

# Behaviorism

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## THE BASICS OF BEHAVIORISM

The *theory of behaviorism* concentrates on the study of overt behaviors that can be observed and measured (Good & Brophy, 1990). In general, the behavior theorists view the mind as a “black box” in the sense that response to *stimulus* can be observed quantitatively, ignoring the possibility of thought processes occurring in the mind. Behaviorists believe that learning takes place as the result of a response that follows on a specific stimulus. By repeating the *S-R* (stimulus-response) cycle, the organism (may it be an animal or human) is *conditioned* into repeating the response whenever the same stimulus is present. The behavioral emphasis on breaking down complex tasks, such as learning to read, into subskills that are taught separately has a powerful influence on instructional design. Behaviors can be modified, and learning is measured by observable change in behavior. The behavior theorists emphasize the need of objectivity, which leads to great accentuation of statistical and mathematical analysis. The design principles introduced by the behavior theorists continue to guide the development of today’s computer-based learning. In distance education courseware and instructional software, key behavior-modification principles are used. For example, a typical course Web site usually states the objectives of the software; uses text, visual, or audio to apply appropriate *reinforcers*; provides repetition and immediate feedback; uses principles to shape, chain, model, punish, and award the learners; incorporates a scoring system as a part of the system; and provides status of the progress of the learner. Major learning theorists associated with behaviorism are the following:

- Pavlov
- Thorndike
- Skinner
- Watson
- Gagné

The major educational technology developments in America that can be attributed to behaviorism are the following (Saettler, 1990):

- the behavioral objectives movement
- the teaching machine phase
- the programmed instruction movement
- the individualized instructional approaches
- the computer-assisted learning
- the systems approach to instruction

Major instructional design theorists associated with behaviorism are as follows:

- Glaser
- Gagné and Briggs
- Dick and Carey
- Mager

## BEHAVIORISM AND LEARNING THEORIES

The advent of behavioral theories can be traced back to the elder Sophists of ancient Greece, Cicero, Herbart, and Spencer (Saettler, 1990). Behaviorism, as a learning theory, can be traced back to Aristotle, whose essay “Memory” focused on associations being made between events such as lightning and thunder. Other philosophers that followed Aristotle’s thoughts are Hobbes (1650), Hume (1740), Brown (1820), Bain (1855), and Ebbinghaus (1885). Franklin Bobbitt developed the modern concept of behavioral objectives in the early 1900s. More recently, the names associated with the development of the behaviorist theory include Pavlov, Thorndike, Watson, and B. F. Skinner.

### Pavlov (1849-1936)

The Russian physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov is the precursor to behavioral science. He is best

known for his work in classical conditioning or stimulus substitution. Pavlov's experiment involved food, a dog, and a bell. His work inaugurated the era of S-R psychology.

Pavlov placed meat powder (an unconditioned stimulus) on a dog's tongue, which caused the dog to automatically salivate (the unconditioned response). The unconditioned responses are natural and not learned. On a series of subsequent trials, Pavlov sounded a bell at the same time he gave the meat powder to the dog. When the food was accompanied by the bell many times, Pavlov found that he could withhold the food, and the bell's sound itself would cause the dog to salivate. The bell became the *conditioned stimulus* that caused the conditioned response of salivating (Thomas, 1994). In 1904, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his research on digestive processes.

The stimulus and response items of Pavlov's experiment can be summarized as follow:

Food	Unconditioned Stimulus
Salivation	Unconditioned Response
Bell	Conditioned Stimulus
Salivation	Conditioned Response

Pavlov also made the following observations (Mergel, 1998).

- **Stimulus Generalization:** Once the dog has learned to salivate at the sound of the bell, it will salivate at other similar sounds.
- **Extinction:** If you stop pairing the bell with the food, salivation will eventually cease in response to the bell.
- **Spontaneous Recovery:** Extinguished responses can be "recovered" after an elapsed time, but will soon extinguish again if the dog is not presented with food.
- **Discrimination:** The dog could learn to discriminate between similar bells (stimuli), and discern which bell would result in the presentation of food and which would not.
- **Higher Order Conditioning:** Once the dog has been conditioned to associate the bell with food, another unconditioned stimulus such as a light may be flashed at the same time that the bell is rung. Eventually the dog will salivate at the flash of the light without the sound of the

bell (<http://www.usask.ca/education/coursework/802papers/mergel/brenda.htm>).

### Thorndike (1874-1949)

Another influential contributor to establishing education as a science was Edward L. Thorndike. Thorndike's laws were built upon the stimulus-response hypothesis of Pavlov. He was also a strong advocate of educational measurement.

Around the turn of the century, Thorndike conducted researches in animal behavior before becoming interested in human development. He was interested in discovering whether animals such as cats and dogs could learn their tasks through imitation or observation.

Thorndike's *laws of learning* for humans, based on *connectionism*, stated that learning was the formation of a connection between stimulus and response. His behavioral learning theory studied increasing a behavior with the use of rewards, punishment, and practice. Three major laws in Thorndike's laws of learning are the *law of effects*, which suggested that the strength of connection is dependent on what follows, the *law of exercise*, which suggested that practice strengthens the connection while disuse weakens it, and the *law of readiness*, which suggested that if physically ready, the connection is satisfying for the organism.

Green (1998) pointed out that close temporal sequence is not the only means of insuring the connection of the satisfaction with the response producing it. The other equally important factors are the frequency, energy, and duration of the connection, and the closeness with which the satisfaction is associated with the response. The result is most clearly seen in the effect of increasing the interval between the response and the satisfaction or discomfort. Such an increase diminishes the rate of learning. Minimum delay in reinforcement has a crucial impact on the learning process. What is called attention to the response or *knowledge of the results* counts also. A slightly satisfying or indifferent response made often may win a closer connection than a more satisfying response made only rarely.

Thorndike believed that when the response was positive, a neural bond would be established between the stimulus and response, and learning takes

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