

The curious incident of the dog in the night-time



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ You live and learn. At any rate, you live,” said Douglas Adams. In other words, he is saying that you are going to live anyway, so make life worth it by learning. Most people learn how to do things or how to act in certain situations by direct experiences, but given a human’s short lifespan, it is unlikely that a person will learn everything by experience. There is no doubt that direct experience is one of the best ways of learning, but it is impossible to experience everything first hand. This is where vicarious learning comes in; through which people learn simply by observing and modelling.

This should not sound new to anyone because people have always been learning implicitly, they just never realised it. Then imagine how much people will be able to learn if they started to observe actively. So, let’s find out how observational learning occurs. Albert Bandura, a renowned psychologist from Stanford University, wrote, “ In the social learning system, new patterns of behaviour can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behaviour of others. ” Learning by direct experience literally means to learn by trial and error, which is the most familiar way of learning.

On the other hand, implicit learning occurs when someone enlightens himself by observing someone else’s action and its consequences. Bandura further explains that there are four steps to learning implicitly: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. First, a person must pay attention to the model’s behaviour. Then, one must retain the model’s behaviour and have the necessary skills at one’s disposal. Finally, a person must be motivated to practice the behaviour and activate it into overt performance in order to learn implicitly.

With these steps, Bandura claims, “ virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experiences can occur on a vicarious basis. ” The famous “ Bobo Doll Experiment” conducted by Albert Bandura clearly shows that behaviours can be learned through observation. Commenting on the experiment, Bandura explains: The model pummelled the doll with a mallet, lunged it in the air, kicked it repeatedly, and threw it down and beat it. Exposure to aggressive modelling increased attraction to guns even though it was never modelled. The guns had less appeal to children who had no exposure to aggressive modelling.

The children also picked up the hostile language. The children in the control group, who had no exposure to the aggressive modelling never exhibited the novel forms of aggression. (Bandura, 1961) From the experiment, Bandura shows how far just watching other people influenced someone’s behaviour. The experiment involved children who were left to watch an adult model beat up the bobo doll, and every child exposed to an aggressive model reproduced the violent behaviour, especially when the model was of the same sex; boys copied male models and girls copied female models.

Those who watched adults play gentle with the doll never showed any aggression. Simply put, children did what they saw; children learned a new behaviour implicitly. A germane example of this can also be found in Mark Haddon’s celebrated book, “ The curious incident of the dog in the night-time” (2004). In Haddon’s novel, Christopher, the protagonist, shows both types of learning as he investigates the death of a poodle named Wellington. Christopher admires Sherlock Holmes, and he himself sets out to investigate who killed the dog.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-curious-incident-of-the-dog-in-the-night-time/>

However, Christopher is a boy with “ special needs”, suffering from mild autism and has trouble socialising. An excellent example of Christopher’s social incompetence is shown when Christopher explains that his mother is dead, to which he seems to be quite indifferent. Christopher obviously cares for his mother, as he wants to bring in meals for her and send her a get-well card when he hears that she is hospitalised. However, when he hears the news of his mother’s death, he diverts to discussing mundane details about heart attacks, and not a word is said about his feelings and emotions.

For instance, throughout the book Christopher never talks about his mother’s absence from the household and the influence it had on him and his father. Instead, when his mother died, Christopher simply re-recorded his life, giving no roles for his mother to play in it in order to cope with the loss. Although Christopher is illustrated to be emotionless, he shows signs of implicit learning about emotions after his mother’s death. When mother is supposedly dead, Mrs. Shears, the neighbour, comes over and cooks for Christopher and Father.

Then Mrs. Shears came over and cooked supper for us... And Father was sitting down and she stood next to him and held his head against her bosoms and said, “ Come on, Ed. We’re going to get you through this. ” (Haddon, 2004, p. 28) Haddon shows how Christopher, while lacking personal emotions and feelings about his mother’s death, observes Father’s pain and anger, which allows Christopher to describe the emotions about the incident. Father obviously tries to hide his emotions from his son, but Christopher witnessing Father leaning against Mrs.

Shears' bosoms shows the emotional toll the whole incident had on Father. Whether or not his mother's death had a similar emotional effect on Christopher remains unclear, but for Christopher, observing Father's pain and anger allowed him to describe the emotion of the event that he could not do alone to the readers. This ties in very well with Albert Bandura's claim about implicit learning. Man's capacity to learn by observation enables him to acquire large, integrated units of behaviour by example without having to build up patterns gradually by tedious trial and error.

Similarly, emotional responses can be developed observationally by witnessing the affective reactions of others undergoing painful or pleasurable experiences. (Bandura, 1971, p. 2) Bandura shows that a person can learn emotional responses by observing others, which is exactly what Christopher does. By seeing his father sad and frustrated with the absence of his mother, Christopher understands that the situation is a sad one and tries to get this mood across to the reader.

