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Learning Theories Paper

In the words of W. B. Yeats, “education is not the filling up of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Teachers are called to do more than provide knowledge for students to memorize; rather, excellent teachers know that they are educating the whole person, teaching them how to think and learn, as well as how to act with responsibility, creativity, kindness, and mindfulness. To achieve this, excellent teachers focus on employing various learning theories to most effectively educate and assist students in reaching their full potential. Though there are seven theories commonly defined, four in particular stand out to me: humanistic theory, choice theory, behaviorist theory, and 21st century skills. With these theories, I can create an environment that embraces individuality, instills responsibility, ensures respect for guidelines, and best prepares students for their future.

Before considering how I might implement these theories into my future classroom, I will offer a brief overview, beginning with the humanistic theory. This model of teaching is characterized by its strong emphasis on relationships, individuality, and the holistic growth and development of every student. This approach tends to “focus less on accumulation of knowledge and more on how the learner’s way of being in the world impacts the integration of skills and knowledge,” while also promoting “a sense of care, acceptance and respect towards individuals” (Purswell). Intrinsic motivation is key to this learning theory, and good relationships between the

teacher and the students is necessary to truly lead students towards ownerships, responsibility, and mindfulness.

Closely related to the humanist approach is choice theory, where, according to William Glasser, “learning is a by-product of need-satisfying relationships formed in an environment where freely chosen, authentic, useful activities are present and possible” (Brown). Before helping students take ownership of their actions and grow in mindfulness, the teacher must have a strong relationship with the student. Glasser believes that “need-satisfying” is the fulfillment of “five basic human needs (survival, freedom, fun, power, love and belonging) which he says are genetic in origin” and every person strives, in some way, to receive these (Brown). Within the humanistic approach, choice theory places students in control of their own decisions and responses, while holding them accountable for the consequences of their actions.

Because students, realistically, will not always act responsibly or embrace intrinsic motivation, the behaviorist theory is also valuable. According to one critic, “[b]ehaviorists believe that learning is contingent on what goes on in the environment and on the association between a stimulus and a response” (Kanter). In this theory, students are offered extrinsic motivation, such as rewards and punishments, given clear procedures to ensure learning and promote good behavior; an environment of stimulus and response is created. Behaviorism might include using proximity to reinforce work-time expectations, or implement a reward/punishment system in which students receive a star for positive behavior or lose one for inappropriate conduct. In other words, behaviorist theory believes in influencing students’ reactions and responses through consistent reinforcement to best motivate students to make good choices.

In comparison to humanism and behaviorism, the 21st century skills learning theory is a relatively new concept, developing in response to the ever changing, rapidly evolving world. According to several researchers, “[t]he term 21st century skills is an overarching expression for the knowledge, skills, and dispositions seen as prerequisites for success in the global workplace of the future” (Germaine, et. al.). These skills are separated into the “four C’s,” namely, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. In addition to these four main attributes of 21st century skills, there are three other “C’s” that are often included: character or citizenship, computing or technology, and cultural or global skills. These skills are implemented to ensure success in *life*, not only in the classroom, as students are taught transferable readiness and competency. This learning theory also promotes deeper cognition and more impactful learning, as students make real-world connections to content and understand key information in light of broader experiences.

These four learning theories have shaped my personal teaching philosophy and equipped me with essential knowledge to bring into my classroom. The humanist learning theory is critical to everything I believe as a teacher: the immeasurable impact of respect for persons, a focus on individuality, and building positive relationships. Closely connected with this theory is choice theory, through which I can help students recognize real-world consequences and develop responsibility and ownership of their own choices and actions. Utilizing this theory will create an environment in which the whole person is valued and respected, for “[a]ll human development, including learning, occurs in, and is influenced by, multiple social, cultural and physical contexts. According to this holistic view, people learn and grow best in the context of a community where their needs are met, and where they feel secure and valued” (Brown). When

students know they are respected and a positive relationship has been established, students, in turn, respect the teacher and strive to meet the expectations set for them. In the words of William Glasser, “[t]eaching is a hard job when students make an effort to learn... When they make no effort, it is an impossible one” (Brown). Through the humanistic and choice learning theories, I intend to provide my students with a holistic education, an environment where they are respected and valued as unique individuals, treated with dignity, and taught responsibility and authenticity. Implementing these theories might take the form of Socratic seminars, or discovery learning in which students choose their own path after the content has been presented. This offers learning that is personal, where students can explore who they are and thrive in a classroom environment that supports their growth and discovery of self-values and principles.

Now, while I hope that students will thrive in this environment, growing through intrinsic motivation and their desire for knowledge, I recognize that this is a high ideal that will, realistically, not always be met; thus, I believe the behaviorist learning theory is beneficial as well. Implementing choice theory will provide students with opportunities for responsibility and determining between right and wrong actions; if this fails, I will have behaviorist guidelines in places. For example, I plan to work with each of my classes to create classroom policies on topics such as late work or tardies. If students do break these guidelines, I can have a conversation with them in which I ask them to identify the set policy and then abide by the accompanying consequences decided on by the class. Behaviorist theory might also be necessary for school-wide policies, such as a “no cell-phones in the classroom” expectation. Ignoring this policy might result in negative punishments, such as the phone being taken away. However, behaviorism is not only manifested tangibly; rather, it must also be implemented through words

and attitudes. I can praise students for appropriate behavior and show enthusiasm and appreciation for improvement or classroom appropriate conduct, while expressing disappointment or redirection for inappropriate behavior.

Lastly, my classroom philosophy embraces the 21st century skills and the importance of implementing this into students' learning so as to best prepare them for their future. Teaching students excellent verbal, non-verbal, and written communication skills is critical for success throughout life, and this aspect must be consistently woven throughout lessons so as to provide ample opportunities for development, while I strive to exemplify appropriate standards for excellent communication. In addition, students leaving the classroom will rely on critical thinking as a transferable skill brought into any job, position, or role they take on after entering the world. Teaching skills such as analysis, imagination, problem-solving, and creativity is essential in preparing students to leave the classroom and take on the 21st century. Creativity is not only needed for problem-solving to find solutions; rather, it should also span multiple outlets and activities. For example, allowing a variety of assessments, creating room for artistic growth, and providing a safe learning environment where students feel comfortable taking new risks, are ways to develop creativity in the classroom. Lastly, students will certainly be faced with some type of collaboration during their lives. Thus, it is essential to teach the skills needed to work effectively with others, maintain one's self-control, address conflict appropriately, and share ideas effectively. While offering students time for individual work is important, providing room for teamwork and community is a key skill for success. This theory is critical to my teaching philosophy, and I will strive to integrate these concepts into my student's lives to ensure their best future.

As a future educator, my goal is to grow into the most excellent teacher I can be; I believe an essential component to this excellence is an understanding and implementation of learning theories into the classroom, so as to best teach, inform, and guide the students. Through the humanist theory, choice theory, behaviorist theory, and the 21st century skills, my goal is to create an environment of growth, creativity, responsibility, accountability, and competency for every individual who enters my classroom.

Works Cited

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