

The Process and Theory of Learning: A Study of Its Styles

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ABSTRACT

An understanding of how people learn is necessary if learning is to take place effectively in an organization. The aims of this paper are to:

- define the concept of learning;
- describe the process of learning;
- summarize the different ways in which people in general learn (learning theory);
- describe how individuals learn - their learning styles and 'learning to learn';
- examine the concept of the learning curve - how people achieve required skill levels;
- discuss the key topic of the motivation to learn;
- describe the practical implications of these theories, concepts and approaches;
- set out the conditions for effective learning.

INTRODUCTION

Learning has been defined by Kim (1993) as the process of 'increasing one's capacity to take action'. As explained by Reynolds et al (2002) it should be distinguished from training: 'Learning is the process by which a person acquires new knowledge, skills and capabilities whereas training is one of several responses an organization can take to promote learning.'

A distinction was also made between learning and development by Pedler et al (1989), who see learning as being concerned with an increase in knowledge or a higher degree of an existing skill, whereas development is more towards a different state of being or functioning. Argyris (1993) makes the point that 'Learning is not simply having a new insight or a new idea. Learning occurs when we take effective action, when we detect and correct error. How do you know when you know something? When you can produce what it is you claim to know.'

ANALYSIS

A number of leading authorities on learning in organizations (Honey, 1998) have declared that 'learning is complex and various, covering all sorts of things such as knowledge, skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes and habits'. Individuals learn for themselves and learn from other people. They learn as members of teams and by

interaction with their managers, co-workers and people outside the organization. People learn by doing and by instruction. The ways in which individuals learn differ, and the extent to which they learn depends largely on how well they are externally motivated or self-motivated.

The effectiveness of learning will be strongly influenced by the context in which it takes place. This includes the values of the organization. Is it truly believed that learning is important as a means of developing a high performance culture and achieving competitive advantage? Is this belief confirmed by actions that encourage and support learning? Is the approach to learning delivery in line with the belief of Birchall and Lyons (1995) that 'For effective learning to take place at the individual level it is essential to foster an environment where individuals are encouraged to take risks and experiment, where mistakes are tolerated, but where means exist for those involved to learn from their experiences'?

There are a number of learning theories, each of which focuses on different aspects of the learning process as applied to people in general. The main theories are concerned with:

- reinforcement;
- cognitive learning;
- experiential learning;

- social learning.

Reinforcement theory is based on the work of Skinner (1974). It expresses the belief that changes in behaviour take place as a result of an individual's response to events or stimuli, and the ensuing consequences (rewards or punishments). Individuals can be 'conditioned' to repeat the behaviour by positive reinforcement in the form of feedback and knowledge of results.

Gagne (1977) later developed his stimulus-response theory, which relates the learning process to a number of factors, including reinforcement, namely:

- Drive - there must be a basic need or drive to learn.
- Stimulus - people must be stimulated by the learning process.
- Response - people must be helped by the learning process to develop appropriate responses; in other words, the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will lead to effective performance.
- Reinforcement - these responses need to be reinforced by feedback and experience until they are learnt.

Cognitive learning involves gaining knowledge and understanding by absorbing information in the form of principles, concepts and facts, and then internalizing it. Learners can be regarded as powerful information processing machines

People are active agents of their own learning (Reynolds et al 2002). Experiential learning takes place when people learn from their experience by reflecting on it so that it can be understood and applied. Learning is therefore a personal 'construction' of meaning through experience. 'Constructivists' such as Rogers (1983) believe that experiential learning will be enhanced through facilitation - creating an environment in which people can be stimulated to think and act in ways that help them to make good use of their experience.

Social learning theory states that effective learning requires social interaction. Wenger (1998) suggested that we all participate in 'communities of practice' (groups of people with shared expertise who work together) and that these are our primary sources of learning. Bandura (1977) views learning as a series of information processing steps set in train by social interactions.

Learning theories describe in general terms how people learn, but individual learners will have different styles - a preference for a particular approach to learning. The two most familiar classifications of learning styles are those produced by Kolb and by Honey and Mumford.

- Concrete experience - this can be planned or accidental.
- Reflective observation - this involves actively thinking about the experience and its significance.
- Abstract conceptualization (theorizing) - generalizing from experience in order to develop various concepts and ideas which can be applied when similar situations are encountered.
- Active experimentation - testing the concepts or ideas in new situations. This gives rise to a new concrete experience and the cycle begins again.

The key to Kolb's model is that it is a simple description of how experience is translated into concepts which are then used to guide the choice of new experiences. To learn effectively, individuals must shift from being observers to participants, from direct involvement to a more objective analytical detachment. Every person has his or her own learning style, and one of the most important arts that trainers have to develop is to adjust their approaches to the learning styles of trainees. Trainers must acknowledge these learning styles rather than their own preferred approach.

Kolb also defined the following learning styles of trainees:

- Accommodators who learn by trial and error, combining the concrete experience and experimentation stages of the cycle.
- Divergers who prefer concrete to abstract learning situations, and reflection to active involvement. Such individuals have great imaginative ability, and can view a complete situation from different viewpoints.
- Convergers who prefer to experiment with ideas, considering them for their practical usefulness. Their main concern is whether the theory works in action, thus combining the abstract and experimental dimensions.
- Assimilators who like to create their own theoretical models and assimilate a number of disparate observations into an overall integrated explanation. Thus they veer

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towards the reflective and abstract dimensions.

Another analysis of learning styles was made by Honey and Mumford (1996). They identified four styles:

- Activists who involve themselves fully without bias in new experiences and revel in new challenges.
- Reflectors who stand back and observe new experiences from different angles. They collect data, reflect on it and then come to a conclusion.
- Theorists who adapt and apply their observations in the form of logical theories. They tend to be perfectionists.
- Pragmatists who are keen to try out new ideas, approaches and concepts to see if they work.

However, none of these four learning styles is exclusive. It is quite possible that one person could be both a reflector and a theorist, and someone else could be an activist/pragmatist, a reflector/pragmatist or even a theorist/pragmatist.

CONCLUSION

People learn all the time, and through doing so acquire knowledge, skills and insight. But they will learn more effectively if they 'learn how to learn'. As defined by Honey (1998), the process

of learning to learn is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and insights about the learning process itself. The aims, as described by Honey, are to:

- provide a basis for organizing and planning learning;
- pinpoint precisely what has been learnt and what to do better or differently as a consequence;
- share what has been learnt with other people so that they benefit;
- check on the quality of what has been learnt;
- transfer what has been learnt and apply it in different circumstances;
- improve the learning process itself so that how people learn, not just what people learn, is given constant attention.

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