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The Promise of Education: Knowledge-Banking On Your Future

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Design and Implementation of Instructional Strategies for Information Professionals

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion of two instructional strategies—behaviorism and cognitive learning. The emphasis is on determining the effective and ineffective portions of these teaching models. The author provides first-hand experiences in employing and receiving instruction based on these theories as well as corroboration from notable academics in the field. A brief discussion of the symbiotic relationship between theory and instructional strategy is touched upon in order to display understanding of how theory can lead to practical teaching. The overall purpose of the paper is to determine which theories lead to the best strategies and in turn to the ideal education model for students. The private conclusion of the author is that cognitive learning offers the greatest personal satisfaction and educational stimulus.
The Promise of Education: Knowledge-Banking On Your Future

Instructional theory has a lengthy history according to Thomas (1999)—“proactive instructional programs as an important part of library services began to evolve nearly 150 years ago,” (as cited by Weiss, 2004, p. 233). However, not every instructional theory which led to a strategic program can be considered successful. For example there’s a term thrown around in reaction to the United States ideologies of capitalism and consumerism dubbed the “banking concept” of education by Freire (2002), (as cited by Elmborg, 2006, p. 193). In this model, “knowledge is treated as cultural and economic capital, and accruing knowledge equates to accruing wealth,” (193). Is this how education should be; a hoarding of resources for personal gain? There are a multitude of theories on how to best teach individuals; some of which include: behaviorism, cognitive learning, the social/situational model, and humanism. This paper will attempt to describe and judge the first two models cited and offer constructive criticism on their success rate. It will also discuss the difference between theory and strategy to put theory into practice.

Behaviorism

Behaviorist theory follows the stimulus-response model. This corresponds to the research of scientists like Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner. Learning is by doing repetitive actions in order to gain a reward. It thus has a built in reinforcement system for the knowledge-obtaining process. It is also known as “operant conditioning—reinforcing what you want people to do again; ignoring or punishing what you want people to stop doing.” (Smith, 1999a, n.p.) Two examples of this type of instruction which I have participated in are puppy house-training and elementary school homework. Puppies are
house-trained by leading them to do what you want—i.e. go to the bathroom outdoors. They are rewarded for a successful endeavor and either given nothing for accidents or confined to a crate. In elementary school, homework is dispersed and you receive positive reinforcement in the form of gold stars and stickers for completed work. Conditioning to desire approbation and the peer pressure of wanting to be the same as your classmates promotes the continued drive to complete homework and receive gold stars (and eventually grades).

I find this method to be slightly ineffective in that it requires the full cooperation of the subject for success, is time-consuming with a lengthy learning curve, and does not work on those who will not conform to societal norms. In order to be effective, the subject must really want a dog treat or gold star. Therefore it is effective but only up to a certain point and it does not allow for much independent thought and self-directed learning. Basically this model works on bribery and physical or verbal abuse. In order to be really effective the parameters for reward and punishment must be ratcheted up to higher and higher levels as a student ages into an ever more worldly and jaded individual.

**Cognitive learning**

The basis for cognitive learning follows the expectation that the individual will want to make discoveries. James Hartley (1998) is quoted as saying, “‘[L]earning results from inferences, expectations, and making connections. Instead of acquiring habits, learners acquire plans and strategies, and prior knowledge is important,’” (as cited by Smith, 1999b, n.p.). This model promotes research, investigation, and drawing conclusions on one’s own. The instruction model tends to be organized and structured in
order to focus the learning of the student; to quote Rubin (1977) the instructor should, “organize school work so that the student may be helped to discover his own capacities, aptitudes, and interests…” (as cited by Weiss, 2003, 240). Therefore, it also generally works best when the work is done “through activities that are meaningful to the learner,” where “learning puts students in situations where they must test and refine their thinking,” (Macklin, 2003, 496). My personal experience with the type of learning comes from time spent in undergraduate work onwards. The change from high school (assigned topics) to college (free choice topics within the subject of the class) was a big change in my research and educational experience. Prior to college classes, work was done on the basis of what the teacher wanted you to learn, college work generally let you focus your own interests and research topics which caught your attention.

This is my favorite model because I find self-directed research to be the most enjoyable. Teachers who allow students to pick their own research topics have always been my favorite and I find that I learn better and retain more when the subject matter is one that I am interested in having picked it myself. Therefore this to me is the most effective instructional model because it has built in organization models to guide the research and learning process but it allows for some freedom in the choice of subject matter. An example of one of my favorite experiences with this model came about when I took an English literature class on the Shellesys in undergrad. The professor allowed us to write our term paper comparing any two works of literature by a member of the Shelley extended family studied in class. I wrote my paper on *Valperga* by Mary Shelley and the poem “Prometheus Unbound” by Percy Bysshe Shelley. I also incorporated philosophical underpinnings learned in an Honors Philosophy course the same semester in order to
draw out the Marxist themes in the two works. Incorporating prior (or concurrent, in this case) knowledge and self-directed original research is the baseline of this model and that is why it is my favorite as it allows the student to build on ideas and gain new insights.

**Strategy versus theory**

This paper would not be complete without a brief diagnosis of the differences between theory and the strategies employed to carry them out. Theory is a rhetorical framework which defines a method of predicting how something will occur. It can predict behaviors and actions; it anticipates how a model will proceed. Strategy is the practical application of the theory in the real world. It is a test of sorts in order to determine the validity of the theory. In terms of instructional theory translating to strategy the goal is to create a successful program which is “integrated, relevant, ongoing, collaborative, and applied,” (Zabel, 2004, p. 20). Some academics argue that the best way in which to implement the strategy is in a credit course rather than a “one-shot bibliographic instruction,” (Owusu-Ansah, 2004, p. 9). This seems like the most logical and effective means by which to instruct users in information literacy. The American Library Association’s (ALA) Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) is in agreement and has produced a document which provides detailed instructional strategy to this end, (Association of College and Research Libraries, n.p.).

**Summary**

The paper highlighted three major instructional theories. Included in this brief survey were: behaviorism and cognitive learning models. The author also provided examples from personal experience and highlighted what was ineffective and effective on a personal level within these incidents. Finally a discussion of how one could
successfully apply the theory into strategic instruction was touched upon in order to gain a fully rounded picture of the entire process of learning.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of the paper I employed a quotation about learning as a “banking concept” of education through the lens of capitalism. I would like to reiterate my agreement that this method “trains students in the capitalist ethic, and they subsequently approach their education as consumers and passive receivers of knowledge rather than active agents shaping their own lives,” (Elmborg, 193). The fact that cognitive learning is my favorite model can be seen in the realization that it, unlike behaviorism, allows the learner to be an active agent in the pursuit of knowledge. Understanding the theories behind education is paramount to understanding the learning process. This knowledge is required in order to begin an understanding of how to instruct most effectively in order to produce learned students. Though my basic understanding of instructional theory is still developing, I am coming to grasp the central tenants of great teaching: to promote engaged learning leading to life-long learners with the competency to improve their own intellect and role within society. The ‘knowledge-banking’ concept is, perhaps, not completely flawed as long as it is followed not for materialistic gain but for self and communal improvement in the state of information globally.
References


