

Comparing and contrasting the behaviourist and social learning theories

[Psychology](#), [Behaviorism](#)



Learning occurs through a process that results in a long-term change in knowledge or behaviour, resulting from experience and interaction with the immediate environment. This has been concluded through research and experimentation by various theorists trying to understand what it is that leads to this enduring change.

Behaviourism was one of the earliest theories to be established with its main contributors being Pavlov, Thorndike, Watson and Skinner. It focuses mainly on observable and measurable behaviours. These theorists highly believed that learning is nothing more than the acquisition of new behaviour in response to a stimulus. (Nagowah & Nagowah, 20009)

Further down the timeline, the Social Learning Theory was developed. This theory expands on ideas presented by behaviourists. It is based on the belief that behaviour is based on observable stimuli, and internal psychological processes. Bandura (1963) explained that learning is not just a behavioural process, but a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. Through observation and direct experience, the learner imitates the modelled behaviour and thus learning occurs.

Behaviourist theorists argued that when a stimulus is presented this will provide a response. Some theorists reinforced this belief with the introduction of rewards and punishments to strengthen the response. The social learning theorists believed that this is not enough for a person to learn, but that this could be enhanced by observing and imitating the people around them. This was built on the idea that peer influence can intrigue someone to go along with the crowd in a desire to fit in and be accepted. At

times the latter can also take place when the observed behaviour conflicts with the individual's personal values.

The behavioural theory largely focuses on overt behaviours and ignores mechanisms such as thought processes. They define learning as nothing more than a newly acquired behaviour. Thorndike (1932) and other behaviourists believed that practice and repetition of the stimulus helps strengthen the association between stimuli and responses. The social learning theory, on the other hand, believe that learning occurs through observation and mental processes, and that when something has been learned, this does not automatically imply a change in behaviour.

Moreover, behaviourism theorists sought to prove that behaviour could be predicted and controlled. (Skinner, 1974) They concluded that all learners understand and learn equally, given the right environmental influences. This would imply a passive role for the learner where a behaviour is learned once it is used. Social learning theorists believe that the learner chooses with behaviours to reproduce and how to react to the consequences of these behaviours. It is possible to observe and remember a behaviour but never reproduce it. Bandura (1963) refers to these behaviours as 'internalised'

Application of Learning Theories in the classroom

" Learning theory is no substitute for experience. Theory without experience can be misguided because it may underestimate the effects of situational factors. When properly used, theory provides a framework to use in making educational decisions." (p. 20 Shunk, 2012)

John is a five year old boy attending a boys' school. He has an older brother and is closely followed and supported by both parents. At the age of two he was referred for assessment due to displaying behaviour that was not age-appropriate, and lack of communication and social skills. It was concluded that John was suffering from severe glue ear which impeded his hearing and thus his ability to communicate verbally. Following medical intervention John's hearing improved dramatically thus opening a whole new world to him - this caused a mix of emotions in the child - excitement, anxiety, frustration and shyness. He was also struggling to cope socially due to the lack of social and communication skills. The goal for John's scholastic year was to improve his communication skills and integrate with the adults and peers in the classroom.

In a mixed ability classroom, one cannot focus on applying a single learning theory, but make the most of the various methodologies that will benefit all students present.

At the beginning of the scholastic year a performance/reward system is presented to the pupils. All pupils have an owl picture that starts at the bottom of a tree on a board in the classroom. As the week goes along pupils have various opportunities to 'help' their owl climb higher up the tree through their behaviour, participation, contributions and performance. At the end of the week students at the top of the tree receive a certificate to take home together with a small token. Social learning theorists believe that seeing peers get rewarded for these positive attributes motivates the learner to imitate the positive behaviours. John would get rewarded when he

demonstrated an effort to contribute during a class discussion or responded to the class teacher's questions.

Class rules were discussed with pupils at the beginning of the year to encourage ownership of them. Using a behaviourist approach, a traffic light system was used. Each pupil had a peg with his name on it and started on green at the beginning of the day. If a child managed to keep his peg on green throughout the day, his reward would be participating in the 10 minutes of free play with class toys, at the end of the day. Each time a pupil did not follow the rules his peg would move down the traffic lights resulting in a consequence of three minutes less playtime, 6 minutes less or no extra playtime at all. Each time the latter occurs, one of the adults would discuss with the students whose extra playtime was reduced, how they can avoid the same consequence on the next day. The next morning all pegs start at green again. The consequence was a demotivator for negative behaviour. John had to move his peg from time to time and was quite disappointed with the consequence, however as time went by he would remind himself about how he managed to keep his peg on green for long periods of time.

