

Who Needs Learning Theory Anyway?

Beginning in college, trainers are inundated with learning theories. Subscribing to one can be a lesson in futility.

BY RON ZEMKE

Theory: *"An idea accepted or proposed as a demonstrable truth. A general principle offered to explain phenomena."*

—Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

Theory: *"A scientific text or discourse. Descriptions of facts and relationships between facts."*

—Handbook of General Psychology

If the learning theories part of that general psychology course you took as a college sophomore is why you entered the training profession, you are a rare duck indeed. Who can blame you if all that stuff about rats in mazes, Skinner boxes, drooling 2-year-olds, confusing, opaque descriptions of incremental and decremental drives,

and those eye-crossing arguments among the behavioral, cognitive and Gestalt schools of thought were enough to make advanced accounting seem like fun. Still, within that often turgid mass of dueling ideas and obtuse experimentation are the golden nuggets of wisdom that underpin the rules of thumb, best practices and driving principles of the training field.

But are those theories, factoids and philosophies something we really need in order to have traffic within this era of online learning, info-on-demand utilities, pop-up templates and just-in-the-nick-of-time-training? In short, is learning theory really relevant to the modern practice of training?

"Oh brother! Learning theory is more relevant today than ever!" asserts Richard Swanson, professor of human resource development and adult education at the University of Minnesota, adding, "the idea of workplace learning is so important today, that knowing how to make it happen most effectively is critical. And with increased interest in training has come a great confusion between knowledge and expertise. Training is about creating expertise, not simply pouring knowledge into people. That difference is why learning and performance theories are so important."

Lesley Darling, chief learning officer for Rochester, N.Y.-based Element K, agrees. "We provide a lot of technical skills training, and there is a huge difference between sharing technical information with people and providing technical training. We'd be lost without a solid learning theory base to work from," she says.

To Allison Rossett, professor of educational technology at San Diego State University, looking at the world of work through the lens of learning and performance theories is a fundamental tenet of the entire training and performance improvement field—not just training development. "When we do an analysis

we don't say, 'What's the body of knowledge they need?' We say, 'What do they have to be able to do.' It's a purpose-based approach," says Rossett. "The questions we ask and the prescriptions we write all revolve around what someone is going to have to learn to do. You need scaffolding or a framework to make sure you look at all the important things about the performance the learners are going to be required to master. The beauty of all theories is they help predict things."

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But Which Theory?

OK. So we *do* need to know learning theory to understand the human performance—the jobs or tasks—that someone is going to have to master and to construct training that will reliably lead neophytes. But *which* theory should a training professional be following?

Not long ago, there were battling "isms," theories and schools of thought over the "one best theory" to adhere to in training. Today, it is pretty much conceded that there is not, and probably never will be, one great unified General Theory of Adult Learning

that will solve all our problems and that every practitioner will call on as his or her core body of training wisdom.

It is doubtful that a phenomenon as complex as adult learning will ever be explained by a single theory, model or set of principles, explains Sharan Merriam, a professor of adult education at the University of Georgia. "Instead, we have a case of the proverbial elephant being described differently depending on who is talking and which part of the animal is examined," Merriam says. "In the first half of the last century, psychologists took the lead in explaining learning behavior."

From the 1960s onward, however, adult educators began formulating their own ideas about adult learning and, in particular, about how it might differ from learning in childhood. "Both of these approaches are still operative," Merriam says. "Where we are headed, it seems, is toward a multifaceted understanding of adult learning, reflecting the inherent richness and complexity of the phenomenon and derived from a multitude of theoretical bases."

Swanson agrees that there is no all-encompassing theory. "The learning psychologists don't really help us here," he

14 Things Thiagi Wants You To Know About Learning

Cutting through the clutter and getting to the useful stuff in the ever-increasing body of learning theory and research can be, and is, daunting. Sivasailam Thiagarajan, Thiagi to friends and admirers, has distilled from that mass of knowledge, wisdom, obfuscation and speculation 14 pithy "Laws of Learning" that we all would do well to post on the cubical wall and read anew every morning before attempting any act of instruction, facilitation or instructional design.

