Bailey Barnes

Dr. Tufte

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Incorporating Behaviorism, Humanism, and 21st Century Skills in a Secondary English Classroom

Learning theories are both important and necessary for a successful classroom, especially because every student has different needs. To account for the diverse needs of learners, teachers should use multiple different theories. Behaviorism, humanism, and 21st Century Skills are theories that work together well to create a successful, safe, and knowledgeable classroom environment.

Behaviorism is the theory that views students as passive learners and deals with the ways in which they can most effectively respond to stimuli. As John Bruce Francis, in his article titled “Theory vs. Practice in High Level Learning: A Response to Behaviorism,” he writes that, “the emphasis is still upon instruction and this clearly implies control by the teacher” (Francis 6). Basically, behaviorism rewards good behavior and punishes bad behavior. This theory can easily, and should, be used in classrooms. The Berkeley Graduate Division even writes, “Correct behavioral responses are transmitted by the teacher and absorbed by the students.” For example, many teachers condition their class starting on their first day to walk into class, sit down, take out paper and a pencil, and respond to a prompt written on the board. They may not have been efficient at this practice at first, but over time, they were conditioned to do this everyday. Another classroom practice that falls into the category of behaviorism is creating class rules. Students who fail to follow the rules will receive a negative reinforcement. In these ways, behaviors are reinforced with positive and negative consequences which conditions student’s behaviors in the classroom.

The next learning theory is humanism. Humanism consists of respecting the whole child and having the expectation that people have the internal drive to do good. It preserves human dignity and gives students a sense of belonging. Upholding a student's dignity includes letting them know that they are loved, safe, and that they have freedom and choice. A classroom practice that reflects this theory is allowing the students to have a free choice in what they do. Giving them a list of potential projects gives them the opportunity to not only be creative in their own individual way, but it also allows them to be empowered by the skills that they are allowed to use. Another way that this theory can be applied is through getting to know the student’s personality types and how they best learn. In this way, students can feel loved, appreciated, and safe, remembering that their teacher cares about them and wants them to do well.

Finally, 21st century skills are important because they allow a student to expand their knowledge through the use of technology. These skills and behaviors that are developed, including critical thinking, communication, and collaboration, are different ways for a student’s knowledge of a subject to be applied in a tangible way. A classroom practice that reflects this theory is asking students to work in groups to collaborate over a project that allows them to exercise their creativity while also allowing them to apply their knowledge. Another practice that can be used is to be constantly asking questions in the classroom and open them up to be discussed within a larger group. This will allow critical thinking as well as communication, collaboration, and creativity among a diverse group of students.

These three learning theories fit in well with my philosophy as a teacher. I think that it is important to lay specific ground rules in a classroom including a cell phone policy, a list of class rules, homework policies, a tardy policy, etc. That being said, if my classroom is only ruled by a behavioristic and authoritarian philosophy, students will not feel loved, respected, or free to make choices. That is why I think that the humanistic theory fits in well with behaviorism. John Bruce Francis even writes that, “exploring the limitations of behaviorist learning theory can restore somewhat a teacher’s faith in personal responsibility” (7). This is exactly what Humanism seeks to do. Allowing students to have freedom in their work is going to move them from being extrinsically motivated by rules and punishments, and start to be intrinsically motivated by the freedom in their work and because they are feeling more empowered. This is what I really love about the humanistic learning theory. Students can not always be let by the teacher. Humanism, beginning with the love and support offered by the teacher, will encourage them to expand their knowledge and do better work. The 21st century skills then tie in perfectly with where the students are after the combination of behaviorism and humanism. The student, both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated, will have the power to use their knowledge and apply them to 21st century behaviors and skills, including critical thinking and collaboration. Delane Bender-Slack authored an article about a humanistic approach to global learning, a combination of two learning theories. She writes, “Last year, after taking a graduate course titled Global Education: Issues and Problems, my mission was clear. I wanted to teach students to function effectively in the global community” (70). This teacher decided to give her class a focus for the trimester and had them read literature that could relate back to the global community. Specifically, she had them research human rights violations, which triggered their interest in the global community as they learned about injustices all around the world. Then, they read poetry and short stories that discussed moral and ethical issues as well as the human condition, giving them a literary background that supports human dignity. For their final project, they collaborated and did projects about a country that has major human rights violations, all while incorporating the literature they studied throughout the trimester. This is a project that can be done in the English classroom that supports 21st century skills, especially cultural awareness and collaboration, using they knowledge that they have gained.

By using Behaviorism, Humanism, and 21st Century Skills in the classroom, I will be able to not only reach the needs of my individual students, but also teach them skills and behaviors that can be used for life outside of the classroom.

Works Cited

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