

Social Learning Theory

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Introduction

No child left behind. A phrase meant to inspire, yet all it seems to do now is cause a teacher's blood pressure to rise and heated arguments to spread viciously across a nation unsure of what to do next in its education system. Currently, the focus is on teaching to the test and making sure schools meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Unfortunately, students living in today's world need more than just the ability to select the correct a, b, c, or d answer. They need to be able to solve open-ended problems and think critically on a higher-level. How do humans solve problems and change the world they live in? They do it together. Humans are without a doubt the most social creatures on earth. "The ways [humans] deal with each other, from personal to international relationships, can have as much an influence on [their] behavior as [their] instinctive reactions" (Taflinger, 1996). In other words, we learn from one another.

One theorist, Albert Bandura, understood individuals learn by modeling and observing others around them. Bandura formed a behavior theory called the social learning theory to describe this interaction. If teachers embrace the social learning theory and implement it into their classrooms, students will have more opportunities to think out loud with their peers and create ideas they may not have developed by working individually. Providing students with models of expectations will ensure success through observation, practice, and opportunities to apply knowledge learned in new situations. The social learning theory does not only work in the regular classroom. Through the use of online classrooms, the Internet and online videos, students follow, observe, and imitate what they see. Embracing the social learning theory in education will ensure students are

strapped with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in life and move their world forward together.

Social Learning Theory Defined

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory builds off of Vygotsky's work, and "emphasizes the notion that people learn from each other by such processes as observation, imitation, and modeling" (Spector, 2012, p.72). In other words, "behavior is learned from the environment through observational learning" (McLeod, 2011). A prime example of social learning theory is how a baby learns to become a toddler and then a young child in society. Babies mimic facial expressions, sounds, and words until mental meaning can be constructed. They observe and imitate their models until they have the actions down. Later on, they can take those actions and apply them as they see fit according to the situation they are in to express their thoughts and feelings.

The key ingredient in this theory is a model. The learner must be able to watch someone model or demonstrate the process that is to be learned (Spector, 2012). Following his studies, Bandura determined three basic models of observational learning: a live model, a verbal instruction model, and a symbolic model (Sincero, 2011). A live model is a real person performing the behavior while the learner observes. Next, a verbal instruction model is used when a learner listens to a voice describing the behavior. Finally, a symbolic model is a real or fictional person representing the performance via movies, books, television, radio, online media, and additional media sources (Sincero, 2011).

It is important to note that learning will not take place just because a student watches a model act out the behavior. Some teachers may say, "I demonstrate and model all day long and students *still* don't get it!" Bandura developed the modeling process in

order to judge whether or not social learning was taking place. This process includes four steps: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. First of all, the student must pay attention to the model. He or she must eliminate all other distractions in order to completely focus on the model (Sincero, 2011). The learner must be actively and attentively engaged in the model demonstration or no learning will take place. The more interesting the model, the better students will pay attention to it. Secondly, a student must demonstrate retention of the behavior observed. The learner must be able to accurately recall and remember information about the behavior without the help of a model. Next, it is time to have the student reproduce the behavior. This means repeated practice until they have mastered it and can perform the behavior themselves. Lastly, the student needs motivation. Positive or negative reinforcement given in the form of rewards or punishments, respectively, will encourage the student to repeat or change the behavior performed. Intrinsic motivation is a crucial component as to whether or not the student will repeat the desired behavior. The student must feel they get something out of performing the desired behavior, whether that is personal satisfaction, feelings of high self-esteem, or confidence (Sincero, 2011). Intrinsic motivation will determine whether the student wants to keep doing the preferred behavior.

History of Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura was born in 1925 in Mundare, Canada (Isom, 1998). In 1949, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of the British Columbia. After deciding to pursue his Ph.D. in psychology, he enrolled at the University of Iowa. It was in Iowa where he began his experimental tests in a laboratory and established the social

learning theory. Bandura had strong feelings that “psychological research should be conducted in a laboratory to control factors that determine behavior” (Isom, 1998).

One of Bandura’s most famous investigations was the bobo doll experiment. In this experiment to test whether or not social behaviors, namely aggression, can be acquired through imitation, Bandura had a group of young girls and boys observe an adult male and female act aggressively towards a blown-up bobo doll (McLeod, 2011). After the children observed, Bandura then watched as the children individually interacted with the bobo doll. The results of the study found “children who observed the aggressive models made far more imitative aggressive responses than those who were in the non-aggressive or control groups” (McLeod, 2011). Bandura also noted “boys imitated more physically aggressive acts than girls. There was little difference in the verbal aggression between boys and girls” (McLeod, 2011). The study concluded social behaviors are indeed acquired by observation and imitation.

