



The Relationship between Learning Theories and Progressive Education

MICHAEL Olugbenga

Department of Educational Foundation and Curriculum, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Email : gbengamichael944@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the place of learning theories in progressive education; it discusses the various theories like behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism and progressive learning theory as it relates to progressive education. It also addresses the role various theories plays in practical execution of progressive education in various schools. The paper concludes that it important for educationist to understand when and how to infuse various theories to day to day classroom activities. The paper suggests that educationist should be exposed to various theories and its application and teachers should be trained and retrained on school and classroom practices in relation to progressive education.

Keywords: learning theories, progressive education, projects

Introduction

It is a known fact that progressive education is a response to traditional methods of teaching. It is defined as an educational movement which gives more value to experience than formal learning. It is based on practical lessons or experiential learning that concentrate on the development of a child's talents. As education gradually moves from traditional to progressive, teachers took cognizance of the developments in psychology as it reveals some influence or relationship with how students learn best. The paper seeks to explore the relationship between various learning theories and progressive education.

According to Agartar (2010), most progressive education programmes have these qualities in common:

- Emphasis on learning by doing- hands on projects.
- Integrated curriculum focused on thematic units.
- Integration of entrepreneurial skills into education.
- Strong emphases on problem solving and critical thinking skills.

Learning theory describes how students receive, process and retain knowledge during learning. Cognitive, emotional and environmental influences, as well as prior experience, all play part in how understanding is acquired or changed and knowledge and skills retained. Learning theories are based on three main psychological paradigms- behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism. It is important to understand the basics of these three approaches and explore the influence and relationship they have on progressive education (Renders, 2010).

Behaviorism

In the beginning of 20th century, educational psychology as a discipline took shape. Psychologists in those days were busy understanding the process of learning. They came out with the theory that took into account the behaviour of different animals. There are many psychologists from different countries who contributed to this development. Four of them need special mention: Ivan Pavlov (1849- 1936), Edward Thorndike (1874- 1949), J. B Watson (1878- 1958) and B.F Skinner (1904 -1990).

Behaviourism paradigm focuses on observable behaviours. Behaviour theorists define learning as the acquisition of new behaviour based on environmental conditions. They identify conditioning as a universal learning process. There are two types of conditioning – classical and operant conditioning.

Classical conditioning refers to learning procedure in which a biologically potent stimulus is paired with a previously neutral stimulus. Operant conditioning, also called instrumental conditioning, is a method of learning that occurs through reward and punishments for behaviour.

The behaviorists believed that the education should be mainly behaviour modification. Classroom instruction where the teacher transmits information to the learner was considered to be effective mode of teaching. It was necessary to ensure that the child acquired all the knowledge the teacher wanted to provide. Behaviourism allows for the following in education.

Transmission of information: this allows for teachers to communicate with his or her students, here students were expected to listen to the teacher carefully and remember any information passed.

Remedial instruction: as the name suggests, the focus here is diagnosis and remediation. An attempt is made to diagnose the gap in understanding when a child has reached the level of mastery learning expected.

Behaviourist learning theory has had substantial influence in education, guiding the development of highly sequenced and structured curricular, programmed instructional approaches, workbooks, and other tools. It has proved to be useful for the development of some type of skills- especially those that can be learned substantially by rote through reinforcement and practice.

Cognitivism

David (2007) stated that sometime close to 1960, psychologists realized the limitations of the behaviourist approach and started focusing on the growth of the brain. Piaget, a leading cognitive psychologist from Switzerland played a crucial role in this aspect. He emphasized on two main functions – organization and adaptation – in learning.

Organization refers to the fact that all cognitive structures are inter-related, and that any new knowledge must be fitted into the existing system while adaptation refers to the tendency of the organism to fit with its environment in ways that promote survival. Based on his work with children, he formulated four – stage model of development: sensory-motor (0-2years), pre- operational (2-7years), concrete operational (7-11years) and formal operational (11+ and more). He advocated that the teacher should be conscious of the developmental level of the child, and the content to be taught should be appropriate to the stage at which the child stands.

As stated above, cognitive theories emphasize making knowledge meaningful and helping learners organize new information in his or her cognitive schema. It is believed that to make instruction effective, it must be based on the students existing mental structures. For cognitivism to serve its purpose strategies were made to enhance teaching:

- **Activity based learning:** education, influenced by behaviouristic thinking, was limited to theoretical discussions providing declarative knowledge. Soon, however, teachers realized the importance of procedural knowledge. As a result laboratories were built in schools where students are allowed to perform simple activities.
- **Inquiry method:** the inquiry method focuses on creating puzzling situations for students to start enquiry. By encouraging students to inquire into day to day problems, they are entrusted with greater opportunity and responsibility of self – learning.
- **Expository teaching:** this method is meaningful only if a learner can relate what he is learning with what he has learnt previously. To facilitate such relationship, there is a need to organize lessons according to the process of progressive differentiation, moving from simple to complex or moving from general to specific.

Constructivism

Constructivism believes that knowledge is constructed through one's own personal experiences and interactions with the outside world. Thus, the learners take up an active role in the construction of knowledge and teachers facilitate this endeavor. Two types of constructivism emerged in late 1970's. Lev Vygotsky introduced social constructivism, in which social interaction with others was deemed helpful to the learner in giving meaning to the information.

Constructivism is best utilized when learners take control of the learning situation, such as problem- based learning. As learners engage themselves in an activity like this, they develop an understanding of the importance of the problem, comprehend the relevance of the topic and construct knowledge through their experience. Constructivism allows teachers to carry out the following:

Project - based learning: project based learning allow students to learn by doing and applying ideas. Students engage in real- world activities that are similar to the activities that adult professionals engage in. A project based classroom allows students to investigate questions, propose hypotheses and explanations challenge the ideas of others, and try out new ideas.

