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AI Acknowledgement

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.

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I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) on 19/12/2025 – 12/01/2026 to research and proofreading. I used the prompt(s):

1. What Theorists cover each theory?
2. Are there any that cross over?
3. Are all theories intertwined within this document?
4. Proofread this for clarity and grammatical errors
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Learning as a Multidimensional Process

Introduction

Understanding how individuals learn has long been central to psychology and education, particularly as educational systems respond to social change, economic pressures, and increasing learner diversity (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2017; OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2023). In this context, several influential theories of learning have emerged, most notably Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, and Social Learning Theory. Although these are sometimes presented as competing paradigms, contemporary scholarship increasingly treats them as cumulative and interrelated rather than mutually exclusive (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2022).

Taken together, these perspectives offer complementary explanations of the same process. Behaviourism emphasises what can be observed—how practice, feedback, and reinforcement shape performance, yet it has been criticised for paying limited attention to internal mental processes and meaning-making (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020). Cognitivism extends this account by explaining how attention and memory shape what learners can process and retain, while also being challenged for insufficient attention to context and culture (Sweller *et al.*, 2019; Rogoff, 2020). Constructivist and social learning perspectives broaden the picture further by showing that learners actively interpret experiences, and that learning is often shaped through observation, interaction, and participation with others (Bandura, 2018; Illeris, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Framed as a movement from conditioning to construction, this review examines these theories as a coherent progression and argues that learning is best understood through an integrative lens that brings together behavioural, cognitive, constructive, and social dimensions (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2022).

Definitions and Views of Learning

Definitions of learning vary across psychological and educational traditions; however, their explanatory value is maximised when they are examined as mutually informing

rather than discrete accounts (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2022). Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, and Social Learning Theory represent overlapping and progressive attempts to explain an increasingly complex phenomenon. Collectively, these perspectives trace an expanding account of learning, moving from observable behavioural change to cognitive processing, active meaning-making, and socially mediated participation (Biesta & Säfström, 2023; Illeris, 2020).

Early behaviourist accounts conceptualised learning as a measurable change in observable behaviour resulting from interactions with environmental stimuli and reinforcement. This emphasis on performance, prediction, and control established a foundation for systematic scientific inquiry and proved valuable in contexts requiring clearly specified outcomes, such as skills training and behaviour management (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Hattie, 2023). However, by deliberately excluding mental processes from analysis, behaviourism offered limited insight into how learners understand, interpret, or transfer knowledge across contexts (Willingham, 2017). These limitations did not render behaviourism obsolete; rather, they revealed explanatory gaps that subsequent theoretical developments sought to address.

Cognitivism emerged in response by reframing learning as an internal mental process involving attention, perception, memory, and reasoning. Rather than rejecting behavioural evidence, cognitivism explained behavioural change as the outcome of underlying cognitive activity. From this perspective, learners actively process information, constructing mental representations that shape how they respond to teaching and solve problems (Mayer, 2020). Research on working memory limits, prior knowledge, and schema development demonstrates why identical instruction can produce variable outcomes, thereby extending behaviourist explanations rather than replacing them (Sweller *et al.*, 2019; Sweller, 2020). Reinforcement, while no longer viewed as the direct cause of learning, remains significant because it influences motivation, attention, and memory formation (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020).

Despite these advances, early cognitive models were criticised for conceptualising learning as overly individualised and insufficiently contextualised. By treating learning primarily as information processing within the mind, cognitivism often underplayed the roles of experience, interpretation, and social context (Fosnot, 2016;

Bransford *et al.*, 2018; Kuhn, 2016; Rogoff, 2020). Constructivist perspectives responded by foregrounding the learner's active role in constructing meaning. Learning was reconceptualised not as the transmission or accumulation of information, but as a dynamic process in which new experiences are interpreted through existing knowledge, beliefs, and prior understanding (Mercer & Littleton, 2019).

