

Fundamental Learning Theories:

An Exposition and Application

Trent Wiebusch

University of Mary

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Ideas shape culture, and in the culture of education, those ideas have the potency to change the very trajectory of society itself. Indeed, the whole of civilization rests its laurels on the mantel of effective education, crediting great thinkers of educational psychology for their groundbreaking theories, chief among them being constructivism, cognitivism, and humanism. Though many see these theories as sufficient for adequate progress, the truth of experience reminds teachers that learning theory must be put into practice in order to make an authentic difference in the classroom and beyond. It is with this disposition that effective educators strive not only to understand predominant learning theories, but also to embody them, living them out in teaching philosophies and classroom practices.

Built on the foundational aspect of an active education, constructivism as an educational theory, emerging in the early 20th century, positions the student at the heart of the learning process, as she builds and shapes her understanding of the world through relating self-experiences to previous knowledge. According to Miller-First and Ballard (2017), constructivism contends, “learners interpret new information using knowledge that they have already acquired” (p. 26). By stimulating preceding knowledge, learners engage in active construction of a paradigm by building new information on this firm foundation. Indeed, as its name implies, constructivism relies on the learner taking self-initiated responsibility to find significance in the events of her life, both scholastic and secular. Miller-First and Ballard (2017) assert by engaging in such a process, “understanding subject matter [becomes] a function of knowledge construction and transformation, not merely information acquisition and accumulation” (p. 26). In addition to implementing techniques such as *jigsaw*, *peer-teach*, and *self-reflection*, constructivist teachers find ways to promote learning opportunities that not only acknowledge and challenge students’

perspectives and presuppositions, but that also contain relevant applications for students to find context in ideas, both large and small. Conclusively, constructivism stands as the principal theory regarding student as builder.

Parallel to the constructivist theory of education lies the cognitivist approach, which developed in the early 20th century. Characterized by an intense focus on the internal and psychological aspects of learning, cognitivism emphasizes the process, rather than the outcome of education. Indeed, Yilmaz (2011) stresses key mental processes such as “memory, attention, concept formation, and information processing within a cognitive framework” as the foundation of all learning (p. 205). Whether considering Piagetian cognitivism exemplified by distinct stages of biological maturation or Vygotsky’s emphasis on sociocultural cognitivism, Yilmaz (2011) maintains the primary emphasis is ultimately “placed on how knowledge is acquired, processed, stored, retrieved, and activated by the learner during the different phases of the learning process” (p. 205). In a classroom defined by cognitivism, one would expect to see lessons organized and structured by theme, high levels of collaboration, teacher modeling and coaching, and heavy *chunking* or *scaffolding*. Ultimately, cognitivism remains the educational theory most devoted to the process of learning.

Considered perhaps the crowning jewel of all learning theories, humanism addresses the deeply intrinsic value of education for the human person. Notwithstanding the importance of the learning process and the applicatory building of knowledge, humanism concentrates on a much more holistic scale. It is for this reason Zhou (2007) claims that the core values of humanism are a “student’s self-concept, autonomy, and ability to make personal decisions, as well as to be self-directed and ultimately self-learned” (p. 131). Thus, humanism as a learning theory strives to place personal growth, motivation, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence at the forefront of

curriculum and instruction. Undeniably, technology and other 21st Century Skills serve as conduits through which humanistic education can flow. Indeed, for this reason Zhou (2007) believes technology can serve “as an instrument for the learner’s self-actualization, adding to the life and growth of the learning person, and finally bring all humans the freedom to learn” (p. 136). Often working with 21st Century tools, the humanistic teacher designs and maintains a learner-centered classroom, implements discovery opportunities such as Problem-Based Learning, and upholds the ideals and practices of student empowerment exemplified in Glasser’s Choice Theory. As its name implies, humanism desires the fulfillment and understanding of self.

Though knowledge of educational theories is essential to the successful educator, it is the application of these theories that remains the variable distinguishing great teachers from those of a lesser caliber. In this mindset, chief among my goals as an educator is to seriously and realistically put these theories into practice. First and foremost, the ideals of constructivism shall be made manifest in my classroom. Indeed, as a developing social studies teacher, I believe it is in the study of history, politics, and the other social sciences where students must be challenged to enter discourse with difficult issues and ideas while relying on their own unique sociocultural background. My philosophy of teaching as preparing students for emersion in the global political economy of our times perfectly represents an embodiment of constructivist methods by providing context and relevance to learning, which is magnified by the study of the social sciences. Allowing students to work in real-world community-based projects will achieve this goal. Finally, in the constructivist spirit of accessing prior knowledge, my philosophy of education seeks to inspire students to interweave their own cultural diversity with learning.

Second, it is abundantly clear that my soul as a teacher is devoted to the essence of cognitivism. Not only am I organized in my approach to teaching, but I also see social studies

instruction as revolving around the cognitivist application of concept formation. Understanding history, economics, government, and geography necessitates the use of cognitivist ideas such as schemas, assimilation, and accommodation. Moreover, I see the human brain as an incredible tool with a tremendous capacity for knowledge. For this reason, the movement of information from the working memory to long-term memory a chief objective of mine, and I will implement this into my classroom via project-based learning, which challenges students to exercise their corpus callosum, amygdala, and hippocampus in the acquisition and application of knowledge.

Finally, stemming from a deep devotion to humanism, I consider education as the primary social apparatus by which students become self-aware in an effort to become the best versions of themselves, not only as learners, but also as members of a global society. In this humanistic spirit, I know I will maintain efforts to implement student empowerment through their voices, upholding the intrinsic dignity and freedom of all my students to choose the life they wish to lead. In my classroom management, students will initiate and design classroom policies and expectations, and in instruction, students will dive deep into inquiry, research, and self-reflection. Indeed, this approach lies at the very heart of my subject matter as well, as grasping the limitless bounds of the human spirit is profoundly interwoven into the realm of social studies education.

Ultimately, a deep understanding of learning theories can contribute to a teacher's effectiveness, as long as those theories are practically applied in the classroom. Certainly, to coherently synthesize the learning theories of constructivism, cognitivism, and humanism into my classroom philosophy and my teaching strategies will be a challenging enterprise. I know being a great educator takes a marathon of work; I am willing to run that race to the finish.

References

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