

A learning theory

Education



In order for teachers to plan and enable learning teachers first must understand the theories and principles that underpin them. A learning theory is an attempt to describe how students learn; therefore trying to help understand the complex process of learning. There are three main categories or philosophical frameworks in which learning theories fall; Behaviourism, cognitive and humanists. This essay is divided into five sections each section I then link into how I apply these theories into teaching.

Behaviourism

Pavlov is one of the best known behaviourists in his field; he studied the behaviour of dogs by using conditioning. He linked sound to food which caused salivation. After numerous attempts the dog would salivate at the sound when no food was present. This is classical conditioning. Reece and Walker states: " Skinner placed great importance on operant conditioning where an operant is a series of actions which the learner completes" (Reece and Walker, 2007, p. 83).

Operant conditioning is more of a humanistic approach where praise and reinforcement is given to encourage learning. I apply this when working with my students in many different ways the main one is positive reinforcement which each one of my learners is given after each assessment. Quite a large number of my students lose motivation due to them deploying on operational tours for up to 9 months at a time I motivate them by reviewing previous learning and setting new targets.

Cognitivism Reece and Walker (2007) suggest that cognitivists do not just receive information but they create a pattern of what it means to them. This

is also identified in Kolbs model see appendix 1. This means to me that learners need to take in and analyse the results then use their own experience's to come up with new ideas on how to make the task better. When carrying out assessments with my learners I will ask probing questions so that the learner really has to cognise about the answer. When the learner suggests an answer we will then have a discussion on how they think the assessment went and could things have been completed any differently to produce better results.

Humanism

Reece and Walker (2007) state that the humanistic approach is based on the theory that learning is individual. This is also justified in Maslow's hierarchy of human needs see appendix 2. Mcleod (2007) writes that Maslow suggests that certain needs must be met before learning can be achieved once those basic needs are met then you can move up the ladder to achieve more effective learning. I agree with this theory and believe a quiet, clean, defined, and positive environment, with access to resources and an articulate Instructor versus a noisy, cluttered, eclectic environment with limited resources and a stressed Instructor will achieve far superior result. The learning environment has a profound effect, but is sometimes overlooked, by providing a safe, warm, and hospitable environment the sole focus of the students mind on the instructor. Petty (2004) suggests that if environmental factors are not correct learning will be found difficult.

Adult learning

Smith (2002) claims Knowles popularised the word andragogy which refers to methods and techniques for teaching adults. The term means leader of men as a pose to pedagogy which mean leader of children. Knowles came up with a theory that includes six key principles that help adults four to begin with and two more as his theory developed learn these are.

1. Adults need to know why, what and how they are learning and what the benefits are. I do this with my learner's on the induction and every twelve weeks when they have their progress review this is done by setting goals and plans so that the learner is up to speed with their progress at all times throughout their award.

2. Their self-concept is important. They often wish to be autonomous and self-directing. I take this into account at the start of the learners programme by giving them the option of choosing their own units for their award.

3. Their prior experience is influential. It can be used as a resource for current learning. It can also shape attitudes to current learning. All of my learner's will have some form of prior knowledge and life experience and I feel this is a powerful learning tool when learning new things.

4. Readiness to learn is important. Adults usually learn best when something is of immediate value. This applies to my learners as they get a pay increase when they produce their certificate for their apprenticeship.

5. Adults often focus on solving problems in contexts or situations that are important to them. This is used a lot within the armed forces where command tasks are often used.

6. Motivation to learn tends to be based on the intrinsic value of learning and the personal pay-off. This is normally the case with my learners as they know at the end of the award they will have gained a qualification although this is not always the case some learners just want to complete for self-satisfaction.

I consider my students learning styles and ensure I use aids that are aural, visual and kinaesthetic. Petty (2004) implies that if learners are made aware of their preferred learning style then learning improves. During the induction phase I emphasise the fact that we have a 98.9% successful completion rate for our students i. e. nearly 99 out of 100 of our learner's achieve their level 2 functional skills. This provides positive reinforcement the message I am giving them is that they too will achieve this award. This positive reinforcement is continued throughout their learning journey, as a training officer I make myself available by mobile, email, and social networking sites in order to provide support, this is a two way process because not only does it make them feel valued but it definitely impacts on their results, which benefit me and my company. Functional skills

Functional skills provide students with essential knowledge skills and understanding that will enable them to operate confidently, effectively and independently. Effective literacy, numeracy and IT skills are critical, not just to the achievement of qualifications, but also to enhance performance in the workplace and in personal and social life. As a company who delivers funded training we carry out core skills testing at the initial assessment stage of our programme and dependant on the results we can offer advice and direction to our learners on where and how they can access help.

We also incorporate functional skills into our programme in a variety of ways that are relevant to the subject we are teaching and the vocational qualification our learners are undertaking. Smith (2004) refers to Rogers' ideas on 'learner centred education' I feel this is what Vocational Skills Programme are all about. The NVQ programme I facilitate requires a formal initial assessment with each learner and includes literacy and numeracy skills testing; learning styles questionnaire and identification of prior learning/knowledge. This information is used to design an individual learning plan in which the learner actively participates.

Conclusion

Since I started the DTTL course I have become aware of many different theories on how learners learn and one common factor has become apparent through this process all learner's learn in different ways each learner learns in their own unique way and in order to meet their learning styles I need to design my lessons to involve a variety of methods that meet as many styles as possible, variety being the key. I have therefore made a conscious effort to incorporate differentiation in my teaching practice in order to assist my learner's progress.