Importantly, constructivism does not reject cognitive accounts but deepens them by situating cognition within lived experience. Mental activity remains central; however, knowledge is understood as constructed rather than simply received, making learning inherently contextual and contingent. Social constructivist approaches integrate cognition with social interaction, emphasising that meaning-making is shaped through dialogue, collaboration, and participation in culturally situated practices (Rogoff, 2020; Mercer & Littleton, 2019). In this way, constructivism brings together behavioural evidence, cognitive processing, and contextual interpretation within a broader explanatory framework (Illeris, 2018).

Ongoing critiques of constructivism, particularly concerning minimal guidance, have clarified the conditions under which constructivist approaches are most effective. Research indicates that learners, especially novices, benefit from explicit instruction, modelling, and scaffolding alongside opportunities for active meaning-making (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Sweller *et al.*, 2019; Hattie & Donoghue, 2016). These findings reinforce the interdependence of learning theories by showing that effective learning environments combine behavioural structure, cognitive support, and constructivist engagement rather than privileging any single position.

Social Learning Theory makes these connections especially explicit by integrating behavioural, cognitive, and social dimensions of learning. Learning is understood as occurring not only through direct experience but also through observation and modelling, with behaviour shaped by both environmental consequences and internal cognitive processes (Bandura, 2018; OECD, 2021). Observation alone is insufficient; attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation mediate whether learning occurs, highlighting the inseparability of behavioural and cognitive mechanisms.

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy further illustrates how learning is socially shaped while remaining cognitively mediated. Learners' beliefs about their capabilities

influence motivation, persistence, and performance, showing how social experience, cognitive appraisal, and behavioural outcomes interact dynamically (Bandura, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Social Learning Theory therefore functions not as an alternative definition of learning but as an integrative framework that makes explicit the connections across earlier theories.

When examined in relation to one another, these perspectives depict learning as a process shaped by interdependent dimensions. Behavioural change provides observable evidence of learning; cognitive processes explain how information is processed and retained; constructivist accounts explain how meaning is formed and revised; and social perspectives explain how learning is shaped, sustained, and transformed through interaction. Considered independently, each theory captures only a partial aspect of learning. Contemporary understandings therefore increasingly recognise learning as simultaneously behavioural, cognitive, constructive, and social (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2022). Understanding learning consequently requires moving beyond theoretical allegiance toward theoretical integration, yielding a coherent framework capable of explaining learning across contexts, tasks, and developmental stages (Biesta & Säfström, 2023).

Historical and Theoretical Development

The historical development of learning theory reflects a progressive broadening of explanatory scope, shaped by sustained efforts to address the limitations of earlier models. Rather than unfolding as a sequence of theoretical replacements, learning theory has evolved through layered development, with new perspectives emerging to respond to unresolved questions about how learning occurs and why learners respond differently to similar experiences (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2022). Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, and Social Learning Theory each arose within particular historical, scientific, and social contexts, collectively contributing to an increasingly nuanced understanding of learning as behavioural, cognitive, developmental, and social (Biesta & Säfström, 2023).

Early twentieth-century behaviourism emerged as psychology sought legitimacy as an objective experimental science. Influenced by Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner, behaviourists rejected introspection and argued that scientific inquiry should focus

exclusively on observable phenomena (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020). Learning was conceptualised as a function of conditioning and environmental control. Pavlov demonstrated how reflexive responses could be shaped through association; Watson extended these principles to human behaviour; and Skinner refined behaviourism through operant conditioning, showing how reinforcement shapes voluntary behaviour.

Within its historical context, behaviourism provided powerful explanations for habit formation, behavioural change, and skill acquisition. Its emphasis on control and measurability aligned closely with educational systems prioritising efficiency and standardisation (Biesta, 2017; OECD, 2021). However, as educational goals expanded to include reasoning, language development, and problem-solving, the limitations of behaviourism became increasingly apparent. By excluding internal mental processes, it struggled to account for conceptual understanding, transfer to new contexts, and novel responses, revealing explanatory gaps that subsequent theories sought to address (Willingham, 2017).

