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Learning Theory and Teaching Practice

What are the main sources from which we draw the learning theories that affect our behavior regarding education?

THE educational picture today is full of paradoxes and inconsistencies. The same people who use pragmatic grounds for criticizing the schools—that is, who find fault because graduates are not able to function adequately as employees—are often the same ones who urge that the curriculum be "beefed up" with subject matter that has little "transfer value," as far as employment skills are concerned. Teachers, too, sometimes display inconsistencies in their behavior, stressing one point of view when talking to colleagues but displaying classroom behavior that is obviously at variance with the philosophy of education they are in the habit of expounding. An example of such "compartmentalized thinking" is the elementary teacher who claimed that she ran her classroom strictly according to democratic principles—each year she wrote the rules for classroom conduct on the board, and the children voted to observe them.

Underlying our complex and sometimes confusing patterns of behavior are some rather basic beliefs or theories about learning. Each of us has such beliefs or theories. The comments and criticisms that the layman makes regarding education are based on theories of learning that he considers to be soundly supported by common sense, while the teacher's behavior regarding educational matters, both within and outside the classroom, is based on theories that he considers to be equally valid.

The term "theories of learning" has a formidable sound to it. It may connote research with mice and monkeys, complex mathematical formulae, and esoteric research papers. Unfortunately, our ability to relegate learning theories to the laboratory and thereby to divorce them from the everyday give and take of the classroom has enabled us to dissociate ourselves from any awareness of the part played by theory in our own educational practices. If the question as to the kind of learning theory we are using ever comes up, most of us are inclined to beg the question and direct the discussion to the "more practical" aspects of the teaching situation. Some people in education are even concerned lest anyone think of them as in any way "theoretical." It appears that our emphasis on the practical in America has led us to create an unnatural dichotomy between "theory" and "practice."

Theory and Practice

The plain fact of the matter is that all practice—in education, as well as in other fields—is based on theory. Usually the theory is not consciously stated in so

many words. Rather, it is what Lee J. Cronbach terms an "implicit theory"—a theory that may be inferred from behavior. Some of the confusion and contradiction I described in my opening paragraph is the result of our unwillingness or inability to identify the theories underlying our statement regarding learning or our classroom behavior. If we *were* able and willing to probe into the concepts basic to our behavior, perhaps we would become more aware of the inconsistencies.

There are three main sources from which we draw or develop the learning theories that form the basis of our attitudes and behavior regarding education: tradition, personal experience, and research. Most of us, laymen and teachers alike, depend most heavily on the first two sources. This may be true even of the researcher in the field of teaching methods. All of us have had the experience of taking courses in educational practices from instructors whose own methods violated every one of the principles they were expounding. Timothy Leary tells of a psychology professor who was advising his class of the importance of getting students to solve their own problems. "Don't let them get dependent on you," he said, "make them think for themselves." After the lecture, a graduate student came up to ask a question. He said that in the section of undergraduate students he was supervising as a teaching assistant, he was continually plagued by requests for answers to problems that could and should be solved by the students themselves. "What should I do?" he asked. The professor cleared his throat and said that students were always trying to trap instructors into solving their problems for them—problems that they themselves should work out. "Now what I would do, if I were you," he went on, "is to——." [1]

The aim here is not to point with scorn to the inconsistency of psychology professors, but rather to show how difficult it is to break away from beliefs and attitudes that have, so to speak, become second nature.

Most of us are strongly influenced by the first of the three sources mentioned in the above paragraph—tradition. Our culture tells us, in effect, how people learn. In our culture, one of the main theories of learning is what might be called the "reward-and-punishment" theory—the theory, that is, that people learn because they are appropriately rewarded or punished. There are other traditional theories—the theory of practice, the theory that learning is a process of assimilation; but the reward-and-punishment theory is one of the most basic, and it is this theory that I shall refer to as symbolizing the traditional point of view on learning.

There is, of course, a great deal of truth in this theory. For example, any one of us can think of instances in which the behavior of a child was changed because of the desire to please a teacher (and this in itself is a kind of reward) or because of the fear of being marked as a failure (one of many forms of punishment). Many teachers carry this theory to an ultimate and unwarranted conclusion—namely, that if children were not rewarded or punished by the teacher, they would not learn. This is, essentially, the traditional and autocratic or authoritarian approach to teaching.

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[1] Timothy Leary. *Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality*. New York: Ronald Press Company. 1957.

