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**Teaching, Learning & Assessment: The Road to  
Democracy**

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## Teaching, Learning and Assessment: The Road to Democracy

Adopt a "learning approach to learning rather than a teaching approach to learning"

(Author unknown).

Through this paper I will elaborate on and compare current teaching learning and assessment philosophies and place them into one of three separate categories. The categories are :

- Behavioural approaches to learning
- Cognitive approaches to learning, and
- Humanistic approaches to learning

I will also offer ideas that have the opportunity to redirect much teaching practice towards an outcome for society that is different to current general practice. While much current practice sees daily and weekly planning as occupying much of its energy, and controlling disaffected children in classrooms that are becoming meaningless to them, I wish to demonstrate that there are alternatives that empower children to become good "decision makers", and that when the three overriding theories that have shaped education for the past hundred years are compared at the "practice" level, different practice becomes possible,

I will demonstrate that much current teaching and learning adheres to behavioural philosophies. I will also demonstrate that while behaviourism is still currently the strongest direction taken in Australian classrooms, society on the whole has demanded much more from its citizens than can ever be achieved by merely "response to stimuli" interactions amongst and between people.

A deeper understanding of citizenship (Pearl 1999, 2003) sees that it demands participation at a significantly more complex level if contemporary world problems are to be solved, than behaviourism can deliver.

However, because of the apparent short-term success of stimuli/response in classrooms in the guise of response to stimuli, the longer-term effect of this conditioning is for the "learner" to become less self-motivated, and at best, wait for the positive conditioning environment before engaging in learning. This learning has a much narrower focus than self-directed learning.

In classrooms where teachers use ridicule and shaming (Krause et al, p114) to control unruly or non-conformist behaviour, children may be left with long term negative feelings about particular classes, subject, teachers, and school in general.

Even when reward/punishment is used in classroom situations, the teacher's expectations are that either the reward or the punishment is changing behaviour to that which is required, and may be successful, but in the child's world the changed behaviour is for either pleasure through reward, or fear from punishment - also learning how to control others the same way when the opportunity arises, perhaps much later in life.

It is understandable that behaviourism has been taken up so extensively in schools, as it confines itself with items that are both observable and measurable. This satisfies the demands of school administrators, parents and teachers, and politicians, particularly at times of standardised testing.

The use of rewards and punishments feature prominently and often prove effective, albeit in the short term.

Historically, rewards and punishments have fitted well with a hierarchical structure in society, with welcome control being exerted by the powerful and wealthy, and subservience practiced by the less powerful and generally poorer, members of the community.

The behavioural view of learning becomes more controversial when its proponents resort to punishment instead of the more generally palatable rewards systems. One of the difficulties for the teaching profession is that in any reward system there is inherently a "punishment" system: all those in a group not rewarded are punished.

The end result all too frequently is that those who receive the rewards are rewarded for their innate skills, and those who are punished are punished for the exact opposite reasons - they do not possess the innate skills to be often rewarded - a frustrating set of circumstances that frequently result in poor classroom behaviour and performance, where the victim receives the blame.

Thorndike (in Dembo, 1994) at least believed that punishment did not necessarily weaken the bonds created by rewards, and saw little need for them in the learning equation. His advice to teachers: "Put together and exercise what should go together, and reward desirable connections" (p.43).

This followed his more general belief that "...the main factor influencing learning is reward, or a 'satisfying state of affairs'" (p.42).

It is important to understand what innate "beliefs" underlie a behavioural view of learning. At its most basic, the belief in stimulus (something that affects the senses) and response (a

reaction to the stimulus) known as contiguity, explains how much learning is occurring. When a stimulus is given, eventually the response will become automatic. This is not so much seen as a problem, but an aim of this approach. When teachers are confronted with the need to have their children perform well in an increasing number of standardised tests, such as the LAP in Victoria, the methods of learning instant responses (to stimuli) become valid. This is despite the totally changing needs of society to have a population who have well developed problem solving skills. The needed skills are in effect an antithesis to stimulus/response, as even at the most basic level of understanding, valid problem solving cannot be hierarchical - it needs the best solutions to be applied to the most critical world problems, rather than the people in the powerful positions determining societal outcomes.

The overemphasis on so-called basic skills will have a detrimental impact on learning that is required for the information age. For a start, the "basic skills" required are different. While many schools have altered their curriculums to include such things as keyboarding skills, the approach to the use of that equipment relates more to the use of chalk and slate, or paper and pencils, rather than the deeper level skills required to utilise the power behind the keyboard.

Substantially, while on the surface it appears that the change to the technological age has occurred, no real change has taken place - no philosophical difference is present, although the tools look different.