The cognitive revolution of the mid-twentieth century responded directly to these challenges. Advances in linguistics, neuroscience, and computer science demonstrated that complex behaviour could not be adequately explained through stimulus–response mechanisms alone (Illeris, 2018). Cognitivism reintroduced the mind as a legitimate object of study, defining learning as an internal process involving attention, memory, and reasoning. Drawing on information-processing metaphors, learning was described in terms of encoding, storage, and retrieval, enabling more detailed explanations of instructional effectiveness (Mayer, 2020; Sweller *et al.*, 2019).

Importantly, cognitivism reframed rather than rejected behaviourist insights. Reinforcement was reconceptualised as influencing attention and motivation rather than directly causing learning, while behavioural change became evidence of underlying cognitive restructuring (Illeris, 2018; Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020). This expansion supported more robust explanations of strategy use, problem-solving, and conceptual development (Bransford *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, early cognitive models were criticised for treating learning as overly individual and decontextualised,

often underplaying the influence of experience, culture, and social interaction (Rogoff, 2020).

These concerns informed the development of constructivist perspectives, which extended cognitive theory by foregrounding learner agency and interpretation (Fosnot, 2016). Piaget emphasised that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, progressing through developmental stages characterised by qualitative changes in thinking (Kuhn, 2016; Bransford *et al.*, 2018). Vygotsky further situated learning within social and cultural contexts, highlighting the mediating role of language, tools, and interaction. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development demonstrated the importance of guided participation, showing that learners can perform at higher levels when supported by more knowledgeable others and cultural resources (Daniels, 2016; Rogoff, 2020; Mercer & Littleton, 2019). This development matters for an integrated account because it shows that learning is not only “in the head” or “in behaviour,” but also in relationships, shared language, and participation.

While constructivism enriched learning theory by emphasising meaning-making and context, it also raised concerns regarding instructional structure. Critics argued that exclusive reliance on learner-driven discovery risks underestimating the need for explicit instruction and cognitive support, particularly for novice learners. Research informed by cognitive load theory reinforced the need to balance learner agency with modelling, feedback, and structured guidance, strengthening the case for integrative approaches rather than privileging discovery or direct instruction in isolation (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Sweller *et al.*, 2019).

Social Learning Theory represents a synthesis of these developments. Bandura proposed that learning arises through reciprocal interaction between behaviour, cognition, and environment, rejecting linear models of causation (Bandura, 2018). His research demonstrated that individuals can acquire new behaviours, strategies, and attitudes through observation and modelling without direct reinforcement, relying on cognitive processes such as attention and memory. Social Learning Theory therefore functions as a conceptual bridge, integrating behavioural, cognitive, and social dimensions while recognising the role of context, interpretation, and meaning making in learning (OECD, 2021; Lave & Wenger, 2018).

Viewed historically, learning theory reflects a shift from externally conditioned accounts of behaviour toward increasingly constructive and socially mediated explanations of learning. This shift does not render earlier theories obsolete; rather, each perspective reframes and extends prior insights, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of learning as a complex and multidimensional process (Illeris, 2018; Biesta & Säfström, 2023).

Principles and Mechanisms of Learning

At the level of learning mechanisms, the interdependence of Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, and Social Learning Theory becomes particularly evident. Although each perspective foregrounds distinct processes, learning does not occur through any single mechanism in isolation. Instead, it arises through the interaction of behavioural change, cognitive processing, active meaning-making, and social participation, reflecting the complexity of how individuals acquire and apply knowledge (Illeris, 2018; Biesta & Säfström, 2023). Examining learning through this relational lens helps explain why no single theory provides a complete account and why contemporary educational practice increasingly draws on multiple theoretical traditions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Behaviourist accounts explain learning primarily through conditioning, most notably classical and operant conditioning, whereby repeated association and reinforcement shape behaviour over time. These mechanisms offer clear explanations for habit formation, routine development, and skill acquisition and have been applied effectively in educational contexts where outcomes are clearly specified and observable, such as skills training and classroom management (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Hattie, 2023). Practice, feedback, and reinforcement therefore remain important tools for establishing behavioural consistency and fluency.

