

Applications Of Socio-Cultural And Behaviorist Perspectives In Educational Settings

Posted on October 16, 2019

Several concepts and notions affect how teachers and students undertake teaching and learning. As it turns out many theories from psychology, especially educational psychology, are helpful in improving the processes of teaching and learning in classroom settings, etc. In modern classrooms, not a single theory but a combination of multiple theories is being applied to make the practice of teaching and learning even more effective. Moreover, which theories to apply and which not to in a particular educational setting largely depends upon the characteristics of that setting, the cognitive level of the students, ethnicity, gender, abilities, etc.

Learning is a complex process. There are plenty of factors affecting the possible outcomes of our efforts to make it as easy as possible. Moreover, there is an immense probability that the mode we choose to practice and the theories or techniques that we choose to apply in making education easy to deliver as well as easy to acquire may very well change the whole process and its outcomes. Because there are some theories right now that reflect the techniques that can be used or applied in educational settings, choosing between them isn't as easy. Over time, educationalists and psychologists have studied, applied and criticized different perspectives of pedagogy encompassing different theories. From a psychoanalytic to humanistic perspective, there has been a lot of research and discussion on numerous possible modes or methods.

Socio-Cultural And Behaviorist Perspective

What I would like to discuss here is the *"Socio-cultural Perspective"* (sometimes also called Social Constructivist Perspective) and *"Behaviorist Perspective."* One of the reasons that these perspectives should be discussed in great detail is their enormous prevalence in educational settings in the contemporary era. In fact, most successful teachers, especially in primary schools, use some teaching techniques originating from either the sociocultural perspective or the behaviorist perspective, or even a combination of both.

The defining difference between the sociocultural perspective and the behavioral perspective is the way they try to make changes in the individual, enabling him or them to learn something new. Socio-cultural theorists like *Lev Vygotsky* and *Jerome Bruner* are more concerned about changes in *"what students think,"* while behaviorist theorists are more concerned about *"what students do."* So, the difference between these two perspectives is rough and vague. The reason is that no teacher wants to deal with the *"thinking"* aspect of the change alone. What students *"do"* is also important and

consequential. For example, when someone is learning to drive, they are more concerned with what they “do” instead of what they “think.” Similarly, If someone is about to cook his first meal or is learning to cook, he will be more concerned about his “ability” to cook rather than his “knowledge and understanding” of the recipe. Thus most of the educational settings use both socio-cultural mode and behaviorist mode in conjunction (Shabani, 2016).

Behaviorist Perspective: What Students ‘Do’

Behaviorist perspective or paradigm of learning focuses on “*an observable change in behavior*” – i.e., changes in how people act or behave. In the examples given above, the focus is on “behavior” rather than “thoughts.” But it doesn’t necessarily mean that it will focus on behavior every single time or that what is desired indefinitely is the change in behavior. The changes in the thinking of the student are of equal importance. However, the behaviorist mode of teaching and learning is undoubtedly way more useful when it comes to observing student behavior and predicting the consequences that follow and the possible behavior after the results shape it. Similarly, behaviorist mode explains with clarity the difference between learning from observing others and learning with the help of others because these two are entirely different. The most influential theories applicable in educational settings originated from a behavioral perspective are the Operant Conditioning and Social Learning Theory.

1. Operant Conditioning: Changing Behavior Through Consequences

Operant conditioning is one of the widely applied theories in education settings and is concerned with how the consequences of behavior change the behavior with time. Although this phenomenon was first studied on animals, not humans, it is equally applicable to human beings as well. This theory was proposed by Harvard professor B.F. Skinner. The original experiment consisted of a famous “Skinner box” where he positively reinforced a rat in the box to press a lever that would release a small pellet of food, and this pleasant consequence strengthened the behavior of the rat over time.

Skinner called these food pellets “*Reinforcers*” and the pressing lever “*Operant*.” Reinforcement could either be positive or negative. Similarly, there is a concept of punishment as well that, unlike reinforcers, decreases the likelihood of a behavior occurring again. Punishment could also be either positive or negative (Skinner, 1990).

Application In Educational Settings

There are some techniques that can be derived from operant conditioning and applied in educational settings. They originate from several fundamental concepts that are a part of the theory of Skinner.

Extinction

It is the extinction of an operant behavior due to a lack of reinforcement. For example, a student who stops receiving praise from the teacher for helping other students in the class may end up helping other students at all.

Generalization

It is the generalization of behaviors similar to operant in the hope of getting the consequence associated with the original operant behavior. For example, a boy who gets an appreciation for reading textbooks at home may also try to read other than his textbooks in the hope of getting a similar appreciation.

Discrimination

It is the ability not to generalize behaviors that are similar to operant. Discrimination results from the extinction of non-operant behaviors when they are not reinforced. For example, the boy may get reinforcement for reading textbooks but not for reading other books. In this way, the non-operant behavior will become extinct.