Social Learning Theory in the Regular Classroom

The majority of people would not argue with the idea that children are like sponges, they absorb quickly and easily. Once a child learns to talk, a parent must be careful of the language they use around the child; otherwise they may be surprised to hear their inappropriate language come out of the mouth of their three-year old child. The babysitter may be amazed to walk in to the living room to find a four-year old has put in a DVD by himself and began playing a movie on his own. Before a child learns to read and gather knowledge through literature, they use two key senses to learn: sight and hearing. Observation, modeling, practice, and imitation can easily be found and applied in all levels of education, but they are especially important in the primary grades. In order to have

students work in a productive, safe, and collaborative environment, a teacher must model expectations and then have students repeatedly practice those behaviors. Reinforcement is crucial to developing acceptable student behaviors. If a teacher observes a student sharing a toy with another student, the teacher may praise by saying, “Oh Johnny, that was so nice of you to share with Lily! I like that you did that.” In this case, positive verbal reinforcement inserted a feeling of pride and generosity within Johnny, therefore he is likely to repeat the behavior. On the other hand, if Bobby pushed Kami off the swings and she scrapped her hand, the teacher may take away Bobby’s recess for the week due to his offense. In this case, Bobby experienced negative reinforcement and since he most likely does not want to lose his recess again, he will not repeat the behavior of pushing someone in order to get what he wants.

When a teacher uses social learning theory to support his or her choices of instructional strategies, the following approaches may be observed in the classroom: cooperative learning, brainstorming, group work, partner work, along with many other activities that focus on students interacting with each other by sharing thoughts and ideas. Learning to work in a group setting is a crucial skill that needs to be learned in elementary school. “Researchers in undergraduate science, mathematics, engineering, and technology (SMET) instruction have found that group learning can improve learning performances” (Yamarik, 2007). Cooperative learning requires teacher instruction and modeling then asking students to work in small groups to discover and solve answers to problems (Yamarik, 2007). Cooperative learning groups can lead to student success at any age, but it is important students learn how to socially and supportively work in a group setting during the primary years if mastery is to be expected by the high school level.

Social Learning in Web-Based Classrooms

With today's technology, anyone can have access to an education regardless of his or her health condition or location. Online learning is rapidly becoming the classroom of choice for college, high school students, and even some elementary students. However, just because a learner is stationed in front of a computer rather than a room full of students does not mean social learning perspectives are disregarded in the education program. Hill, Song, and West (2009) address this concept in their article, "Social Learning Theory and Web-Based Learning Environments: A Review of Research and Discussion of Implications." They state, "Research indicates that students perceive greater social interaction when creating and sharing in-depth online messages" (Hill, et al., 2009). It is then described how much better students will respond in an online message board if they are given a strong model to follow.

Along with modeling, a student must have internal motivation to put forth the effort to gain knowledge from the class. Self-efficacy, a term coined by Bandura in 1993, is the amount of confidence learners feel towards applying themselves to a new task (Hill, et al., 2009). Technology can increase anxiety if one does not know how to use it so it is crucial in an online learning environment there is a model ready to assist the learner. Since technology has become so advanced, there are multiple forms of models ready to assist a learner. A live person could help or the student could search for an instructional how-to video on the Internet. If a video cannot be found, web searches and chat boards could suffice.

Group collaboration and communication are just as important in online learning environments as they are to regular classroom environments. It follows the notion that

humans are social creatures, and it is through social interactions that we learn. Therefore, an instructor must incorporate opportunities for his or her students to engage in group work within the class. This can be challenging in an online class due to the physical space. If using web-cams, students can interact somewhat face to face with immediate feedback. Still, most online classes are in the form of written communication. Hill, et al., note written communication may be misinterpreted “due to the lack of facial expression, body language, and tone of voice” (2009). On the other hand, written communication is lasting and can be reread to develop new thoughts and responses. The style of learning preferred and the amount of knowledge retained in the course is dependent upon the learner and the motivation they have to work in the environment established.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory refers to how individuals learn from one another through modeling, observing, and imitating. In order for successful learning to occur, the modeling process must include adequate attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Social learning theory is supported through instructional strategies in the classroom such as collaborative group work, cooperative learning, brainstorming, and partner or team responses. It also applies to web-based learning environments as well with the use of online videos, web-cams, and message boards. The Internet is our go-to source for quick information. With 68% of U.S. adult Internet users claiming they use the Internet to look for “how-to,” “do-it-yourself,” or repair information and 66% using the Internet for social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, or Google Plus, society is undoubtedly in a social revolution (PEW, 2012). Embracing social learning will help move education forward while engaging today’s digital-age learner.

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