However, behaviourist mechanisms alone are insufficient. Reinforcement does not produce uniform effects across learners, nor does behavioural change necessarily indicate conceptual understanding. Cognitivist mechanisms address these limitations by explaining how reinforcement influences learning indirectly through internal mental processes, including attention, motivation, and memory (Illeris, 2018). From a cognitivist perspective, learning involves organising information into mental schemas

that support interpretation, problem-solving, and transfer to new contexts. Cognitive Load Theory further demonstrates that learners' capacity to process information is limited, meaning that instructional effectiveness depends on how content is structured, sequenced, and paced (Sweller et al., 2019; Mayer, 2020).

Cognitivism therefore reframes rather than rejects behaviourist mechanisms. Behavioural feedback remains important, but its effectiveness depends on how learners perceive, interpret, and encode it, helping to explain why similar instructional strategies can produce different outcomes across learners (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Deans for Impact, 2015). Nevertheless, cognition alone does not fully explain how learners generate meaning from experience.

Constructivist perspectives address this limitation by emphasising that learning involves active meaning-making rather than passive information processing. Learners interpret new experiences through prior knowledge, beliefs, and context, meaning that learning often entails restructuring existing cognitive frameworks rather than simply accumulating information (Fosnot, 2016; Bransford et al., 2018). This perspective explains why learners exposed to the same instruction may develop different understandings and why misconceptions can persist despite repeated practice (Kuhn, 2016). Constructivist mechanisms foreground learner agency, reflection, and engagement with meaningful tasks, showing that learning improves when learners can connect new knowledge to purpose and prior understanding.

Social constructivist perspectives further highlight that meaning-making is shaped through dialogue, collaboration, and shared practices, with language and cultural tools mediating learning and linking individual cognition to socially developed knowledge (Rogoff, 2020; Mercer & Littleton, 2019). These insights reveal learning as inherently contextual and interpretive, exposing the limits of explanations that rely solely on behavioural or cognitive mechanisms.

At the same time, constructivist approaches raise important concerns regarding structure and guidance. Research drawing on cognitivist principles indicates that minimally guided learning can overload cognitive capacity, particularly for novice learners who lack well-developed knowledge structures (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Sweller et al., 2019). Effective learning therefore requires a balance between exploration and explicit instruction, including modelling, scaffolding, and structured

feedback, reinforcing the interdependence of constructivist and cognitive mechanisms (Bransford et al., 2018).

Social Learning Theory integrates these mechanisms by demonstrating that learning frequently occurs through observation and modelling within social contexts. Bandura showed that learners can acquire behaviours, strategies, and attitudes without direct reinforcement, provided they attend to models, retain observed behaviours, and believe they are capable of reproducing them (Bandura, 2018). Central to this process is self-efficacy, which shapes motivation, persistence, and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

In practice, these processes often operate simultaneously. For example, in a collaborative classroom setting, learners may observe a teacher or peer model a problem-solving strategy (social and behavioural mechanisms), while cognitive processes such as attention and memory support understanding and retention. Guided discussion and feedback enable learners to articulate and refine their reasoning, actively constructing meaning rather than merely reproducing procedures (constructivist mechanisms). At the same time, learners' confidence in their ability to succeed is shaped by social feedback and comparison, influencing motivation and persistence through self-efficacy (Bandura, 2018).

Social Learning Theory thus functions as a bridge across behavioural, cognitive, and constructivist mechanisms. Observational learning incorporates behavioural modelling, relies on cognitive processes such as attention and memory, and unfolds within social environments that shape meaning and motivation. Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism further emphasises that behaviour, cognition, and environment interact dynamically rather than independently, highlighting how instructional practices, peer interaction, and cultural expectations jointly influence learning (Bandura, 2018; Lave & Wenger, 2018; OECD, 2021).