Vygotsky's theory says that the child's higher mental processes are developed through the child working with other more knowledgeable persons than themselves. (Kozulin, 2003) In the classroom the pupils were seated at islands in groups of five. Each group had children with different abilities. This was to encourage them to work together and contribute to each other's learning through their own performance and observation of the performance of others. John benefitted from this seating arrangement since being in a

smaller group he felt less anxious to contribute and participate. Having a confident and outspoken pupil seated close by gave him the opportunity to observe interaction and eventually partake in conversations too.

Within these small groups students worked independently on their classwork. Students with higher academic ability were given opportunities to work extra worksheets of a higher level, or to aid a struggling peer. This would reinforce relationships and also reduce the possibility of boredom. Initially John used to get frustrated when peers finished their task before him, so it was important for him to see that others are still working till he is finished. Eventually he would look forward to a peer contributing to aiding him finish his task when needed. Midway through the scholastic year he used to look forward to having the opportunity to help his peers who needed support and he would do so by sharing his support materials provided by the teaching team.

The class teacher's lesson plans were set keeping in mind the multiple intelligences learning theory. Most lessons followed a pattern - present a visual or pose a question to create curiosity and promote a discussion about what they think the topic would be. This would be followed by a song or video clip related to the topic. Next the teacher would deliver the lesson explanation with the help of a powerpoint presentation, providing visuals related to it. An activity on the interactive board would follow to reinforce the explanation and assess understanding of the pupils; this would often be accompanied by an activity using the visuals provided for the lesson. A group work activity will be the final step before the written classwork. The lesson will be rounded up by a quick recall and explanation of homework

related to the topic. John would pay attention to the lesson and participate actively (as he became more confident). The fact that each activity was short and specific made it easier for him to maintain his attention. He would have his own set of visuals matching those of the class teacher to reinforce his learning experience.

In this group-work setting of the classroom, the pupils cooperate to explore possible answers or creations and present them to the rest of the class. To help overcome his shyness, John often required verbal prompting and encouragement to give his contribution. Constructivist theorists believe that “ Cooperative learning, hands-on activities, discovery learning, differentiated instruction, technology, distributed practice, critical thinking, and manipulatives are elements that embrace the constructivist educational philosophy” (White-Clark, et al., 2008, p. 41).

One of John’s greatest challenges during the scholastic year was participating on stage in front of an audience. This was primarily due to his shyness and anxiety when speaking. Initially a social story was prepared which included pictures of him on stage during rehearsals. John’s speaking part on stage was chosen to be brief and simple, and towards the middle of the performance, so as not to increase the anxiety to an already stressful situation. In this way, John was able to observe his peers and model his performance on theirs. He was given opportunities to vocalise his part using the microphone on his own and in front of his classmates several times, before performing in front of a hall of spectators. Having John model his performance on that of his peers is a social learning approach. John was

eager to receive praise from his teachers and from his peers for his efforts. He had the opportunity to take part in a class stage performance 4 times during the scholastic year, and each time his performance improved significantly making him feel more confident to do his part the following time. Reinforcement, or the belief that it will be forthcoming, affects performance rather than learning. (Schunk, 2012)

Upon completing curriculum/syllabus objectives in class, the students were assessed. This was done through individual oral assessments, observations during class work and written worksheets. These assessments measure observable behaviour of learning. This behaviourist approach allowed the teaching team to recognise which students required more reinforcement of particular topics. The pupils referred to this task as 'secret work' - John was eager to carry out this work particularly when it was a written task. During oral individual assessments, John performed better with a teacher he was more confident with.

Schemas were also beneficial with John. This was presented in the form of a personalised book which presented the daily routines of different parts of the school day. It was also used to prepare pre-tasks for special activities or educational excursions to prevent anxiety build up. This book was taken home for John to explain various aspects of his school day to his family.

Theories are not universal and do not work for every student. Today's teacher must be able to cater for the diverse needs of a mixed ability classroom. One cannot have a 'one size fits all' attitude and must

understand that the theories do not give solutions, but they direct attention to the variables that lead to the solutions to reach the students' full potential. (Hill, 2002)