

Learning Theories: EDU 421

Stephanie E. Hauf

University of Mary

Learning Theories: EDU 421

Learning and knowing a variety of learning theories can help teachers become more effective in their classrooms and aid students in the learning process. This paper will cover three learning theories: Behaviorism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism. First, this paper will give an overview of each theory, its importance in the classroom, and some examples of classroom policies and practices that fit within each theory. Then I will discuss how each theory fits into my teaching philosophy and how it will be applied in my future social studies classroom.

Theories

Behaviorist

Behaviorism is a teacher-centered approach (Yilmaz, 2011). Behaviorism is based on “objectively observable and measurable teacher and student behaviors through a stimulus-response framework” (Yilmaz, 2011). This means measurable student behaviors are addressed strategically by the teacher. Implementation of behaviorism includes consequences, rewards, and proactive planning on the part of the teacher. The teacher attempts to motivate students extrinsically. Some general classroom practices that follow from behaviorist theory include utilizing proximity for off-task students, movement for all students, or rewards for good behavior such as dropping the lowest grade on homework at the end of the semester. These teacher actions do influence student behavior and may decrease instances of misbehavior or stress in the classroom, but they do not motivate students intrinsically to learn or work harder.

Cognitivist

Cognitivism is a theory which explains how students learn best; how their brain receives, processes, and stores information. Teachers must connect information to what students already know. For cognitivism to work, “Instructional materials should include demonstrations,

illustrative examples, and constructive feedback so that students can have mental models to embody” (Yilmaz, 2011). The cognitivist theory requires the teacher to present material in an organized, coherent way, and provide opportunities for students to rehearse and apply their learning while connecting it to what they already know. This approach is student-centered, with modeling as one valuable method of teaching that shows students how to succeed on tasks they are asked to perform (Yilmaz, 2011).

Constructivist

The constructivist learning theory is based on the idea that each individual constructs their own meaning and understanding in the world through their own experiences. Making learning relevant to students’ lives by allowing them to build on their prior knowledge aligns with constructivism (Bevevino et al, 1999). One of the best ways to involve students in their learning is to provide them with experience completing hands-on projects. The activities must pique curiosity in the student by appealing to former learning, asking questions, and then allowing students to build on this knowledge by exploring their interests using critical thinking and inquiry (Bevevino, et al, 1999). Hands-on projects allow students to apply their learning to their world in a meaningful way they will remember.

Classroom Application

While behaviorism is not the most desirable learning theory because it attempts to motivate students extrinsically rather than intrinsically, it is necessary to have some elements of behaviorism in the classroom. Behaviorism can help routines to develop in the classroom and make expectations clear. Classroom management strategies such as proximity are useful for addressing student behavior without directly calling out or embarrassing the student. I will utilize behaviorism in my classroom through policies such as allowing students a free pass on one

homework assignment per semester or allowing students to choose their own partners or groups for certain assignments. I plan to use movement throughout my classroom to encourage students to raise their hands and ask questions and to keep all students on task. Establishing routines and clear expectations for student behavior is the most important way I will utilize behaviorism in my classroom.

Cognitivism will be a useful tool in my classroom for helping my students learn effectively. One part of cognitivism that comes naturally to me is organization. Presenting material in an order that makes sense is one thing I will do in my classroom, along with providing overarching themes that connect information to prior learning. Emphasis will be placed on the most important concepts rather than the small details, focusing on the material students will be expected to recall in the future. This can be important in a social studies classroom, so students don't feel overwhelmed or bogged down by trying to memorize dates and names, but rather feel excited about how everything in social studies is connected. I also plan to incorporate student-centered review into my classroom throughout every unit to allow students to review the most important information from each day and bring forth their questions and ideas before assessments to receive feedback.

In my social studies classroom, constructivism will be an important tool for engaging students and allowing them to take ownership of their learning. I like the idea of using projects where students can dig into what truly interests them about the topic. Hands-on projects are generally seen as a way to engage students primarily in science but can be used in social studies as well through simulations, role-play activities, or PBL. An example of an activity I would have students complete that follows constructivism is having students in a government class research a topic they are curious about, establish an informed opinion, and then write (and send) a letter to

whomever it concerns, such as a principal, school board member, or even state representative. Students should be able to bring their own experiences and what is important to them into my classroom.

Conclusion

Knowledge of different learning theories as well as strategies for incorporating them in a classroom setting is important for all educators to have as part of their pedagogical knowledge. These learning theories help educators become effective classroom managers and student motivators. Understanding learning theories means understanding how students learn best, and what role a teacher should play in that learning. Behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism are three theories I plan to incorporate into my future social studies classroom because of the known benefits of their implementation.

References

- Bevevino, M. M., Dengel, J., & Adams, K. (1999). Constructivist Theory in the Classroom: Internalizing Concepts through Inquiry Learning. *Clearing House*, 72(5), 275–278.
- Yilmaz, K. (2011). The Cognitive Perspective on Learning: Its Theoretical Underpinnings and Implications for Classroom Practices. *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 84(5), 204–212.