All About Learning

Making sense of contemporary Learning theories

The On-Line Training module "All About Learning" explains this in more detail, including a 30 page download.

INTRODUCTION

30 – 40 years ago, children sat silently in classrooms, dutifully copying information, because they knew they were about to be tested on retention. Interaction was discouraged: Retain, evaluate, regurgitate.
And, the people who were taught that way lead corporations today! They, of course, are too busy to learn now. Little wonder training departments carry the stigmata of the "whiff of chalk dust" and learning is viewed as a potential distraction from working.

In the last 20 – 25 years we have seen an explosion of research into learning, some of which is based on our improving ability to study the brain itself – neurological support for the hitherto "fanciful" theories of psychologists. It was useful, for example, to debunk the myth that *"we only use 10% of our brain."* We use it **all** – the issue is to tune it so we make better connections, faster.

It is well worth studying the contemporary learning theories together, because, not surprisingly, they connect fairly well.

For example, ***Behaviourists*** define learning as nothing more than acquiring new behaviours through conditioning (rewards for doing it right). ***Social Cognition*** theory says culture is the main determinant of individual development. ***Communities of Practice*** view learning as an act of membership of a community – we learn by doing in a social context.

Do they conflict? Not really…..common sense says we learn a lot from those around us and from the beliefs in our culture and we're more inclined to do it again if we're patted on the head for it.

Then ***Constructivism*** says we screen new knowledge against mental models of our previous experience: *Common sense!*

We each have slightly different ***Learning Styles:*** *sure, we're human.*

We all have ***Multiple Intelligences*** (which is a relief if the IQ score isn't looking too competitive) – or sets of skills which allows us to find and resolve the problems we face. Again, that sounds plausible and closely related to having different learning styles.

We need ***Emotional Intelligence***, self awareness, mood management, ability to relate to others – yes, of course we do in an ever more complicated, faster moving, stressful world.

Control Theory says we respond better to learning if it is what we **want,** and we have some say in it. *Common sense* – most customers don't buy things they don't need, and if pressured into buying, they are very dissatisfied….and unlikely to shop there again.

Brain Based Learning pulls many of the preceding theories together, under a set of 12 core principles and suggests practical instructional techniques which give us Constructivists a new lease of life

- Immerse learners in the Learning Experience
- Eliminate fear in learning
- Learn by doing

SUMMARY OF THEORIES AND POTENTIAL ACTION

Constructivism

Learning is a process of adjusting our mental models to accommodate new experiences – a search for meaning in what we learn.

Action?

- Eliminate off-the-shelf curriculum
- Relate curricula to learners' prior knowledge
- Emphasise hands-on problem solving
- Open questions to encourage thinking
- Extensive dialogue within the learner group

Piaget's Developmental Theory

The developing learner (the child) builds mental maps/ networked concepts to understand or respond to physical experiences in their environment (the early Childhood base for Constructivist theory).

Action?

- Plan developmental appropriate curricula
- Ensure learning interacts with the environment (on-the-job learning is important)

Behaviourism

Behavioural theorists define learning as nothing more than the acquisition of new behaviour. Conditioning is the universal learning process – rewards or reinforcement increase probability of repeat behaviour.

Action?

- "Accreditation" of learning is one such (status) reward
- A clear link between KPIs and learning…..and the potential for advancement, is another such reward

Neuroscience (included as a preamble to *"Brain based Learning")*

A young field of study. Our brain is actually 3 brains. It is definitely not a computer, more a self-organising system comprising 10 billion neurons and 1000 trillion connections. As we use it (and yes, we use all of it,

not just the mythical 10%), we strengthen connections, making the connections easier to create next time.

Action?

- Continuous learning and intellectual development helps to "grow" the brain's ability to connect

Brain Based Learning

Everyone learns – it's only the effects of out of date teaching methods that inhibit learning by discouraging, ignoring or punishing the brain's natural learning processes.

Action?

- Design training around learners' interests and make training relevant and contextual
- Good learning occurs in teams
- Structure learning around real problems
- Extend learning well beyond the classroom
- Help people to learn – to understand, monitor and enhance their own learning processes ("Learner Driven Development")

Learning Styles

How much individuals' learn is influenced by whether training is geared to their particular style of learning.

Concrete v Abstract
Active v Reflective

***School** taught us to be abstract and reflective, **Business** expects us to be concrete and active.*

Action?

