

Behaviourism and behaviour management



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Briefly outline Behaviourism. How does this theory aid in an understanding of disruptive behaviour, and what are the limitations of this approach?

Behaviourism

Behaviourism was the primary psychological paradigm of the early twentieth century and is characterised by the work of Watson (1913) and Skinner (1976). It is an approach to learning that focuses on observable and quantifiable behaviour and discounts the need to refer to mental processes (Pritchard, 2009). Knowledge is seen as a repertoire of behaviours that are largely passive, mechanical responses to environmental stimuli (Wray, 2010). In order to describe this knowledge, no reference to internal, mental processes are needed, and instead, someone is said to understand something if they possess the appropriate repertoire of behaviours.

Behaviourists believe that the aim of education is to provide learners with the appropriate repertoire of responses to specific stimuli. Information, in the form of the appropriate behaviour for a certain stimulus, is transmitted from the teacher to the learner and learning is described as “ the acquisition of a new behaviour or the modification of behaviour as a result of teaching, training or tutoring” (Woollard, 2010, p. 1). Behavioural responses are reinforced through the use of an effective reinforcement schedule which breaks down material into a sequence of small tasks, consistently repeats the material, and provides positive reinforcement to correct responses (Skinner, 1976). As such, teaching methods includes techniques such as learning by rote, ‘ skill and drill’, and question and answer tasks that gradually increase in difficulty, as these techniques are able to break down material into smaller pieces and allow for the consistent repetition needed

for learning to take place (Wray, 2010). It is also believed that teaching should be carefully planned and systematic, regularly testing learners' behaviours in order to monitor their progress and provide feedback on their learning (Cox, 2004).

Behaviourism as a method of teaching and learning content has received considerable criticism in recent years and has generally fallen out of favour, not least because of its disregard of what goes on within a learner's head and its rejection of the importance of the mental processes the learner engages in (Bartlett and Burton, 2012). However, in the field of behaviour management, behaviourism is still an important influence and a number of behaviour management approaches and techniques draw from this field of psychology.

Behaviourist Behaviour Management

From a behaviourist perspective, all behaviour is considered to be a repertoire of responses to a particular stimulus. Appropriate responses can be taught and learnt through the use of an effective reinforcement schedule. Therefore, from this perspective, disruptive behaviour is considered to be an undesirable response to a set of stimuli, and children can be taught more desirable responses through the use of reinforcement. Using this basic theory, behaviourism has had considerable influence on classroom management techniques and the encouragement of appropriate behaviours in the classroom. Using a behaviourist perspective, Merrett and Wheldall (2012, p. 19) recommend using a 'positive teaching' approach to establish the context for appropriate classroom behaviour, characterised by the following five basic principles:

1. It is concerned with the observable, i. e. behaviour;
2. It is assumed that behaviour is learned;
3. Learning involves change in behaviour;
4. Changes in behaviour depend mainly upon consequences;
5. Behaviours are also governed by the contexts in which they appear.

This approach emphasises how appropriate behaviour can be taught and learned through the use of behaviourist principles. The teacher firstly identifies the behaviours that they consider to be desirable and those that are considered to be disruptive and undesirable and then communicates these rules to the learners. The teacher then rewards the learners who display the desirable behaviour, thus changing behaviour through showing the learners the positive consequences of displaying appropriate behaviour (Pritchard, 2009). Behaviour management approaches such as ‘assertive discipline’ follow a similar pattern. In this case, a series of rules are established, there are rewards for those who follow the rules and consequences for those who do not, and these rewards and consequences are consistently applied (Canter and Canter, 1992). Current government guidelines for the management of behaviour in UK schools also adopt such an approach (DfE, 2011).

Behaviourist principles can also be used to help understand disruptive behaviour once it occurs. From a behaviourist perspective, the understanding of disruptive behaviour does not require any consideration of the learner’s internal mental states or consciousness as it is believed that states such as belief, motivation, and satisfaction can be understood through an examination of the manifested behaviour (Woollard, 2010). Instead, an

analysis of disruptive behaviour requires only an examination of the behaviour itself and the context in which the behaviour occurs with no reference to the learner's mental processes. Behaviour is examined in terms of what comes either before or after the manifested behaviour using a model known as the ABC model, where:

1. Antecedent: what happens in the context prior to the observable behaviour;
2. Behaviour: describes what actually happens in observable terms;
3. Consequences: what happens immediately afterwards

Roffey, 2006, p. 8

It is believed that behaviour can be changed by either changing the antecedence to the behaviour or the consequences of the behaviour.

Hastings and Wheldall (1996) numerate a number of advantages of this model of understanding disruptive behaviour. They suggest that it focuses the teacher's attention on what the child actually does in the B aspect; the behaviour has to be systemically observed and recorded rather than simply labelling the behaviour under the general umbrella term of 'disruptive'.

Furthermore, the teacher's attention is directed towards events within the classroom that s/he has influence over and thus, can change in order to effect change in the child's behaviour. Thirdly, it is suggested that the ABC approach emphasises that the child's behaviour takes place within a particular context and that their behaviour is both influenced by the environment and that their behaviour influences what happens next in the classroom. Finally, this approach provides links between the identification of

undesirable behaviour, an explanation for why it occurs, and possible strategies for changing the behaviour.