There are plenty of other examples of the application of operant conditioning, like *Contracts and Agreements* – where the learner and teacher agree on how the learner will behave and what he will get for it, and *Scheduling* – the process through which the reinforcements are scheduled. Research suggests that intermittent or irregular schedules take longer for the behavior to be learned, but at the same time, these behaviors are more difficult to extinct. (Ferster, et al., 1997; Mazur, 2005). Similarly, *Shaping* – reinforcing the behavior close to the desired operant to get the operant, *Cuing* – giving cues to initiate the operant, and *Token Economy* – reinforcing with a token that represents a reward are also examples of how this theory is being applied in educational settings.

2. Social Learning Theory: Changing Behavior Through Observation

Social learning theory is concerned with the behavioral change that takes place by observing others – people in our society, our parents, peers, and teachers. This theory was proposed by Albert Bandura, who agrees with other behaviorists on the conditioning phenomenon and the connection between stimulus and response. However, he adds two more points to the behaviorist subject matter;

1. Mediating processes are present between stimuli and response.
2. Our behavior is changed by observing the behavior of others.

According to a study, when customers at a restaurant were given ranking information of the five most

popular dishes, the demand for those dishes increased by 13 to 20 percent (Cai, Chen, Fang, 2009). The reason was that the customers thought those dishes were frequently chosen by others. So if others had chosen them, they had to choose them too. It can very well be referred to as indirect observational learning.

Application And Educational Settings

There are several ways in which observational learning can be applied in educational settings or classrooms;

Flipped Classrooms

Flipped classrooms reverse the orthodox learning environment by instructing online, outside of the classroom. While the activities considered as homework are done in the class.

Role Plays

It is altering one's behavior to assume a specific role. The rationale is that the assumed role is to be learned, and by performing and observing others perform it, students are more likely to learn it.

Socio-Cultural Perspective: What Students 'THINK'

Although behaviorist techniques allow us to change what students do, 'sometimes we are also concerned with what a student 'thinks.' The *Constructivist Perspective* deals with the same question. However, constructivism is of two types;

1. Psychological Constructivism – Learning by mentally organizing new information or experiences.
2. Social Constructivism (or Socio-cultural Perspective) – Learning by interacting with other individuals who are more knowledgeable

Here, we are concerned with Social Constructivism, also referred to as the Socio-cultural perspective. The socio-cultural theorists suggest that we learn by getting *assistance* from others and *mediation* by a knowledgeable person is important for learning.

Vygotsky once said, "Through others, we become ourselves," which is the essence of the sociocultural perspective.

Most of the work in this area was done by Bruner and Vygotsky. Their theories and their implications are still widespread across the educational globe (Vygotsky, Rieber, & Hall, 1998).

1. Instructional Scaffolding

Jerome Bruner first coined the term *Instructional Scaffolding*. It is the process through which the instructor supports the learner by mediating. The rationale is that if the instructor guides the learner instead of helping him do it, the learner is more likely to develop an understanding than if he was left alone to learn by himself or if the instructor helped him do the thing. Just like the scaffolding around a building provides support until the building is built, instructional scaffolding also provides support to the learner until he learns, without a part of that learning.

2. Discovery Learning

Discovery learning is an inquiry-based, sociocultural learning theory that concerns problem-solving circumstances where the learner uses his knowledge and experience to find out or “*discover*” the possible solutions to the given problem. It was also proposed by Jerome Bruner.

Students are given a situation and are asked to manipulate the situation or experiment with it until they reach a possible solution. However, unguided discovery learning is not as beneficial as guided discovery learning. According to a study done on the students of a lower-division biology course, where unguided learning is not as effective, guided discovery learning is effective in promoting students’ achievement. (Wilke & Straits, 2001)

3. Zone Of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Suppose a boy who has played very little football will start to play better if ‘*guided*’ by a coach who plays better than him. According to Vygotsky, this difference between solo performance and assisted performance is called the zone of proximal development or ZPD. “*From this social constructivist perspective, learning is like assisted performance.*” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Initially, the skill or knowledge was found in the coach. He was motivated to help. So, he arranged situations and circumstances where his knowledge and skills were transferred to the player.

Application In Educational Settings

Socio-cultural perspective has uncountable applications in educational settings. Here are some of the teaching/learning techniques inspired by this perspective.

Dialogic Teaching

It is a specific style of teaching where “*Dialogue*” is the center of all activity. The teacher makes sure that the students take part in the dialogue with the teacher and their peers. Research indicates that

the dialogic teaching/learning method was inspired and evolved by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (Petrova, 2013).

Inclusive Education

A careful reading of his works (1062, 1978) suggests that Lev Vygotsky was one of the first advocates of inclusive education for infants and toddlers.

Spiral Curriculum

Bruner gave the idea that the curriculum should be organized in such a way that it is neither too hard nor too easy for the learner. This idea is being implemented in educational settings in the form of a spiral curriculum.

Discovery-Based Projects

Based on Bruner's theory of discovery learning, discovery-based projects are a big part of today's instructional style. However, these projects must be guided with scaffolding.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that these two paradigms are indeed very comprehensive in enhancing teaching and learning in educational settings, they are still used in concurrence by most instructors. In the end, it depends upon the immediate need of the instructor and the student that the learning is more concerned with changes in behavior or changes in thinking and knowledge. Depending upon the need, optimal techniques can be used to maximize the effectiveness of the instructor and make sure the learner not only comprehends the knowledge but is also able to apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate it.

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