

PSYC 337 LEARNING

Session 1 – What is Learning?

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Session Overview

- Our ability to learn underpins the very existence of all cultures and almost everything that we do.
- How many schools can you count?
- They are all built to promote learning.
- Industries all over the world depend on ability to learn when training their human resources.
- Psychologists view learning as a means of adapting to the environment.
- Generally, learning is a process that depends on experience and leads to long term changes in behaviour.

Session Objectives

- At the end of the session, the student will
 - Understand what learning is and what it is not;
 - Understand the classifications or different types of learning;
 - Be able to differentiate the various conceptions of learning.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One: The Definition of Learning
- Topic Two: What Learning is Not
- Topic Three: Types of Learning



Reading List

- Relevant text/chapters and reading materials are available on Sakai



Topic One

THE DEFINITION OF LEARNING



The Definition of Learning

- A relatively permanent change in behavior, that occurs as a result of experience (Terry, 2000).
- **Key words in the Definition**
- **Relatively Permanent**
 - ✓ Learning does not include temporal changes such as tiredness
 - ✓ It should result in long-lasting behaviour (in relative terms)
- **Change in Behaviour**
 - ✓ Learning can mainly be inferred from observable behaviour
 - ✓ In essence, in order to know whether learning has taken place or not, you have to compare the person's prior behaviour to a behaviour before the experience and the behaviour after the experience

The Definition of Learning

- **Experience**
 - Something that happens to you in your lifetime, usually involving interaction with your environment
- Every time you interact with your environment, you gain an experience.
- This experience, depending on individual characteristics, leads to changes in behaviour.
- Learning can take place only through experience.
 - Any other change resulting from any other factor other than experience is not a learnt behaviour.

Sample Question

- Explain why the following key words are important in defining learning:
 - Experience
 - Behaviour
- What is the relationship between the definition of learning?

Topic Two

WHAT LEARNING IS NOT



What Learning is Not

- According to Sdorow (1993), the following concepts are not learning
- **Reflex:** An inborn involuntary response to a specific kind of stimulus
 - E.g. automatic and involuntary withdrawal of your hands when you accidentally touch a hot object.
- This is called the limb-withdrawal reflex.
- It is an example of a reflexive behaviour.
- You did not learn that response through experience.
- Rather, it is an inborn tendency and therefore cannot be considered as a learnt behaviour

What Learning is Not

- **Instinct:** An inborn complex behaviour found in members of a species
- Note that some organisms are programmed in such a way that they are controlled by their inborn tendencies.
 - E.g. nest building in birds is an instinctive behaviour because birds start this behaviour at a particular stage of their development without prompting.
- Note: Though instinct results in changes in behaviour, it does not constitute learning because it is not due to experience

What Learning is Not

- **Maturation:** The sequential unfolding of inherited predispositions
- Learning and maturation coexist.
 - A child needs to be biologically mature to learn a language.
 - This is an example of **phase-specific learning** (Frieman, 2002).
- At a specified stage in their biological maturation, when children are exposed to a language environment, which is an experience, they begin to pick sounds and start making intelligible sounds and ultimately begin to speak.

Sample Question

- In your own words explain why the following cannot be considered as learning:
 1. Maturation
 2. Reflex
 3. Instinct
- What is phase-specific learning?

Topic Three

TYPES OF LEARNING



Types of Learning

We will explain the following types of learning:

- 1. Habituation**
- 2. Sensitization**
- 3. Associative Learning**
- 4. Complex Learning**

Types of Learning

1. Habituation

- It is a simple form of learning, in which an organism after a period of exposure to a stimulus stops responding.
 - It is the diminution/ waning of responsiveness to repetitive stimulation (Frieman, 2002)
- It can be seen as learning to ignore frequently occurring stimuli that are not harmful or have no bearing on an individual's welfare
- Example: The alarm of a new clock is likely to wake you up initially; but after sometime, you learn to ignore the sound.

Types of Learning

- Importance of Habituation
 - it helps filter large amounts of information from surrounding environment.
 - i.e. minimises jittery because of the billions of stimuli that impinge on our senses every minute.
 - you get to focus attention on the most important features of your environment (Frieman, 2002).

Types of Learning

2. Sensitization

- The opposite of habituation is **sensitization**.
 - the process where by an individual learns to respond defensively to a wide range of stimuli due to exposure to a dangerous or a painful stimulus.
- In sensitization, an individual develops an enhanced responsiveness to repetitive stimulation (Frieman, 2002).
- E.g. people who are afraid of snakes would readily develop a heightened sense of awareness, if they have to walk through a bush.

Types of Learning

3. Associative Learning

- It involves learning that two events occur together.
- This type of learning has been referred to as **Stimulus-Response (S-R)** type of learning.
- There are two types of associative learning:
 - A. Association between Stimuli
 - B. Association between a Response and its Consequences

Types of Learning

A. Association Between Stimuli:

- Under this type of associative learning, an organism learns association between two or more stimuli
- A **stimulus** is any thing that triggers a response.
 - The plural form of stimulus is **stimuli**.
- A sound that causes you to turn your head in its direction is an example of stimulus
- The process whereby an organism learns association between stimuli is termed **Classical Conditioning**.

Types of Learning

B. Association Between a Response and its Consequences

- This involves the situation in which an organism learns association between a response and its consequences

Example

- Imagine that you do not know what an electric switch is.
- In your first response, you press the switch and all of a sudden the room is lit with lights.
- Your curiosity causes you to press the switch again and the result was that the room becomes dark.
- With these two demonstrations, you will learn association between your response— pressing a switch— and the consequences— lights being turned on or off.
- The process where an organism learns association between a response and its consequence is termed **Operant Conditioning**.

Types of Learning

4. Complex Learning

- Complex learning is where there is an involvement of a wide range of cognitive processes in learning.
- Under complex learning, the role of cognition in learning is emphasised.
- This is where the role of mental processes feature strongly

Sample Question

1. What is associative learning?
2. What is stimulus?
3. Differentiate between the two types of Associative learning