Thorndike (1911, 1931) Pavlov (1928) and BF Skinner (In Bjorn 1993) who all worked with animals, demonstrated both the power and the pitfalls of their approaches to behaviourism. While they were able to show valid evidence that animals respond to stimuli in order to perform specific functions, most

specifically to satisfy their basic need (Maslow 1968) for food, they have inadvertently demonstrated that animals respond well to an external locus of control. The only available decisions for the animal subjects of these experiments are those controlled by the designers of the experiments - the aforementioned researchers.

It should also be noted that the changes to ethical treatment of animals since many of these experiments took place would render them unethical by current, more enlightened standards. It then becomes problematic that much of what occurs in current classroom practice has this currently ethically dubious animal based research as its anchor.

I will now discuss cognitive approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and demonstrate how they generally add more to the education equation than behaviourist methods but still do not allow openings for learners- whether teachers or students, to challenge the world and find solutions to the next generation's problems.

By examining these concepts I will show that teaching, learning and assessment in schools has to catch up to the general needs of society, and that some of the answers may lie in the more humanistic approaches to learning, discussed later.

The proponents of cognitive learning theories see it as the addition of personal decision making and thinking to behavioural theories. As an approach to teaching, learning and assessment, it has a number of presumptions:

- children are committed to the goals of the teacher,
- children have self discipline, and that
- there will be an experienced "expert " available to assist the teacher design appropriate courses of action.

(Krause et al, 2003)

In reality, there may be little to link the child's thinking to the teacher's plans. And again, in great similarity to behaviourism, the cognitive approach hopes to convince the child to "toe the line", but just gets a little more sophisticated than overtly rewarding or punishing the child in doing so.

Where a cognitive approach does add something significant to the learning, teaching and assessment scenario is that it recognises the need for the child to actively engage in the learning process by making personal decisions about the learning tasks. Those tasks, emanating from the teacher, are not, however, challenged by the cognitive process, as the teacher is presumed to have all the knowledge and control, and has the sole responsibility for curriculum selection and decision making. While the cognitive approach sees its primary function the making of meaning out of experiences with the world, and to create links with learning that had previously taken place, the presumption is that the content of the learning is valid and appropriate for each child, and also that each child has a similar learning style- a belief that is strongly contested by Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1939, 1943) and many others.

Cognitive belief systems are taken a step further with what is referred to as constructivism. The addition of social interaction in a classroom setting to assist children's learning is again a step towards child centred learning, and is yet again a more complex scenario than straight behaviourist approaches. These social interactions can be constructed by the teacher and still fail to see that the mode of learning is still external locus of control. This learning may be much more seductive in its appeal to the young learners, but there has been no transfer, or sharing, of power, particularly when seen in a social context. A recent example of this is the dismantling of bilingual education structures (1999-2001) in the Northern

Territory, for Aboriginal children in remote communities. Much money is spent on such things as consultation, and so-called inclusion, and followed closely by massive spending on western cultural classroom materials, drawing children into willing compliance of their own cultural destruction - while still leaving the schooling system with extremely low levels of literacy, (Brendan Nelson TV interview, Darwin, April, 2002) and unable then to take an equal part in the benefits of modern society, while no longer being an integral part of their own traditional culture. Playing with toys, and rote memorisation of grammatical functions and spelling, no matter how important a teacher feels it to be, is overtly detrimental to the children it purports to assist. Brendan Nelson claimed that only 16 Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory in 2001 passed, or nearly passed, the National Literacy test.

One aspect of constructivism that is yet to be widely utilised in the Northern Territory is that individual learners need to make sense of information for themselves (Bruner 1990). As this necessitates each learner sees knowledge as relative, and therefore possibly different for each learner dependant upon prior knowledge and socio-cultural context. It then becomes easy to see that standardised testing has very little to offer this understanding of education, as there cannot, by definition, be "standards".

The only opening for such testing is that the teacher is still in total control of the selections within the curriculum- evidence also that, while a better option for learning than straight behaviourism, not much has changed substantially. Despite such glaring inconsistencies, there is no groundswell of opposition to standardised testing in classrooms that utilise the cognitive constructionist theories of learning, teaching and assessment. Teachers have made no real attempts to challenge those inconsistencies, and indeed have become compliant with

the testing authorities, submitting to the government's terms in case of punishment that may be metered out for non compliance.

Humanistic approaches to teaching, learning and assessment take a totally different belief system as a beginning point, than behaviourist and cognitive approaches. Humanism is ... "any system of thought that is predominantly concerned with the human experience of reasoning rather than with the spiritual aspects of life" (Krause et al, p 172, 2003).

Humanism is also described as the "belief that individual human beings are the fundamental source of all value and have the ability to understand—and perhaps even to control—the natural world by careful application of their own rational faculties" (Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names [Online]).

When these understandings are translated to the classroom practices of teaching, learning and assessment, the locus of control can, for the first time, be recognised as internal. Learners can learn for altruistic reasons. They are able to feel a sense of control, as their individual worth is seen as paramount. A seminal theorist in this understanding of the learner was Abraham Maslow, who developed a theory of motivation and a hierarchy of needs (1969), with the belief that humans are basically good, and need no other coercion to learn than the constant personal struggle to gain self-fulfilment, which he calls self-actualisation.

