

Learning Theories: From Divine to Mortals

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Learning is a fascinating journey, a puzzle waiting to be solved. It's like piecing together a complex jigsaw, with each theory offering a unique piece of the puzzle. As an educator, I have come to appreciate three fundamental learning theories that have shaped the way we understand the process of acquiring knowledge: behaviourism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism.¹ Let's embark on this enlightening voyage through the world of learning.

First, there is behaviourism.² Imagine knowledge as something external, waiting to be absorbed like a sponge soaking up water. In behaviourism, learners are like blank canvases, waiting for the right stimuli to shape their behaviour. It is like training soldiers; actions are repeated, words of encouragement are spoken, and rewards are offered. While this method may work well in military training, it is not the ideal approach for children or adults in optimal learning environments. After all, we are more than just passive recipients of information; we are thinkers and creators.

Cognitivism, on the other hand, treats learners as active processors of information.³ Think of your mind as a supercomputer, with intricate processes happening internally. Unlike the blank slate of behaviourism, cognitivism recognizes the complexity of human thought. It is not just about stimuli; it is about thinking and reorganizing information. Learning occurs as we find new explanations or adapt old ones. This theory is the birthplace of concepts like cognitive load theory and schema theory. However, it has its limitations, as it tends to overlook the impact of the social environment and individual differences.

Now, let's delve into Constructivism, a theory that views learners as architects of their own knowledge.⁴ We are not blank slates; we bring our unique experiences and prior knowledge to the table. Learning, in this context, is about building upon what we already know. We assimilate new information and accommodate it into our existing mental structures. It is like adding new bricks to a constantly evolving mental structure. Teachers in this approach play interactive roles, guiding learners as they construct their understanding. I have always been intrigued by how these theories have

been part of human inquiry for centuries. Plato himself pondered, "How does an individual learn something new?" It is not a new question; it is an age-old quest for understanding. Learning theories have been attributed to various scholars throughout history, from Kohler and Vygotsky to Piaget and Bloom. But it is essential to remember that these theories are not rigid boxes; they often overlap and complement each other.

In my academic journey, I have found inspiration in the wisdom of the Quran. It invites us to think critically, to learn through thinking (cognitivism) and doing (experiential), and to draw lessons from the experiences and fates of previous generations (behaviourism). It is a call to engage our minds and hearts in the pursuit of knowledge. The first verse revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is: "Read (O Prophet), in the name of your Lord, Who, created: created man from a clot of congealed (clotted) blood".⁵ Here we see an invitation to think critically based upon "creation of a new human" the unique power of the creator (Allah/Lord).

Beyond religious texts, there are pearls of wisdom from Confucius and Aristotle.⁶ "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand," says Confucius, emphasizing the importance of experience in learning. Aristotle adds, "For the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing." These ancient insights resonate with constructivism, where hands-on experience is key.

But let's face the reality of education. In an ideal world, every teacher would prefer a student cantered approach in small groups, fostering interaction and providing hands on experiences. Unfortunately, the real world comes with stakeholders like departments, curriculum committees, and educational authorities. Teachers often find themselves with one hand tied. It is a balancing act between theory and practice. As you embark on your academic journey, remember that learning is not a one size fits all endeavor. It is a dynamic process influenced by various factors. Embrace the principles of behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism as tools in your toolkit. Think critically, learn by doing, and construct your unique

understanding of the world.

In your pursuit of knowledge, do not forget the rich tapestry of learning theories that have shaped education throughout history. They are not just abstract concepts but practical guides on your path to academic excellence. So, as you explore new horizons, keep these theories in mind, and let them be your compass in the ever-evolving landscape of learning.

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