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Learning Theories in the Classroom

Teaching is more than giving students information to learn so they can pass a class; being an educator includes teaching students how to be responsible, hard-working, good people. Teachers are amazing insofar as they provide knowledge and information to students as well as teach them how to be good individuals. This may seem like a daunting task; how can one teacher possibly do all of that for each one of their students? Part of what helps teachers accomplish all they can and teach in the most effective way comes from learning theories. Learning theories allow teachers to learn about their students and mold their practices to fit their needs. While there are many different theories in existence, three in particular stand out: humanism, behaviorism, and 21st century skills. I would like to delve deeper into these three theories to learn their implications on education and how to put them into practice in my own future classroom.

One crucial learning theory in today's world is called humanism. This theory is rooted in respect and teamwork between students and teachers. Shih contends, "All children are individuals who are unique in their abilities and who come from a rich diversity of backgrounds, beliefs and cultures. Children have the right to be treated with respect, positive regard and dignity" (198). In other words, students deserve an education in which they are treated as an individual. This is perhaps the most important aspect of humanism: *individuality*. Teachers who practice humanism understand that each child is so uniquely different, and they embrace those differences. Since every child is their own individual, it makes sense that all of them live and learn differently. This is where humanistic educators come in; they respect each child as their

own person, and they adapt their teaching to fit the needs of every student. Shuh offers several classroom practices that demonstrate the humanistic approach to education. For example, teachers who wish to exhibit humanism “trust that all students have their own talents” (199). Further, this means that teachers give students ample opportunities to showcase their unique talents in the classroom when necessary. In addition, Shuh explains that humanistic teachers teach in accordance with students’ interests. To respect a child’s individuality, teachers must learn and teach to what students are interested to. Understanding students’ talents and interests are just a few classroom approaches that demonstrate the theory of humanism.

Behaviorism is another very important theory in education today. Ertmer and Newby classify behaviorism as such: “Learning is accomplished when a proper response is demonstrated following the presentation of a specific environmental stimulus” (48). The theory of behaviorism focuses heavily on stimuli and students’ responses to those stimuli. The overall goal of behaviorism is to reinforce correct responses and practices enough to make it habitual for students to respond to a stimulus with the correct behavior. Teachers can use this theory to shape their students’ behaviors to an extent. One basic example of behaviorism is when a teacher rewards their students with free time for completing their homework on time. However, this theory can also be applied without tangible rewards such as praise or compliments. Overall, teachers who practice behaviorism do so in order to reinforce correct responses and behaviors from their students.

One last major learning theory that is extremely relevant to today’s teachers and students is that of 21st century skills. This is a rather new theory that has come into existence in response to our rapidly-changing and advancing society. The 21st century skills theory has been summarized as “the 4 C’s” which are: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and

creativity. It is understood that these “4 C’s” are the main skills that students in the 21st century must possess and hopefully master. Particularly, critical thinking is a critical skill for our students to have. Kivunja offers some great classroom practices to develop and foster this skill in his piece, “Innovative Pedagogies in Higher Education to Become Effective Teachers of 21st Century Skills.” For example, he asserts, “Effective teaching of critical thinking teaches students metacognition which helps them to consciously ask questions about observations or ideas about personal thinking” (Kivunja 42). Metacognition is an absolutely necessary skill for students to possess insofar as it helps them to dig deeper and ask questions about the information they are given. If students are able to think “outside of the box” and learn to question how or why things are the way they are, they will quickly learn to be more effective critical thinkers. Further, another important part of critical thinking involves “...[learning] how to examine old ideas in new ways; exploring and imagining alternatives to old ways of thinking., and [developing] open-mindedness and willingness to explore alternative possibilities” (Kivunja 43). These are just a few examples of ways to teach critical thinking which, in turn, is only a piece of 21st century skills overall, but there is no doubt that critical thinking is an essential skill for students to have.

Regarding my personal teaching philosophy, humanism fits directly into what I hope to practice in my future classroom. I want each and every one of my students to feel comfortable and respected in my classroom; that respect must come from the other students in the class and, most importantly, me as their teacher. One major component of humanism revolves around respecting students and understanding that they are their own individual. Therefore, it is obvious that humanism directly relates to my personal teaching philosophy. Not only do I want my students to feel respected and cared for, I also wish for them to embrace their strengths and

differences from their peers. Again, this ties back into the individualized nature of the humanist theory in education.

Behaviorism also relates to my teaching philosophy insofar as I want all of my students to constantly exhibit appropriate behavior to myself and their classmates and respond appropriately to classroom procedures. Obviously, every student will not behave how I wish they would one hundred percent of the time, but I hope to condition them to act appropriately most of the time; this is where the theory of behaviorism comes in. Part of my teaching philosophy is to teach my students how to be good citizens and individuals; behaviorism can assist me in achieving this goal because my students will understand the implications of desirable actions and behaviors.

Finally, the theory of 21st century skills also aligns with my teaching philosophy. One of my goals as a teacher is for my students to leave me knowing they are ready to take on “the real world,” or at least more prepared than they felt before. As I mentioned before, teaching is so much more than textbooks and quizzes and worksheets; teachers should strive to help their students grow. Growing is not necessarily synonymous with learning. What I mean by helping students grow is that I want them to challenge what they already know and have learned. I want them to be able to look at the world in a wider lens. This idea correlates directly to the critical thinking aspect of 21st century skills. Critical thinkers are not afraid to test the waters and accept new ideas. This is part of what I want my students to learn in my classroom. I wish for my students to embrace their strengths and differences, but I also want them to be comfortable with trying new things and questioning what they already know.

There is no perfect teacher or perfect way to teach. The profession of teaching is constantly changing, and with it, our methods of teaching. Great teachers will know how to adapt

and change with the times; our practices and theories that we use may change, but our number one goal will always be to help our students. The theories of humanism, behaviorism, and 21st century skills may not last forever, but they can be put into practice to shape our students and state of education today. I hope I can effectively use these theories and more to benefit my future students and give them the education they deserve.

Works Cited

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