

Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design

Learning Theories

The field of adult education is full of many different learning theories. Some date back over 60 years, but most of them are based upon research that has been conducted in the past 20 years. Primarily, all of these theories can be categorized into **five main categories** or **orientations**. Each of these orientations has **strengths and weaknesses**. Likewise, none are particularly "good" or "bad," but there are times and situations when one may be more appropriate than another depending upon the targeted clientele and topic being covered. On the pages that follow, you will learn some of the "guiding assumptions" and the roles of the instructor, for each orientation.

Orientation Overview and Guiding Assumptions

Humanist

Humanists believe that people are inherently good and possess unlimited potential for growth and development.

Learners will naturally progress towards increased competence, autonomy, freedom, and fulfillment.

Behavior is a matter of human choice. People have the freedom and responsibility to become what he/she is capable of becoming.

The purpose of learning is to fulfill one's potential; a holistic process of personal growth and an active search for meaning; directed by learner who alone knows his/her needs and goals.

Experience is the primary phenomenon for learning.

Involves the whole person, not just behavior and intellect; great emphasis on feelings and affective goals.

Examples of educational methods: Self-directed learning, Interpersonal interaction and encounter, Experiential learning and Needs-based programming.

Instructor's Role

Facilitator of learning.

Helping adults learn how to learn.

Helping a person to self-discover learning.

Facilitator must develop trust, warmth, non-judgmental acceptance, genuineness, empathic understanding and caring.

Orientation Overview and Guiding Assumptions

Behaviorist

Learning is a change in overt, observable behavior (not concerned with internal processes).

The course and content of learning are controlled by stimuli in the external environment, not by the individual learner.

Learning results from stimulus and response in a person's environment.

Behaviorism is referred to as "Stimulus-Response" learning which is derived from the work of B.F. Skinner's "Reinforcement Theory."

Examples of educational methods: Reinforcement & incentives, Instructional feedback, Programmed instruction, Games and Simulations.

Instructor's Role

Instructor focused on specific goals and objectives,

Instructor is to manage, control and direct learning by arranging the environment, selecting stimuli, reinforcing desired responses, and discouraging undesirable responses.

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Social Learning

Encompasses large number of theories, models and approaches, including:

- Behaviorists' concepts of reinforcement and environmental influence.
- Cognitive notions of internal structures and processes mediating learning.
- Belief that learning is a social process.

Most of what people learn is through observations and interactions with other people in a social context.

Observation, reflection, then imitation/modification.

Focus is on the impact of people on people.

Examples of educational methods: Demonstrations and trials, Behavioral modeling, Apprenticeships, Mentoring, Tutorials, Peer partnerships and On-the-job training.

Instructor's Role

Instructor is a model (demonstrator) or identifies and provides effective models.

Social analyst and facilitator of social interactions.

Orientation Overview and Guiding Assumptions

Cognitive

Learning is a process occurring inside the learner in an attempt to make sense out of the world and give meaning to experiences.

- Learning is not seen as change in behavior, but as “changes in the way in which the learner understands or organizes the elements of the environment.”

Focus is on the thinking process and unobservable constructs such as: meaning, knowledge, intention, concepts, beliefs, expectations, and creativity.

- Cognitive and cognition relate to knowledge and the process of knowing. It is internal change that cannot be directly observed.

The learner acts on the environment, not the other way around. In other words, the learner takes control of the learning situation.

Learning results from individual mental functions and processes.

The purpose of learning/education is the acquisition of knowledge.

Examples of educational methods: Advanced organizers; Metaphors, analogies & similes; Chunking; Framing and Concept mapping.

Instructor's Role

Instructor creates proper conditions for learning.

Provides the environment, materials and feedback so that learners can organize and structure their own knowledge (discovery learning).

Structures and organizes information and materials so that learners can assimilate them meaningfully into their knowledge structure.

Stimulator of knowledge acquisition.

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Critical Reflection

Incorporates other four areas, but the distinct difference is critical reflection and capitalizing on learners' experience.

Learner involvement. In general, critical reflection involves the learner in identifying and evaluating the assumptions, beliefs and values that underlie his or her thoughts, feelings or actions. This leads to a transformation in how one looks at the world.

Learning goes beyond cognition.

- This refers to learning that is deeper, more fundamental, relating to values, philosophy, and worldview and the nature of knowledge itself.

Learning is transforming basic underlying assumptions, transformative learning.

- These can become distorted through socialization experiences in schools, families and communities. Critical reflection learning helps to overcome these.
- Learning involves transforming basic underlying assumptions of how the world works.

Examples of educational methods: Focus group inquiry, Critical incidents, Critical debate, Action learning, Imaging the future, Reflective judgment, Language analysis and Scenario building.

Instructor's Role

Instructor's role is that of critical analyst, stimulator of critical reflection, and challenger of assumptions.

Responds to more than expressed needs.

Emphasis is on learner and instructor equality. The educator is simultaneously teacher and learner.

The learner's role is active participation in utilizing knowledge.

References

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