Discovery method: discovery learning techniques can be used to motivate students, help students retain information and teach them how to learn. In this style of lesson planning, the discussion should begin with a problem. As the students attempt to deal with the problem, they not only learn the basics concepts involved but also acquire skills to gain knowledge (Sudhakar, 2019).

Progressive learning theory

The progressive embraced Piaget's ideas about child development, Vygotsky's ideas about socially situated learning and the construction of knowledge, and the age –old emphases on both experiences and thinking or reflection as a basis for learning. They endeavoured to establish child- centered schools for students to approach learning through their own experience with the understanding that all learning is situated. The debate of the progressives, which continues today, is what is proper balance of traditional school's focuses on teacher transmission and the progressive school's focus on the students learning from personal experience which guided opportunities to explore, discover, construct and create.

Four of them need special mention: John Dewey (1859- 1952), Maria Montessori (1870 -1952), Friedrich Froebel (1782-1952), and Jerome Bruner (1915-1952)

Relationship between learning theories and progressive education

Today teachers utilize a variety of classroom practices that are based on all of these ideas about learning. Contemporary learning theory recognizes the role that both experience and reflection play in the development of ideas and skills. Researchers and practitioners appreciate that reinforcement and practice play a role in the development of skills, and so do cognitive intent, effort and reasoning. They acknowledge the importance of development;

they also recognize that development can also be encouraged through social interaction and the structuring of experiences within the learners' zone of proximal development or readiness sphere. Modern learning theories incorporate the role of culture and other influences on experience in views of how people construct their understandings and develop their abilities (Sarah, 2010)

Kim (2001) Stated that contemporary theories also recognize that the content matters, - the nature of the disciplines has much to do with how they learn and best taught. In large part because of differences in underlying views of the purpose of education, debates continue about best teaching practices. The relationships are further discussed below as follows:

The brain plays a role

All forms of education utilize the brain to carry out tasks. The mind is set up to process outside stimuli, to make sense of them, and to draw connections. There are critical periods for motor and sensory development, the development of the brain is lifelong and not predetermined at birth or within the first three years. However, psychologists have observed that individuals do progress through a predictable series of stages in their cognitive development. Learning changes the physical structure of the brain through the process of continuous interactions between the learner and the external environment. Differences in human processing and performance have been found to be related to different brain structures and functioning.

The learning environment makes a difference

People learn by making sense of the environment and of stimuli around them. Greater perceptual development and learning occur in environments that are rich with stimuli and provide useful feedback in response to a learner's efforts to act upon the environment. The nature of the tasks confronted, the ways in which information is presented and the expectation for the learners' involvement all impact the learning process.

Learning is based on associations

Learning is a process of drawing connections between what is already known or understood and new information. Prior knowledge is important to the learning process. Learners make connections and draw conclusions based on a sense of what they already know and have experienced. Learning can be viewed in part, as a matter of encoding, and storing information in memory, processing, categorizing, and clustering material and later retrieving this information to be applied at the appropriate times and situation.

Learning occurs in cultural and social context

The associations people make and understandings they develop are dependent upon and influenced by what is valued and what is experienced at home, in the community and within the classroom learning environment. Culture influences the knowledge and experiences people bring to the classroom, the ways in which they communicate, the expectations that have for how learning will occur, and the ideas they have about what is worth learning.

People learn in different ways

Identifying individual differences among learners can help us to better understand and guide the learning process. Learners can be seen as possessing a number of intelligences beyond the linguistic and logical mathematics abilities typically emphasized in schools. Theories allow for teachers to understand that learners possess inter- and intrapersonal intelligences, musical, kinesthetic, and spatial abilities. It gives the teachers the idea that learners process information differently.

People think about their own learning and their feelings matter

Thoughts and emotions shape the learning process. Good metacognitive thinkers are good intentional learners; they are able to redirect the normal frustration that occurs when things are confusing or not initially productive into further learning. Emotions play a role; students who are fearful, anxious, depressed or distracted cannot focus or process information (Sarah, 2010).

Conclusion

Learning theories allow educationists to understand how students learn, manipulate and interact. This gives the teacher the power to blend suitable theories that fit a particular classroom circumstance. It is worthy of note that theories form the basis of progressive education and for education to be progressive some of these theories must be put in use in teaching and learning process. The progressive learning theory which allows for hands on activities, projects etc. can serve as a guide in executing progressive education.

Suggestions

1. Teachers should be trained to understand the application of various theories in the teaching and learning process.
2. Curriculum should move traditional to progressive.
3. Classroom operation should be executed based on existing theories which serve as a root to progressive education.

References

- Agartar, S. (2010). Combating learning hurdles arising out of social deprivation in Yew.
- Jin, L. Handbook of science Education Research in Asia, Dordrecht: Springer Publishers, 2010.
- David, L. (2007). A Victorian Sharman of Science, *New scientists*, 75, (25) 101-110.
- Kim, A. (2001). How People Learn: Introduction to Learning Theories, Stanford University School of Education.
- Render, D. (2010). Conceptual Change- A Powerful Framework for Improving Teaching and Learning, *International Journal of Science Education*, 25 (6) 671-688.

- Sudhakar, C(2019). Influence of learning theories on education, *International education and Research Journal India*, 56 (40) 123- 143.
- Sarah, L. (2010). Capacity for change: A Review of the Nuffield foundation commonwealth programme, London: Nuffield foundation.