Any attempt to change behaviour using this model should begin with the questions ‘ What triggered the behaviour?’, in other words, the antecedence, and ‘ How is this behaviour being reinforced?’, in other words, an examination of the consequences (Welsh Assembly, 2010). Antecedents to disruptive behaviour include both issues that the teachers can affect such as task difficulty, the learner’s engagement with the topic, the classroom seating arrangement, and their relationship with the teacher, as well as issues that the teacher has little control over, for instance the effect of the learner’s home environment on their learning. The ABC model suggests that teachers can use a number of preventative strategies to avoid disruptive behaviour by eliminating the antecedents to the unwanted behaviour, for example, the teacher can enforce rules through positive statements, they can give praise that is behaviour specific or they can change teaching to engage the interest of the learners (Gulliford and Miller, 2015).

However, despite the teacher’s best efforts, it is highly likely that some children may still display disruptive behaviour on occasions. In this case, according to behaviourism, it is important to address the consequences of the behaviour as it may be the case that the undesirable behaviour is being reinforced by the reaction the learner provokes. For example, the child may behave badly in order to gain the teacher’s attention as, for some children, any attention, even negative, is better than no attention. Every time the teacher reacts, they are reinforcing the child’s disruptive behaviour.

Alternatively, the child may be behaving badly in order to secure a reaction

from their peers, and again, if this reaction is gained, the behaviour is being reinforced (Wray, 2010). Therefore, behaviourism advocates teaching learners new repertoires of behaviour and then reinforcing this good behaviour. Equally important, the undesirable behaviour should not be reinforced. Thus, reinforcement is the key aspect of this stage; however, it should be noted that, according to behaviourism, punishments and sanctions are not a part of the reinforcement schedule (Gulliford and Miller, 2015). Instead, positive reinforcement should be used as it is argued that pleasant experiences are more likely to help learners make the desired connections between specific stimuli and the appropriate response to that stimuli (Wray, 2010). Positive reinforcement can be given in three instances (LaVigna, 2000): a reward can be given when a learner chooses a preferred behaviour, known as differential reinforcement of an alternative response; a reward can be given when the learner chooses not to commit the undesirable behaviour, known as a differential reinforcement of the omission of a response; finally, a reward can be given when the learner displays a lower frequency of unwanted behaviour, known as a differential reinforcement of lower rates of responding. Disruptive and undesirable behaviour should be ignored as much as possible so as not to reinforce the behaviour (Wray, 2010).

Limitations of Behaviourism

While behaviourism continues to exert an influence over behaviour management techniques in today's schools, it has also been criticised for its limitations. Some of these criticisms derive from the incorrect application of the approach. Martella et al. (2012), for example, suggest that behaviourist approaches to dealing with disruptive behaviour such as assertive discipline

are often misused in practice as teachers often neglect the praise components and move straight to the punishments. As such, bad behaviour is being reinforced through the negative attention the learners receive and good behaviour is not being reinforced.

Other criticisms focus on the limitations of the approach itself. One major criticism of behaviourism is that it does not recognise the uniqueness of the individual (Vialle et al., 2005). In the educational context, Weare (2004) suggests that behaviourist approaches to behaviour management do not work equally with all learners, and they particularly do not work for those who may find it difficult to fit in with the behavioural demands of the learning setting because of reasons such as cultural differences, learning difficulties, and their emotional state. Therefore, it is argued that behaviour management should take a more holistic approach and should consider the child's unique personal situation, their developmental level, cultural and social background and personality and characteristics instead of focusing on rigid norms of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviour (Kay, 2006).

Similarly, the behaviourist approach is also criticised for taking a simplistic approach to behaviour, largely derived from experiments on animals.

Learners are considered to be passive recipients who react to various stimuli provided by the trainer, and who have little free will of their own (Wragg, 2001). This view of humans does not take into account the complex nature of human learning, and in focusing on only the observable behaviour, the learner's cognition and thinking processes are ignored.

Furthermore, it is suggested that behaviour management techniques that focus only on behaviour and do not consider the mental processes of the

individual are unable to change the learner's cognition (Garner, 2009). This is because there is a focus on suppressing bad behaviour rather than a focus on teaching learners new responses and changing long-term behaviour problems (Kearney, 2007). As such, it is suggested that behaviourist approaches have little long-term effect and do not teach learners the skills to respond to situations in more appropriate ways.

Finally, behaviourist approaches to behaviour management have been criticised for their focus on rewards and it has been suggested that such a focus can reduce a learner's intrinsic motivation to complete tasks (Vialle et al., 2005). In other words, the learner learns not to value learning and good behaviour for its own sake, but for the extrinsic rewards they receive for behaving well and completing the tasks the teacher gives them. As such, the learner does not become a self-motivated learner, but is reliant on the approval and direction of the teacher.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the behaviourist approach suggests a basic ABC model for understanding disruptive behaviour through an examination of the antecedents and the consequences of the behaviour within the context in which it occurs. This approach also provides a number of suggestions for strategies for avoiding disruptive behaviour and dealing with it once it occurs. It would seem that behaviourism is a commonly used behaviour management approach; humans tend to use reinforcement in their general behaviour and research has shown that the vast majority of teachers use behaviourist principles in their behaviour management strategies (Wragg, 2001). However, given the limitations of this approach, it would perhaps be

useful for teachers to be aware of different approaches to behaviour management so that the needs of each individual student can be met.

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