

Four Main Orientations to Learning

There are four traditional categories of learning theories described by Merriam and Cafella (1991), later adapted by Smith (1999). As with any categorisation there is often debate over the boundaries and areas of overlap but generally these categories are a useful guide.

- ✚ The behaviourist orientation
- ✚ The cognitivist orientation
- ✚ The humanist orientation
- ✚ The social and situational orientation

The Behaviourist Orientation

Theorists include:

Watson, Thorndike, Skinner, Tolman, Guthrie, Hull, Pavlov

This orientation is based on 3 main assumptions:

“Learning is manifested by a change in behaviour”

“What one learns is determined by the elements in the environment”

“The principles of [contiguity](#) and [reinforcement](#) are central to explaining the learning process” (Merriam & Cafella, 1991, p 126.)

Control over learning comes from the environment and learning is expressed as observable behaviour.

Purpose in education

- ✚ Produce behavioural change in desired direction

Educator's role

- ✚ Arranges environment to elicit desired response

Manifestations in adult learning

- ✚ Behavioural objectives
- ✚ Competency -based education
- ✚ Skill development and training

(Smith, 1999)

The Cognitivist Orientation

Theorists include:

Koffka, Kohler, Lewin, Piaget, Ausubel, Bruner, Gagne

This orientation is also known as information-processing learning theories. Key factors are perception, insight and meaning. “Learning involves the reorganisation of experiences in order to make sense of stimuli from the environment” (Merriam & Cafella, 1991, p 128.). Control of the learning lies with the individual learner and how they process information.

Purpose in education

- ✚ Develop capacity and skills to learn better

Educator's role

- ✚ Structures content of learning activity

Manifestations in adult learning

- ✚ Cognitive development
- ✚ Intelligence, learning and memory as function of age
- ✚ Learning how to learn

(Smith, 1999)

The Humanist Orientation

Theorists include:

Maslow, Rogers

This orientation views learning from the perspective of the unlimited potential for human growth. Based on the assumptions that humans can influence their destiny, "people are inherently good and strive for a better world; people are free to act, and behaviour is the consequence of human choice." (Merriam & Cafella, 1991, p 132.).

These beliefs form the base of many adult learning theories that focus on the self directed learner and the value of the learning process.

Purpose in education

- ✚ Become self-actualized, autonomous

Educator's role

- ✚ Facilitates development of the whole person

Manifestations in adult learning

- ✚ Andragogy
 - ✚ Self-directed learning
- (Smith, 1999)

The Social and Situational Orientation

Theorists include:

Bandura, Lave and Wenger, Salomon

This orientation is based on the belief that people learn from observing and interacting with others. "Learning is in relationship between people and environment." (Smith, 1999)

Context has considerable importance and it is the interaction of many factors that result in learning.

Purpose in education

- ✚ Full participation in communities of practice and utilization of resources

Educator's role

- ✚ Works to establish communities of practice in which conversation and participation can occur.

Manifestations in adult learning

- ✚ Socialization
 - ✚ Social participation
 - ✚ Associationalism
 - ✚ Conversation
- (Smith, 1999)

References

Merriam, S.B. & Caffarella, R.S. (1991). *Learning in adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, M.K. (1999). Learning theory. The encyclopedia of informal education. Retrieved on 26 June 2004 from www.infed.org/biblio/b-learn.htm.