APPLIES TO ALL LIVING CREATURES:

1. Law of reinforcement: *Learners repeat behaviors that are rewarded.*

APPLIES TO ALL HUMAN BEINGS:

2. Law of individual differences: *Different people learn in different ways.*
3. Law of emotional learning: *Events that are accompanied by intense emotions result in long-lasting learning.*
4. Law of practice and feedback: *Learners cannot master skills without repeated practice and relevant feedback.*
5. Law of active learning: *Active responding produces more effective learning than passive listening or reading.*
6. Law of response level: *Learners master skills and knowledge at the level at which they are required to respond during the learning process.*
7. Law of learning domains: *Different types of learning require different types of strategies.*

APPLIES TO ADULT LEARNERS:

8. Law of previous experience: *New learning should be linked to (and build upon) the experiences of the learner.*
9. Law of relevance: *Effective learning is relevant to the learner's life and work.*
10. Law of self direction: *Most adults are self-directed learners.*
11. Law of expectations: *Learners' reactions to training sessions are shaped by their expectations related to the content area, training format, fellow participants and the trainer.*
12. Law of self image: *Adult learners have definite notions about what type of learners they are. These notions interfere with or enhance their learning.*
13. Law of multiple criteria: *Adult learners use a variety of standards to judge their learning experiences and accomplishments.*
14. Law of alignment: *Adult learners require the training objectives, content, activities, and assessment techniques to be aligned to each other.*

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says. "They are more interested in arguing with rival theorists and sharpening their positions. Those of us interested in a holistic, encompassing approach to a practical learning theory are somewhat on our own."

Swanson, who teaches instructional technology, draws his theoretical underpinnings from behavioral psychology and Gestalt psychology. "The synthesis I teach is a model I call 'whole-part-whole.' Learners need to see the big picture of where they are going, they need to learn the details of the performance, and then they need to test themselves on the whole performance in the end. For a touchstone these days, I look to Edward Tolman and his theory of purposive behaviorism."

Rossett picks her guiding theory set from an even bigger pallet of possibilities. "I tell my students that theories simply wrap research results and facts into some kind of order to predict that 'B' will happen when 'A' occurs," she says. "The goal is to have the right theory for the right situation."

As such, Rossett teaches and informs her own work from a number of theories, including Malcolm Knowles for looking at adult motivation, Bransford's ideas on anchored learning, and David Merrill's and Ruth Clark's component display ideas. "Gagné's conditions of learning are important for us still," Rossett says, "and David Ausubel's subsumption theory is massively important for learning on the Web. Albert Bandura's social learning and modeling is important for looking at and teaching behavioral nuances."

Rossett agrees that constructivism and cognitive and basic behavioral concepts all have merit, when you match them with the right situation or part of a situation or for the right tasks. "Learning theories aren't like religion," she says. "You don't have to pick Catholic or Baptist or Muslim, and shun the others."

Element K's Darling is equally eclectic. She follows the principle that learning has to be results-based, learning-centered, involving and engaging, and it must lead to learner competence and confidence. "It takes a lot of theories to inform those goals," she says. "Ruth Clark's component display model, Knowles' adult learning theory and Keller's principles are all useful. If we have a specific model for development it has components from these theories and thinkers."

Sivasailam Thiagi Thiagarajan, adjunct professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University and president of Workshops by Thiagi, reaches even further for his models and theories. "I want my students to know the central ideas from all the great theories," he says. "We even talk about the '14 Laws,' the commonalities that come from this huge body of work (see sidebar at left). But I remind my students to reach beyond the psychologists and their theories as well. I ask them to look at the practice of magic and improvisational theater and even to stand-up comedy to learn how people hold an audience's attention and make an impact."

Which theory or theories of learning should guide your work? That will depend upon your situation—the people you serve, the nature of the skills they must master and the context in which they are to perform—and, frankly, your comfort with the tenets of and confidence in those theories. But make no mistake, social psychology pioneer Kurt Lewin's reply to the question of why he labored so hard over his theories is as true for us as it was for him: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory." ■

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(For more on learning theories, see page 90).