Viewed collectively, learning emerges through the interaction of reinforcement, cognition, construction, and social participation. Contemporary instructional models increasingly reflect this synthesis by combining explicit instruction, scaffolding, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative activity. Such integrative approaches are consistently more effective than reliance on any single mechanism, particularly in diverse and complex learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD,

2021; Hattie, 2023). Understanding learning mechanisms therefore requires moving beyond debates about theoretical primacy toward recognising how different processes operate together, providing a robust foundation for explaining learning and for designing educational practices that are responsive to the complexity of human learning (Biesta & Säfström, 2023).

Key Theorists, Critiques, and Contemporary Relevance

The development of learning theory has been shaped by a succession of theorists whose work builds upon, critiques, and reinterprets earlier perspectives rather than replacing them outright. Viewed collectively, these contributions illustrate a gradual expansion in how learning is understood, moving from externally controlled behavioural models toward increasingly complex accounts that incorporate cognition, meaning-making, and social interaction (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2022). This progression reflects broader shifts in educational purpose, scientific inquiry, and epistemology, and is most accurately understood as cumulative and interconnected rather than as a sequence of stand-alone paradigms (Biesta & Säfström, 2023).

Early behaviourist theorists, most notably Ivan Pavlov, John Watson, and B. F. Skinner, established conditioning as a central explanatory mechanism for learning. Pavlov demonstrated that learning could occur through associations between stimuli; Watson argued that psychology should focus on observable phenomena; and Skinner showed how reinforcement shapes voluntary behaviour through operant conditioning. Together, these contributions positioned learning as a product of environmental control and behavioural adaptation, aligning closely with early twentieth-century educational priorities of efficiency, measurability, and standardisation (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Biesta, 2017). Behaviourism remains practically valuable where routines, compliance, or procedural fluency are required. However, by excluding internal mental processes, behaviourism struggled to explain reasoning, language development, conceptual understanding, creativity, and transfer across contexts (Willingham, 2017; Hattie, 2023). These limitations remain relevant when learning is reduced to performance indicators without sufficient attention to understanding.

Cognitivism emerged in response by reintroducing the mind as a legitimate object of scientific inquiry. Cognitive theorists such as Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner reconceptualised learners as active agents rather than passive recipients of conditioning (Illeris, 2018). Cognitivism reframed learning as an internal process involving attention, memory, perception, and reasoning, explaining behavioural change as evidence of underlying cognitive activity rather than learning itself. Research on working memory, prior knowledge, and schema development clarified why identical instruction can lead to variable outcomes and why instructional design and sequencing matter (Mayer, 2020; Sweller *et al.*, 2019; Sweller, 2020). Piaget further showed that learning involves qualitative changes in thinking over time, while Bruner emphasised discovery learning supported through scaffolding, arguing that teaching should guide learners towards underlying structures rather than simply transmit information (Kuhn, 2016; Bransford *et al.*, 2018; Mayer, 2020). Nevertheless, cognitivism has been criticised for portraying learning as overly individualised and decontextualised, sometimes underplaying the influence of experience, culture, identity, and social interaction (Biesta, 2017; Rogoff, 2020).

Constructivist and sociocultural perspectives extended cognitive accounts by foregrounding interpretation, context, and the social conditions of learning. Constructivist theorists emphasised that learning is not the accumulation of information, but a process in which new experiences are interpreted through existing knowledge, beliefs, and prior understanding (Fosnot, 2016). Vygotsky situated this meaning-making in social and cultural activity, highlighting the mediating role of language, tools, and interaction. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development demonstrated that learning occurs most effectively through guided participation with more knowledgeable others, linking cognitive development with instruction and social support (Daniels, 2016; Rogoff, 2020; Mercer & Littleton, 2019). However, constructivism has attracted sustained criticism, particularly when interpreted as minimal guidance. Research informed by cognitive load theory indicates that learners especially novices, can be overwhelmed when instructional support is insufficient, reinforcing the need to balance learner agency with explicit instruction, modelling, scaffolding, and feedback (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Sweller *et al.*, 2019; Bransford *et al.*, 2018).

