A View on Behaviorist Learning Theory

Introduction

Behaviorism is a learning theory that emphasizes observable behavior. The most radical view of behaviorism assumes that all behavior is determined via the environment or how one has been conditioned. This removes the notion that a person has free will to make choices and use experiences to construct new knowledge (Ertmer and Neby, 1993).

Early Contributors

One early contributor to the theory of behaviorism is Ivan Pavlov. Pavlov conducted research on dogs that led him to demonstrate that he could issue a desired response by having a dog make an association between the environment and something that naturally occurs as well (Windholz, 1995). John B. Watson made a dramatic quote regarding behaviorism, essentially saying that he could take a dozen healthy infants, put them in his own environment, and train them to be any profession he wanted based on training and environment (John B. Watson Biography, n.d.). Edward Thorndike also conducted research regarding animals, similar yet different than Pavlov’s experiment. Concluding from his research, he believed that when a being behaves in a certain way and receives a pleasant consequence, the consequence will more likely be repeated (Thorndike’s Laws of Learning, n.d.). Another important contributor to behavior is B.F. Skinner. Skinner’s thought process was in line with Thorndike’s with the idea of conditioning. He noticed relationships about how stimuli change due to positive and negative consequences (B.F. Skinner Biography, n.d.).

Major Principles

Watson’s study of psychology and understanding that it is a purely objective branch of science led many people to conduct behaviorist research. One of the major principles of
behaviorism is that of classical condition, due to Pavlov. His researched drew conclusions that a response is given due to an association with the environment. In relating this to learning, a stimulus or event that happens in the learning process can be used to predict how the learner will respond next time. Pavlov called this a stimulus-response association (Sparrow & Fernald, 1989). The majority of Pavlov’s tests were conducted on animals, which can only be translated to reflexive responses or involuntary behavior. However, it provided a foundation for future research to be conducted.

Following in Pavlov’s studies, Thorndike sought to understand whether there was a connection between voluntary behaviors and a desired stimulus. Based on his research with animals, he was able to determine three major laws in making connections with voluntary responses and desired outcomes: Law of Effect, Law of Exercise, and Law of Readiness (The Rise of Behaviorism, n.d.). The Law of Effect simply states that when behavior is followed by positive consequences, it will more likely be repeated, and when it is followed by negative consequences, it will be more likely to stop. The Law of Exercise states that as the behavior and consequence are repeated more often, the connection will be stronger. The Law of Readiness hinges on the previous in that if the subject is ready to perform a task, the subject will be satisfied, but if the subject is not ready then the subject will be annoyed or frustrated (Thorndike’s Laws of Learning, n.d.).

Skinner’s operant conditioning came later and is more widely known for advancing behaviorism into a human learning theory. The basics of this theory are a reward or consequence system. Skinner believed that it was necessary to view a person externally to be able to identify behaviors and their correlations. There are two concepts to his idea of operant conditioning: reinforcement and punishment.
Reinforcement seeks to increase a desired behavior. Skinner mentions two types of reinforcement: positive and negative. Positive reinforcers are outcomes that one would enjoy and are given or presented to the subject after the desired behavior. This could be words of encouragement or a reward. Negative reinforcers, on the other hand, involve the taking away or removal of an undesirable event or outcome after a behavior is displayed. An example of this would be a child getting nagged because he has not cleaned his room. Upon cleaning his room, the nagging ceases (Skinner, 1938).

Punishment seeks to decrease an undesired behavior. There are two types of punishment, positive and negative. A positive punishment refers to when an undesirable behavior occurs and an undesirable event or outcome is put on the subject, causing the subject to decrease that behavior. Negative punishment takes away a favorable event or outcome when an undesirable behavior is found (Skinner, 1938).

The development of the behaviorist theory led a path to further research and laid a foundation for more learning theories to be developed. Behaviorism is found in all sorts of places, especially in the basics of education.

**Application**

As teachers begin the school year, there are certain rules that they want their students to follow. These rules are laid out from the beginning, but students do not automatically follow them. High school students might follow certain expectations more so than a pre-school student because of the conditioning that has been performed throughout the school year.

Let us look at a pre-school student coming to school for the first time. The teacher wants this student to behave according to the classroom standards and get along with other classmates. Being in a school for the first time, the student does not know the expectations. Even after being
told and shown what the expectations might look like, the child may still do the opposite of the desired behavior. This is where operant conditioning comes in.

Often times, teachers seek to use reinforcers as a method of conditioning students. The pre-school student might demonstrate a behavior that the teacher finds appropriate and necessary. This behavior would be immediately followed by praise, words of encouragement, or a reward, in essence being a positive reinforcer. An example of this would be the student listening to directions that tell him to put his crayons away. After the student has followed the directions, he receives a positive reinforcer, increasing the chances that he will do it again next time.

An example of a negative reinforcer in this case would look like this, although it also contains part of the punishment as well. The child is sent to the corner for pushing another student. When the child decides to apologize to the student, he may leave the corner. While the child is waiting, this is an undesirable event. When he apologizes to the other student, the event is removed, and he recognizes that he needs to apologize.

Positive and negative punishments are often interchangeable because they are quite similar in the fact that something undesirable happens. The pre-school student does not complete his work because he is not focused or trying. The teacher does not want this behavior to continue, so he must stay inside for recess, which is an unfavorable event. A negative punishment could also be used similarly. The child is disrespectful to the teacher or another student. The teacher might take away a card that could have been used to receive a prize. The student displayed undesirable behavior and something desirable was taken away.

I use a lot of behaviorism in my own classroom as well. As 6th graders, my students know very well of the things that are expected of them because of the conditioning they have had
throughout the years. However, there are always certain expectations that a teacher carries. The quickest way for students to learn these expectations is to be disciplined on them by reinforcers or punishment.

References:


Sparrow, K., & Fernald, P. (1989). Teaching and Demonstrating Classical Conditioning. Teaching of Psychology, 16(4), 204-06

