Behaviourism as a Learning Theory

Scott Paterson, OCT. 12 2014

Vancouver community college

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Behaviourism

People’s behaviour has always been an interest of mine, the choice to write about behavioral theories was an easy one, to me it’s the most interesting of learning theories. Why do people do what they do? Are people driven by some unseen force? Is it fate that guides them or is it some divine guidance that makes people choose their path? If there is something that makes us choose our path is it possible to manipulate that force, bend it to our will so we can control the actions of people? What form would this manipulation take, could this manipulation be used to influence our choices and actions? If there is manipulation what implications could this have on education? All these questions about people’s actions and motivations have been studied extensively by psychologists for over a century or longer and there have been some very interesting results.

The behaviour of people and their manipulation was the focus of noted psychologist, Frederic Skinner, John B Watson, Edward Lee Thorndike, and Ivan Pavlov. Most people know the story of Pavlov’s dog. Pavlov would feed and dog and noticed that the dog salivated when the food was brought out. Over time Pavlov began ringing a bell when the food was brought out. Eventually, just ringing the bell would make the dog salivate. Pavlov attributed this phenomenon to be a result of a conditioning of the dogs to relate the bell with food, because the dogs had never done this before. Pavlov postulated that this was a “learned behaviour” These studies of classical conditioning have become famous since his early work between 1890-1930. Classical conditioning is "classical" in that it is the first systematic study of basic laws of learning conditioning ( [McLeod](http://www.simplypsychology.org/saul-mcleod.html), 2013).

John B Watson continued the work of Pavlov when he conducted his experiments which are known famously as “Little Albert”. Watson took a baby around the age of nine months, exposed the child to a series of stimuli including a white rat, a rabbit,  a monkey, masks and burning newspapers and observed the boy's reactions. The boy initially showed no fear of any of the objects he was shown. The next time Albert was exposed the rat; Watson made a loud noise by hitting a metal pipe with a hammer. Naturally, the child began to cry after hearing the loud noise. After repeatedly pairing the white rat with the loud noise, Albert began to cry simply after seeing the rat. (Green, 2009).

From his studies Watson proposed the idea of an objective psychology of behavior called "behaviourism." He saw psychology as the study of people's actions with the ability to predict and control those actions. This new idea became known as the Behaviorists Theory. “Watsons view of Behaviourism was considered radical and was known for its extreme anti-mentalism, its radical reduction of thinking to implicit response, and its heavy and somewhat simplistic reliance on conditioned reactions.” (1999).

American psychologist Fredrick Skinner followed the works of Watson. His views were slightly less extreme than those of Watson. Skinner believed that we do have such a thing as a mind, but that it is simply more productive to study observable behavior rather than internal mental events. Skinner believed that the best way to understand behavior is to look at the causes of an action and its consequences. He called this approach Operant Conditioning. Skinner is considered the father of Operant Conditioning (Macleod,  2014).

Skinner's theory of Operant Conditioning was based on the work of Edward Thorndike. Thorndike studied learning in animals using a puzzle box to propose the theory known as the 'Law of Effect'. Skinner introduced a new term into Thorndike’s Law of Effect - Reinforcement. Behavior which is *reinforced* tends to be repeated (i.e. strengthened); behavior which is *not reinforced* tends to die out-or be extinguished (i.e. weakened) ( [McLeod](http://www.simplypsychology.org/saul-mcleod.html), 2014).

Because of the work of these psychologists we know that people’s action can be directly influenced. Behaviourist theory is based on the fundamental idea that behaviours that are reinforced will tend to continue, while behaviours that are punished will eventually end. Behaviourism has had a profound effect on education and the way in which we teach.

*“The behaviorist model suggests that teachers can develop motivated students by reinforcing the desired learning behaviour that constitutes excellent work (attentiveness in class, careful and thorough work on assignments, thoughtfulness, and frequent contributions to discussion), thereby encouraging students to continue these behaviours. If students are not able to engage in these behaviour immediately, they‘ll gradually improve if the correct behaviours are reinforced or if necessary suppressed through punishment.*” (Barkley, 2010, p. 9).

“*Behaviorists believe that human behaviour is the result of arrangement of particular stimuli in the environment. If this behaviour is reinforced or rewarded it is likely to continue; if it is not reinforced it is likely to disappear. Thus what one learns is a response to particular stimuli arranged in the environment for the purpose of bringing about learning. Further, observable behaviour, not internal mental processes or emotional feelings, determines whether learning has occurred. Learning for behaviorist is defined as a change in observable behaviour*”. ( Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 26)

The behaviorist model suggests that the role of the learner and role of the student will be clearly defined as one of trainer and the trained. With The trainer dispensing rewards and the trained being driven to wanting those rewards, this is the classic scenario of every grade from K to 12 and even University.

Grade schools are full of this behavioristic model. Was there any justification to the strap other than a behaviorist view? It is so engrained in the school system to punish bad behaviour in the hopes of garnishing good behaviour, or as Barkley puts it “suppression thru punishment” That it was not until 1971 when the Toronto Board of Education pioneered the abolition of corporal punishment. In most other Canadian jurisdictions, the strap continued to be an important instrument in the teacher’s disciplinary arsenal until the 1990s. It was not until 2004 that the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that corporal punishment was an unreasonable application of force in the maintenance of classroom discipline. (Canadian Education Association (CEA), 2014).

Under a behaviorist’s model a student is driven towards good behaviour by things like gold stars, extra credit, high grades, good report cards, the Dean’s list, incentives for early work are all clearly intended to foster good behaviour. Detention, standing in the corner, being sent to the principal’s office, lower marks for assignments handed in after due dates these are all forms of reinforcing the role of negative consequences to bad behaviour. Even the notion of summer school: how many young students have heard their parents threaten them with summer school if they don’t pass their classes? What could be a bigger punishment than going to school in the summer for a young child? That has to be a motivator!

Behaviorist theory is not without its critics. Manipulating ones action is rather a simple process of reward and punishment. In respect to education, this manipulation has been used as the basis for much of the 20th century’s course design and teachings. But has its time run out? Is there a better way? There is a debate as to the affectedness of the Behaviorist model, especially when applied to Andragogy. It is no doubt that Pedagogy rather than Andragogy is far better suited to the idea of Behaviorism. Children are far more susceptible to fear motivation than adults . It is highly unlikely that a detention or a letter home to parents will motivate an adult.

*“Rosessger (2012) has suggested that the field of adult education needs to revisit behaviorism as “the current monolithic understanding of behaviour is inaccurate and unjustly applied to Skinners philosophy. As a result, educators and learners are denied effective and valuable practical applications” Further “Behavioristic principles have been soundly criticized as being to mechanical and controlling. With regard to curriculum and course design in adult education there is also a concern that too slavish adherents to behaviorism ignores the complexity of the human being in the process*.” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p.28)

It should not be a surprise that a theory derived in the early part of the last century has come under attack, and certainly basing the theory upon the actions of a dog and small child hardly compare to the complexities of the human mind. Despite the obvious down falls of behaviorism and its many critics, the theory still has many practical purposes, and continues to be present in theories of education.

Today Behaviorism is used in combination with many of the later theories of education that followed it. Humanism, Cognitivism and Social Cognitivism and Constructivism. These different learning theories all combine to provide a good educator with tools to motivate, reward, engage and evaluate learning in both Pedagogy and Andragogy students, all of this of course without the strap.

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