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory provides one of the most comprehensive syntheses of these developments. Bandura demonstrated that learning frequently occurs through observation and modelling rather than direct reinforcement alone, while remaining mediated by cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and motivation. His concept of reciprocal determinism rejected linear causation by proposing that behaviour, cognition, and environment influence one another dynamically (Bandura, 2018; OECD, 2021). Social Learning Theory functions as a conceptual bridge between conditioning and construction, integrating behaviourist insights into modelling, cognitive explanations of mental mediation, and constructivist recognition of context and meaning (Biesta, 2022).

Nevertheless, Social Learning Theory has been critiqued for potentially underestimating the complexity of social dynamics and power relations. Observation and participation do not occur in neutral contexts; access to role models, feedback, and legitimate participation is shaped by cultural norms, institutional structures, and social inequalities (Lave & Wenger, 2018; Hodkinson *et al.*, 2020). Critical scholars therefore argue that social learning must be understood not only as a psychological process but also as an ethical, political, and relational one (Biesta, 2019; Lynch, 2020). This critique strengthens, not weakens the relevance of Social Learning Theory for contemporary education, because it underscores that learning depends on the quality and fairness of participation opportunities, relationships, and learning cultures.

Importantly, critiques across traditions are comparative rather than conclusive. The limitations of each theory become visible largely through the analytical lens of others, reinforcing the case for integration rather than theoretical competition (Illeris, 2018; Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Biesta, 2022). Contemporary educational research increasingly recognises that no single framework can fully account for the complexity of learning and that effective pedagogy requires selective and reflective engagement with multiple theoretical traditions (Biesta & Säfström, 2023). In contemporary educational contexts characterised by diversity, complexity, and rapid social change, the enduring relevance of learning theory lies in the capacity to integrate behavioural clarity, cognitive support, active meaning-making, and social participation in coherent, context-sensitive practice (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; Hattie, 2023).

Reflection

Contemporary perspectives increasingly recognise that Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, and Social Learning Theory are not competing explanations of learning but interdependent perspectives that together account for its complexity. Behavioural theories explain how practice and reinforcement shape performance; cognitive theories clarify how information is processed and retained; and constructivist perspectives emphasise the active construction of meaning. Yet no single framework adequately explains learning in socially complex, culturally diverse, and technologically mediated contexts. Learning is therefore best understood as simultaneously behavioural, cognitive, constructive, and social (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2022).

Within this integrated view, Social Learning Theory is particularly significant because it explicitly synthesises these dimensions while foregrounding the social conditions under which learning occurs. By emphasising observation, modelling, interaction, and participation, it explains how learners acquire not only skills and knowledge but also values, norms, and identities through engagement with others (Bandura, 2018; OECD, 2021). This makes the theory especially relevant to contemporary educational and social environments.

The centrality of Social Learning Theory is reinforced by the nature of learning in modern society, which increasingly occurs in collaborative classrooms, workplaces, and digital communities. For example, workplace induction often relies less on formal instruction than on observing experienced colleagues, receiving informal feedback, and gradually increasing participation. Such processes illustrate how learning is shaped by modelling, social participation, and beliefs about personal capability rather than instruction alone (Bandura, 2018).

Social Learning Theory also foregrounds motivation, self-efficacy, belonging, and participation dimensions often treated only implicitly in other theories. Learners' beliefs about their capability strongly influence engagement, persistence, and transfer, and these beliefs are socially shaped through feedback, encouragement, and cultural expectations (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Consequently, the theory provides critical insight into why learning opportunities and outcomes are unevenly distributed.

For these reasons, Social Learning Theory is best understood not as one theory among many but as a central organising framework for learning in contemporary society. Its integrative focus on interaction, modelling, and participation offers a robust and socially responsive foundation for educational theory and practice in contexts characterised by diversity, inequality, and rapid change (Biesta, 2022; Biesta & Säfström, 2023).

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