Although his autism stops him from completely focussing on his mother's death, Christopher without a doubt learned when and how to feel sad and angry imply by observing. Christopher riding the tube for the first time and observing other people from a photo booth to find out how the tube works is another good example of vicarious learning. And I did detecting by watching and I saw that people were putting tickets into gray gates and walking through. And some of them were buying tickets at big black machines on the wall. And I watched 47 people do this and I memorised what to do. (Haddon, 2004, p. 173) Haddon shows how Christopher was able to pick up and

understand what to do in order to ride the tube simply by observing the behaviours of other people.

This ties in perfectly with Albert Bandura's idea of vicarious learning. First, Christopher paid attention to other people using the tube. Then Christopher retained the behaviour by memorising the routine. Lastly, Christopher was motivated to get to his mother's home and acted out the newly learnt behaviour, completing the prerequisite for vicarious learning. Christopher was then able to learn how to use the tube by monitoring what other people were doing. The following passage from Albert Bandura's social learning theory further supports the claim that Christopher's learning is a vicarious one.

People can represent external influences symbolically and later use such representations to guide their actions; they can solve problems symbolically without having to enact the various alternatives; and they can foresee the probable consequences of different actions and alter their behaviour accordingly. These higher mental processes permit both insightful and foresightful behaviour. (Bandura, 1971, p. 2) According to Bandura, Christopher modelled what others were doing, and by doing so, he symbolically represented their actions and memorised it.

Then, based on the model, he altered the behaviour accordingly, such as imagining a red line leading him to the ticketing machine so that he could carry out the same behaviour. Observation allowed Christopher to gain an insightful and foresightful behaviour. The direct learning is also portrayed in The curious incident of the dog in the night-time. Christopher, like any

teenager of his age, rebels against his father and seeks to be independent. I decided that I was going to find out who killed Wellington even though Father had told me to stay out of other people's business.

This is because I do not always do what I am told. ... So I decide for myself what I am going to do and what I am not going to do. (Haddon, 2004, pp. 28~29, 30) Haddon shows how Christopher is quite determined to achieve independence. However, because of his condition, Christopher cannot be as independent as he desires. He finds it difficult understanding people, handling new environments, going to new places, and, ironically, making decisions. Initially Christopher tries to achieve independence by disobeying his father and continuing with the murder investigation.

During the investigation, Christopher gets out of his comfort zone and starts to talk to complete strangers, in hope of finding Wellington's killer. Although he does not improve much from this murder investigation and ends up running away when Mrs. Alexander asks him to come inside, it still is a big step for Christopher as he starts to experience how to deal with strangers. Solving Wellington's murder forces Christopher to be independent, to talk to strangers, and it eventually gives him confidence that he is able to solve problems on his own.

The frightening trip to London is another example of Christopher learning by experience. Christopher does not feel comfortable around many people, and going to new places is one of his biggest fears as too much new information floods in, forcing him to cuddle into a ball and block out the outside world. Therefore, his trip to London by himself is a huge step towards

independence. This supports Albert Bandura's theory about learning by direct experience. The more rudimentary form of learning, rooted in direct experience, is largely governed by the rewarding and punishing consequences that follow any given action.

People are repeatedly confronted with situations with which they must deal in one way or another. Some of the responses that they try prove unsuccessful, while others produce more favourable effects. Through this process of differential reinforcement successful modes of behaviour are eventually selected from exploratory activities, while ineffectual ones are discarded. (Bandura, 1971, p. 3) Bandura is saying that people learn directly by trial and error and eventually select the behaviours that produce successful results. Christopher used to avoid any situation that posed him any challenge.

However, in order to get to his mother's place in London, he had to face every uncomfortable situation he feared. Getting to his mother's home is the reward and the action Christopher had to take to get this reward was to face his fears and become independent. For Christopher this reward was his biggest motivation, and "successful modes of behaviour" were selected. The trip consists of everything Christopher finds uncomfortable, and by successfully making his way to mother's home, Christopher finally learns how to be independent and gains confidence that will allow him to face any challenge on his own.

Sherlock Holmes once said, "You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear." (Doyle, 1892, p. 162) Holmes, as a detective always

learns and derives new information by observing. Although slightly different in meaning, the fundamental mechanism of learning by observation is the same. In the novel, Christopher matures mentally through both direct and vicarious learning, and by completing the trip to London, Christopher learned how to handle the obstacles of his life, allowing him to move on to the next phase of life.

Though it may seem like Christopher was able to learn from his experience because of his condition, remember what he says in the book: that everyone has “special needs”. In other words, nobody is perfect. Therefore, it is safe to say that there is always some room left for someone to learn, whether it is by direct experience or implicit experience. For better or worse, people must make an effort to continuously improve and progress, or at least take a look around and actively observe. It will not always be easy, but at least someone will learn something new and make more of already short life.