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Learning Theories in the ELA Classroom

Learning theories are ideas and philosophies about the way students learn best. There are numerous theories about learning and every teacher finds different ways to employ the learning theories in his or her own classroom. Some work well for some educators and not so well for others as every teacher has a personalized style of educating. While there are many good learning theories, this paper will explore three: constructivism, behaviorism, and humanism. Each learning theory has numerous implications for the classroom and can be wrapped into my personal philosophy of teaching.

Constructivism is a theory posed by Jerome Bruner and states that “learning is the process of constructing knowledge - not merely obtaining it - in social environments” (Abdullah 2). Students actively construct their knowledge through the situation in which they are learning, and they build on previous experiences to understand new concepts. Constructivism is often most popular in the science and mathematics classrooms, but it can be used in the English language arts (ELA) classroom as well and be extremely beneficial for students.

This learning theory focuses on the thinking process of students. This is very beneficial to use in the ELA classroom because it acknowledges that many variables go into how a reader understands a text based on their previous experiences, the prior information they may have on the subject or the history of a text, and numerous other components. Another great implication constructivism has on the ELA classroom is that constructivists believe that learning is highly

influenced by social situations. Allowing students time to discuss their reading with a teacher doing something like posing an open-ended question will lead the students to think more critically about the text and constructing their interpretations. Thus, allowing students to play an active role in constructing their understanding and critical thinking skills.

Another important learning theory that has shaped the way we educate students is behaviorism. This is a theory that looks at the observable behaviors of students that are learned through their interaction with the environment. Students learn behavior through conditioning, reinforcement, punishment, and rewards. Behaviorism “stresses predetermined measurably stated objectives in their use to develop an appropriate learning environment... It is clear then to pupils if they have violated a standard. Either a pupil has/has not broken a rule. There is no guesswork involved” (Ediger 4). Students know when they are not meeting their expectations and the reaction after this is what will determine whether or not a student continues the behavior. Many educators believe that behaviorism alone is not the most effective or accurate theory for how students learn, but it is clear that having defined punishments or rewards for behaviors will determine the likelihood of the behavior being repeated. In almost every classroom, there is an element of behaviorism such as what consequence a student receives when turning an assignment in late or the reward a student gets when she is on time and prepared for class.

A third learning theory that can seem quite different from behaviorism is humanism. In this theory, learning is viewed more individually. Each student is a human and learns best in different ways than other students and comes to class with differing life experiences. Where behaviorists believe that students act because of how they are conditioned, humanists think that students act with intention and based on their values as a person. The humanistic classroom is very student centered and the teacher acts as a facilitator instead of the traditional idea of the

teacher role of standing in front of the classroom telling students everything they should know. When the classroom is more centered on students a shift happens, the classroom becomes a “learning community where students felt invited and empowered to contribute to their own and others’ learning” (Kenney 11). Here, too, students become more involved in their learning, which gets them to become more engaged and excited about this process.

I think each of these theories will have a place in my classroom through my philosophy and classroom practices. More specifically, a combination of humanism and constructivism is mainly where my teaching style lies. In my classroom, I want students to take charge of their learning. This will come through them actively participating in constructing their knowledge. There are many great ways constructivism can be used in the ELA classroom. When it comes to learning things like grammar, having a unit to focus solely on grammar instruction and then moving on will lead students to forget what they learn. When applied to real topics and in applications that the students see matter, the students will be more engaged in their learning and the information will stick with them. For grammar, students should learn it in conjunction with writing, so they can use real application to their concepts. Working through writing an essay and applying what they have been taught so far to figure out when to use a comma or a semi-colon will help the students connect their knowledge to the application. In reading, I can call on students’ prior knowledge and see how this affects their interpretation of a text. I also plan on having a lot of discussion in the classroom. I hope to get my students to be involved enough where the discussions can be more student-led rather than teacher-led to allow the students to critically think about their texts and use the social context of the class to create meaning.

Along with this, a safe classroom environment is extremely important to me. I know that if students do not feel comfortable in my class they probably will not speak up during

discussions and I will have a hard time forming a relationship with this student. Humanism comes in to play very strongly here. Each student is a person that has needs, and I will meet them as best as I can to make the student feel comfortable, welcomed, and wanted in my classroom. Relationships with students are very important and remembering this aspect of humanism will help me build connections with my students and foster the relationships. If they understand that I see them as a person first, it will help make connections with the students and allow me to tailor my lessons to better suit them.

I hope to focus less on behaviorism in my classroom. I think it will be more prevalent at the beginning of the year while students are getting used to my expectations for them. For example, if a student does not turn in his homework, there will be a consequence which will hopefully make it less likely for that action to happen again. However, I also really value choice and student responsibility, so I will create my procedures with the students. This was not a theory previously mentioned, but it is rooted in Glasser's choice theory that highly values student choice. My students will be the ones to decide, with guidance, things like what they think the late homework procedure should be and what the rule should be about tardiness. This puts a new sense of responsibility on the students that they may not have experienced before and allows them a sense of control in the classroom. When students see that they have a sense of control and that I value their opinions, a relationship of respect will start to form between the students and myself. I also want students to have choice when it comes to their class work as well. Even if the choices are minor, like whether they would like to work in small groups or alone, it gives students a way to be actively involved in their education and take responsibility for choosing what will help them learn best. The students will then become more engaged in the class and more open to learning.

In my future classroom, I will highly value relationships, student choice and responsibility, and the students being actively engaged in their learning. The learning theories of constructivism, where students take part in constructing their knowledge, and humanism, where each student is treated as a human and the teacher understands that students have different needs, fit with my teaching philosophy extremely well. I also see myself using behaviorism, where students' behaviors are learned through reinforcement, in some situations in union with the other two. Finding the right balance of the concepts of these learning theories that work best for me and my students is crucial for having the most effective classroom that is best conducive to the learning of my future students.

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