Perspectives on Learning

The process of learning and the cognitive and behavioral processes that guide it have been the subject of study for a number of years. As a result, theorists have postulated a number of theories regarding the learning process. Plato, Skinner, and Gestalt are three theorists in particular who presented their views on learning. While each theory is valid, I propose a different view.

For Plato, knowledge was an innate part of an individual’s framework, present even before birth (Phillips & Soltis, 1998). He theorized that when a human died, his or her soul was sent to be reborn. Before that rebirth, they drank from the Forgetful River (Phillips & Soltis, 1998). It is implied that those who drank too much would be ignorant in their new life and those who drank in moderation would recall what they had learned in their previous life. Therefore, Plato believed that all “learning was a process of recalling what the soul had already seen and observed” (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 10). Knowledge, then, came through remembering, not through being presented with new information. Where did Plato’s theory address teachers?

Plato believed that a teacher’s role was merely to aid the individual in remembering what they had already learned. In “The Simile of the Cave”, Plato outlined his belief that people are not as knowledgeable as they are in reality. Appearances are deceiving in the cave because humans are only able to see shadows of reality until they are released from their chains. Teaching facilitates
this; it is “the process of releasing people from the chains of ignorance” (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 11).

Philosophers such as Plato were not the only individuals interested in the complexities of learning. Behaviorists also studied and proposed their own theories. B.F. Skinner expounded on Thorndike’s stimulus/response model in his discovery that “an action or response does not have to be rewarded or reinforced every time it occurs” (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 27). An individual (or animal), however, can be conditioned to respond correctly in order to reinforce a positive behavior. Correct behavior warrants a reward. Just as Skinner taught pigeons to bowl and steer a guided missile, he theorized that teachers could stimulate their students to learn by reinforcing correct answers.

Practical use of this theory in the classroom means that teachers present material and give students questions. If the student gives a correct answer, “the learner receives immediate positive feedback” (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 28); this is coined “operant conditioning” (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 28). In the event that the answer is incorrect, he or she is given a remedial question. Teachers, also called “machines” in Skinner’s theory, present material and prompt students to the correct answer without giving it away. In this scenario, teachers are merely the facilitators of learning, using a more Socratic method of questioning in order to produce responses in their students. Rather than giving answers to students,
machines allow students to probe the question in order to come to their own conclusion. If that response is correct, they are rewarded.

Gestaltists have a different take on learning. Rather than Skinner’s view of operant conditioning, they believed that learning occurred through acts of insight (Phillips & Soltis, 1998). Wolfgang Kohler’s work with chimpanzees such as Sultan led him to believe that learning involves the manipulation of elements of a problem until the individual makes a connection; this is the “Aha” theory (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 7). Humans, just as chimpanzees, make connections due to meanings they derive from experiences. Sultan attempted to reach the banana using the means available to him, two separate sticks. It was not until his brain concocted the concept of pushing the sticks together that he was able to reach the banana. He utilized the past experience of each stick separately to realize that two sticks together would be a more useful tool to achieve his goal.

The Gestalt view on learning can be practically applied to the classroom by stating that environment has an impact on learning. If students are given the necessary tools to learn, there is a greater chance that they will glean something from the class. The process of learning is not merely about remembering knowledge from past lives or reinforcing the correct answer; instead, it is a product of the utilization and connection of tools in the learning environment to a useful meaning in the individual.
As a future educator, the issue of learning is of great importance to me. The views presented in this book offer a variety of perspectives on learning. However, I do not believe that one can be used over another and touted as the correct theory of learning. I believe that each philosopher, psychologist, and behaviorist provided intriguing insights into learning. Each took their own hypothesis, performed experiments, and postulated a theory.

Plato, Locke, the Gestaltists, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bandura all proposed their views on education, often feeding off the inadequacies in the previous researcher’s theory to formulate their own. While each theory is valid, I believe they only represent a part of the whole learning process. To say that humans can only remember what they have learned in a previous life is to limit his or her potential. By the same token, I do not believe that learning is conditioned due to the response of the educator or merely a light bulb going on when the setting is right.

I believe that true learning is experiential and fluid. It is not always the same and does not occur in all circumstances, even if the environment is the same. Teachers cannot create the perfect environment to force students to learn. It is the teacher’s role (and my goal) to create an environment where students feel comfortable exploring and challenging their own beliefs. True learning is not merely regurgitating known information; it is being cognizant of and delving into the world as we know it and deriving our own meanings. Cynthia L. Riley