In his writing he believed that self actualisation tended to be reserved for people who had much life experience and were generally old. If his own theories are valid, self actualisation must also be possible for much younger people - school children, because by its nature, self actualisation can not compare one person's experience with another's. Older

people's self actualising moments may be more complex than children's but I believe key moments in children's lives could properly be described as "peak" experiences, or self actualising.

Maslow's understandings also have much to teach educators, and many current practices in schools reflect his views. Breakfast programs in many poorer schools worldwide show the understanding that if the basic need for food is not fulfilled, then there is little point moving towards the more intellectual pursuits of literacy and numeracy.

He also saw that there was a great need for children's self-esteem and positive self image to be developed, in order for children to be motivated to achieve. He also saw the benefits of engaging in art, music, literature, etc, as these too are a vehicle to the achievement of self fulfilment. Significantly, he believes that unless children's basic needs are met, they may not find other learning worth engaging in (in Dembo, p.206). Carl Rogers (1983) was adamant that "...prescribed curriculum, similar assignments for all student, lecturing as almost the only mode of instruction, standard tests by which all students are externally evaluated, and instructor-chosen grades as the measure of learning..." (p.21) was a flawed approach. He saw as the alternative "freedom to learn", where teachers and parents were to take on the role of facilitator, who "actively listen" to children, and guide them in their own endeavours by really engaging in children's thinking and problem solving with them and developing a good and positive relationship with the learner. He also highlights another crucial component of a teacher's repertoire: they must be truly human, and that their human qualities are a crucial part of the teaching learning equation (Dembo, p.209).

Rudolf Druikers (1957, 1968) approach to teaching, learning and assessment could best be described as "hands on" humanism. Where other theorists let things happen, Druikers sees the adults with positive roles, which include encouragement (not praise), and the allowing of what he calls natural consequences of children's behaviour to be their ongoing teacher. Later, "logical" consequences was added, which gives parents and teachers a solid interventionist role in children's learning. Awhile this approach has often, and easily, been confused with punishment, Druikers would be a strong supporter of Rogers in seeing the relationship between teacher and learner as crucial, and that it has a great need to be a positive relationship.

He also sees children as developing in their ability to understand the subconscious goals they may have, and that it is important for the teacher to recognise the children's goals by observing their behaviour.

Overall, he sees children as powerful developing decision-makers, needing maturity gained by the experience of consequences.

One of the few theorists who actually linked classroom learning-literacy in particular, to what Maslow sees as self actualising, and Rogers "freedom to learn" ideas, was Paulo Freire (1972) (in Emmitt and Pollock 1998 reprint). He believed that teaching merely the skills of reading and writing was not enough, but that learners must become critically aware of their world and to be in creative control of it. He saw the necessity to become actively involved and engaged in conscious action to achieve this, with the aim also of becoming more fully human in order to have control over our destiny. Emmitt and Pollock (1998) have interpreted his belief in self construction as only being possible by becoming

...active individual subjects engaged on an equal basis with others in the process of creating (or naming) the world. We should create history and culture rather than exist merely as passive objects accepting reality and the world as ready-made by other people. In creating history and culture, we create our own beings in the process. (Emmitt and Pollock p13, 1998).

Vygotski (Sternberg et al 1998) was also a proponent of the social context of learning. While it is implicit in his understanding of "scaffolding", where more knowledgeable learners work closely with less experienced learners, he also sees that social context as crucial in all learning. According to Grigorenko (in Sternberge et al, 1998) "Vygotski's main idea was that the development of the mind takes place in the course of social experience" (p.202).

In summary, I have discussed a variety of theorists, some behavioural, some cognitive, and others humanistic. I have shown that humanistic theory is the only one of the three that emphasises the human person in the learning arena.

Humanistic educational theory has much to offer teachers and educators in that its focus is human experience, while competing theories extrapolate from animal research. The key humanistic theorists see the development of the whole person as necessary for the advancement of a free and democratic society, and the very pursuit of freedom, with the humanistic understanding, desperately needs to be translated into classroom practice.

Being excited about real world learning, and solving real world problems, as simple as who sits next to whom on a classroom, in a cooperative fashion, is an achievable classroom aim.

Assessment, then, is as easy as looking at whether effort in achieving a result for a project was valid.

I believe the fundamental difference between the three philosophical approaches to teaching, learning and assessment discussed in this paper can be limited to one single component: that the control of the learning in only one of them rests with the learner - the humanistic approach.

"It is a fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of teaching have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of enquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this, it goes to wrack and ruin without fail,"  
Albert Einstein (in *Freedom to Learn*, p.83, 1969)

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