher education, where it can be argued that this type of approach is really the only way in which to “learn” a particular subject, medicine or veterinary science being just two examples.

Self-efficacy is also important, learners should be aware of their beliefs in themselves as well as their competencies (Bakx, 2003), and the role of the teacher can be critical in encouraging individuals to not just critically analyse the situation, but also to critically analyse themselves – especially in terms of what the learner knows they are good at and what they need more support with.

In summary, Cognitivism and humanism theories of learning and the role that these theories have in both the approach to teaching and the assessment of how effectively learners learn has been critically analysed. The involvement of communication in learning has also been discussed. It should be remembered that as much as the theorists would have us believe, there is not one theory that “ fits all sizes”, and that the best way to promote inclusive practice within the classroom is to use a mix of theories, assess how learning will take place and what will be the most appropriate way to encourage differentiated learning within the classroom. The power of communication within the learning process should never be underestimated; it should be communication that dictates the effectiveness of learning, rather than the more one learns, the better the communication. Finally, the ability of any teacher to adapt their teaching practice in new subjects, with new groups of students, and in new environments is also the best way to demonstrate their learning abilities also.

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