- Focus on judgment as well as knowledge or skill
- Help people to understand their own style
- Build variety and options into the learning process

Multiple Intelligences

*Gardner started the 20 year growth of "brain based" theories and practices in the early 80s, by suggesting that there are at least 7 different types of intelligences…..and traditional learning heavily favours **only 2** of these (verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical).*

Action?

- Use learning methods that appeal to all intelligences – role playing, performance, cooperative learning, visualisation, case studies etc.
- Again, help learners to understand why they have certain preferences

Right Brain vs. Left Brain

Suggests that the two sides of the brain control 2 quite different modes of thinking and that each of us prefer one of these modes….from logical/ rational/ analytical to intuitive/ holistic/ subjective.

Action?

- Aim for a whole-brain learning experience – overlay right brain activities on the more traditional left brain approach
- Reinforce/ applaud right brain talents and skills

Communities of Practice

*Views learning as an act of membership of a community of practice – i.e. learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon. Knowledge is also inseparable from practice – **we learn by doing.***

Action?

- Bring the experience of the community into the classroom
- People working together on real world problem solving
- Extend learning beyond the classroom – communities (project teams etc.) on-the-job

Control Theory

*Essentially an extension (by William Glasser) of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It says behaviour is inspired by what a person **wants** – learners are rarely "unmotivated", just "unsatisfied",* due to inability to control their learning environment.

Action?

- Negotiate the curriculum with the learners – let them shape **what** and **how** they are taught
- Extend "learner power" to most learning activity
    - Relevant assignments
    - Their idea of working groups
- Get their input to the Measures (usually Competencies) to be used

- Give recognition for learning success (e.g. “Accreditation”)
- Help the move to “self-actualisation” (true learner driven development)

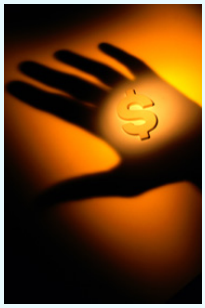
Observational Learning

Occurs when behaviour changes after observing the behaviour of a model.

Based on 4 separate processes: ***Attention, Retention, Production*** *and* ***Motivation*** *(not dissimilar to the way we buy – awareness, interest, desire, action).*

Action?

- Use demonstration in learning – by trainers, managers (on-the-job) and peers in group work
- Encourage collaborative learning generally
- Provide the incentive and supportive environment in which behaviour change can happen



Social Cognition

This learning model suggests that ***Culture*** *is the prime determinant of individual development – so the culture of the business environment and how learners interact with it, is critical.*

Action?

- Design curricula to emphasise interaction between learners and learning tasks (“learning by doing”, again)
- Provide the coaching “scaffolding” where by learners gradually become more responsible for their own development
- Assess **progress** not just absolutes

Emotional Intelligence

Born in the last 10-12 years out of society’s concern for family breakdown, drug abuse, suicide rates etc. etc. This school suggests that we need “preventative medicine” in terms of

- *Self awareness*
- *Mood management*
- *Self-motivation*

- *Empathy for others*
- *Relationship management*

Emotional intelligence is a "master aptitude" and that includes learning how to learn.

Action?

- Include more "soft skills" topics in curricula – conflict resolution, stress management, interpersonal skills etc.
- Teach associates to learn!

SUMMARY

If we view contemporary learning theory as a whole, there is **great consistency of thinking** (even though all academics write as if their theory is completely new and different).

What we need to do is distil this further into a unified model of learning (and "Brain Based Learning" gives us a positive start to that) so that we can

- Sell the benefits of learning to our various stakeholders
- Help people to learn

This list of "benefits" from Internet sources gives us a start:

- The benefits of enhancing the way people learn are limitless.
- Continual learning fuels continual improvement.
- The more you learn, the better able you are to arrive at your own solutions.
- The more knowledge you gain, the better equipped you are to sort through the information overload of today's business world.
- Most of us are too busy for our own good, both at the office and in our personal lives. If we would only invest a little time to **learn** better, we would **work** better.
- Most executives think education is key to their success. However, most of them would never attend a training session, partly because they're too busy, and partly because they don't have enough respect for their company's training department.
- People in our organization are learning all the time. So we might as well find a way to capture the knowledge they're gaining and reap its benefits.

The full version of this paper (30+ pages) explores the theories in detail. You can download it when you buy the "All About Learning" On-Line module.