

A Theory of Learning (Always a Work in Progress)

By Sarah Kramer

In many regards, learning is simply *living*. But that's a bit too simple an explanation. Most people have likely experienced some form of traditional "learning," but I argue that learning is happening in all settings. I believe learning is a collection of observations, social interactions, experiences, and challenges that we face. We are constantly learning when we are constantly observing, interacting, experiencing, and challenging ourselves. Although it can certainly manifest as a change in behavior, it cannot be characterized as changed behavior alone. Learning is a shift in the mind and in the heart that the learner can recognize as a form of growth.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Albert Bandura conducted very influential research from which he developed a social/observational learning theory. Perhaps his most famous are the "Bobo doll" experiments, cited by many subsequent researchers, including Kendra Cherry (2020a). Bandura recorded adults playing with a Bobo doll (essentially a large blow up clown), then showed this video to children before they played with the Bobo dolls themselves. In the absence of incentive or encouragement, the children imitated the adult behavior they saw (Cherry, 2020a). Though I believe that most adults are not intentionally teaching their child bad habits or negative behaviors, we can see through Bandura's experiments that learning does not have an on and off switch. Observational learning is very much a part of our everyday lives, and even more so a part of a child's everyday life. Bandura's work also ties into that of Putnam and Borko (2000), as they posit a theory of situated perspective.

Putnam and Borko's situated perspective (2000) teaches us, and educators in particular, that learning is social in nature, affected by the physical and social context, and spread across learners, environments, and tools (Putnam & Borko, 2000). I find the last one the most interesting of these three characteristics - that learning is spread across learners, environments, and tools. Perhaps learning, something that we often seek as a task to be independently accomplished, is actually a collective understanding and shared experience. Unsurprisingly, as our world becomes more interconnected, learning includes more variety in learners, environments, and tools. Whereas learners used to only interact with those living locally, they can now connect to others across the globe. Whereas the environment used to be a single room, it can now be a small screen. Whereas learning used to be done with a blackboard and chalk, it can now be leveraged with a variety of technology tools. Learning is a dynamic collection of these shared experiences.

As learning is social, observational, and situated, it is arguably difficult to avoid learning. It is rare to be in an isolated context with no new ideas being shared. But that begs the question - is learning always intentional? In Bandura's case of the Bobo doll, I doubt that the children were intentionally learning how to be aggressive. So, perhaps we could say that learning is sometimes active and sometimes passive. For the learner to acknowledge and take ownership of their shift in thinking, active learning is ideal. Active learning can be leveraged with the help of Lev Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Essentially, the ZPD is the gap between what a learner knows and can do independently and what they do not know and cannot do independently (Cherry, 2020b). It is in this ZPD where a learner faces challenges and opportunities for growth. A

knowledgeable other, often a teacher, parent, or leader, but perhaps a peer or even technology tool (thinking back to Putnam and Borko's situated theory), helps to guide the learner through the ZPD to mastery of a new learned concept. So in some cases, especially in a traditional school setting, learning is intentional. It is the challenge faced in that leap from one side of the gap to the other, the crossing of the ZPD.

So how do we measure this learning? How do we know it happened? BF Skinner was the pioneer of studying behaviorism and operant conditioning theory, and he was a believer that humans lack free will. He would say that we must see a change in behavior, either to receive a reinforcement or to avoid a punishment (Nebel, 2017). Although behaviorism may have a smidgen of truth to it, learning is so much more than just changed behavior. Educators are consistently working to better understand how to assess learning - something that we can't always see or hear, but a shift that the learner can recognize. For now, we can know that learning is observational, social, experiential, and challenging. It is not linear; learning is the collection of all the adventures on the nonlinear journey towards knowledge and growth.

References

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