The uniqueness of our experience and personality means that each of us will develop a somewhat different arrangement or pattern of learning theory to serve as a basis for our behavior as educators. Some of us will be eclectic, attempting to combine traditional theory with theory based on research. Some will depend more directly on personal experience, fortified with a liberal dosage of reward-and-punishment theory. As each of us becomes involved in the teaching-learning process, he learns that certain approaches are more effective for him than others. Or perhaps certain practices are particularly expressive of his personality and attitudes toward life in general.

One person may thus come to believe that learning is fostered best when the teacher is cool, crisp, detached, and objective in his relations with students. Another may believe that students are more likely to learn when the teacher shows a personal interest in the lives of his students, even to the point of involving them in counseling relationships with him. These are but two of the many kinds of theories that teachers may develop with respect to the way in which learning is influenced by their behavior.

Effects of Research

Although most of us in the education profession are inclined to believe that research has had a marked effect on our theories regarding learning, an examination of our actual behavior in the classroom would probably show a considerable disparity between the research-oriented theories we publicly avow and the implicit theories that may be deduced from our behavior. One of the reasons for this disparity lies in the nature of the theories that derive from research.

Let us examine two theories that have important implications for the learning process. One, that derives from research in the field of social psychology, holds that individual behavior can be more readily modified by group decisions than by recommendations emanating from authority figures. Another, deriving largely from clinical research, holds that emotional factors in the life of an individual play an important part in directing his behavior. The teacher who accepts the first theory would be inclined to develop classroom situations in which students have an opportunity to learn through making their own decisions. The second theory leads to an instructional approach based on an understanding of and a concern for the feelings of students.

Note that both these theories are democratic in their implications. They place the student at the focal center of the teaching-learning process, in contradistinction to traditional theories, which are adult-centered and teacher-centered —authoritarian and autocratic. And therein lies a major source of the disparity between the theories we preach and the theories that are implicit in our own behavior.

Research Orientation

Rudolf Dreikurs points out, in an insightful essay, that we are today in a period of change from an autocratic to a democratic way of life.[2] This is a development that has been in progress for hundreds of years. We have now reached a point where many, if not most, of us have accepted democratic modes of conduct as just and proper. At the same time, we have not been able to develop modes of behavior that are always consistent with our democratic ideals and instead

[2] *Character Education and Spiritual Values in an Anxious Age.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1952.

must continually fall back on traditional and more autocratic approaches. The latter are, after all, a part of our cultural heritage that goes back to our most primitive beginnings.

When we are confronted by a difficult and frustrating situation in our classrooms, the tendency is for us to want to exert our authority rather than to examine the situation critically in the light of our democratic ideals or research-oriented learning theory. It calls for a great deal of maturity and self-control to respond to frustration in ways that are likely to improve classroom learning, because our personal needs to take out our frustrations on our students struggle for expression. Furthermore, as Dreikurs points out, we are not even sure how to resolve difficult situations in ways that are consistent with our democratic ideals. This is true not only of difficult and frustrating situations, but of everyday classroom teaching as well.

We still have a great distance to go in finding ways to translate the findings of clinical and social psychology into classroom practice. Hence there are many individuals, the present writer included, who continually find themselves falling back on the traditional and teacher-centered educational methods of lecture, assignment, examination, etc. What we obviously need is a great deal more classroom experimentation in approaches that attempt to translate research-oriented theory into classroom practices that are consistent with its democratic implications. I refer here to the efforts of individual teachers to find ways to improve learning in their classrooms, as well as to the more rigorous experiments of the educational or social psychologist.

It will not be easy to conduct such experimentation. Laymen and colleagues alike whose learning theories are essentially traditional will object to any approach that to them seems inconsistent with common sense. And the recent attacks on education have not created a climate that encourages much experimentation, informal or otherwise. Such attacks increase anxiety, defensiveness, and insecurity, which in turn foster a resurgence of traditionalism. But it is easy to place the blame on others. When the opportunity for experimentation presents itself, our chief problem will be ourselves.

Our first task will be that of becoming aware of the ways in which our practice is at odds with our democratic ideals, as well as the principles that have evolved from research findings. This is a task that takes considerable insight and self-understanding, but it is a task that must be resolved if we are to develop learning theories and teaching practices that are more effective. If we are able to face our own deficiencies, then we will be able to move on to the creative thinking and improvisation that constitute the preliminary phases of experimentation with new methods.