**5 educational learning theories and how to apply them**

**By Brian Fairbanks**

September 09, 2021 • 6 minute read

**At a glance**

* There are **five primary educational learning theories**: behaviorism, cognitive, constructivism, humanism, and connectivism.
* Additional learning theories include **transformative**, **social**, and **experiential**.
* Understanding learning theories can result in a **variety of outcomes**, from improving communication between students and teachers to determining what students learn.

**How educational learning theories can impact your education**

Teaching and learning may appear to be a universal experience. After all, everyone goes to school and learns more or less the same thing, right? Well, not quite.

As the prolific number of educational theorists in learning suggests, there’s actually an impressive variety of educational approaches to the art and science of teaching. Many of them have been pioneered by educational theorists who’ve studied the science of learning to determine what works best and for whom.

“Learning is defined as a process that brings together personal and environmental experiences and influences for acquiring, enriching or modifying one’s knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, behavior and worldviews,” notes the [International Bureau of Education](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/geqaf/annexes/technical-notes/most-influential-theories-learning#:~:text=Learning%20is%20defined%20as%20a,how%20this%20process%20takes%20place.). “Learning theories develop hypotheses that describe how this process takes place.”

Generally, there are five widely accepted learning theories teachers rely on:

* **Behaviorism**learning theory
* **Cognitive**learning theory
* **Constructivism**learning theory
* **Humanism**learning theory
* **Connectivism**learning theory

Educational theorists, teachers, and experts believe these theories can inform successful approaches for teaching and serve as a foundation for developing lesson plans and curriculum.

**What are learning theories?**

Theories in education didn’t begin in earnest until the early 20th century, but curiosity about how humans learn dates back to the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They explored whether knowledge and truth could be found within oneself (rationalism) or through external observation (empiricism).

By the 19th century, psychologists began to answer this question with scientific studies. The goal was to understand objectively how people learn and then develop teaching approaches accordingly.

In the 20th century, the debate among educational theorists centered on behaviorist theory versus cognitive psychology. Or, in other words, do people learn by responding to external stimuli or by using their brains to construct knowledge from external data?

**The five educational learning theories**

Today, much research, study, and debate have given rise to the following five learning theories:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **THEORY** | **EXPLANATION** | **APPLICATION** |
| Behaviorism | As Simply Psychology puts it: “Behaviorism is only concerned with [observable stimulus-response behaviors](https://www.simplypsychology.org/behaviorism.html), as they can be studied in a systematic and observable manner.” | Learning is based on a system of routines that “drill” information into a student’s memory bank, as well as positive feedback from teachers and an educational institution itself. If students do an excellent job, they receive positive reinforcement and are signaled out for recognition. |
| Cognitivism | Learning relies on both external factors (like information or data) and the internal thought process. | Developed in the 1950s, this theory moves away from behaviorism to focus on the mind’s role in learning. According to the [International Bureau of Education](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/geqaf/annexes/technical-notes/most-influential-theories-learning#:~:text=Learning%20is%20defined%20as%20a,how%20this%20process%20takes%20place.): “In cognitive psychology, learning is understood as the acquisition of knowledge: the learner is an information-processor who absorbs information, undertakes cognitive operations on it and stocks it in memory.” |
| Constructivism | The learner builds upon his or her previous experience and understanding to “construct” a new understanding. | “The passive view of teaching views the learner as ‘an empty vessel’ to be filled with knowledge,” explains Simply Psychology, “whereas [constructivism states that learners construct meaning](https://www.simplypsychology.org/constructivism.html) only through active engagement with the world (such as experiments or real-world problem solving).” |
| Humanism | A “[learner-centric approach](https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/an-introduction-to-humanistic-learning-theory-1489cdde6359)” in which the potential is the focus rather than the method or materials. | With the understanding that people are inherently good, humanism focuses on creating an environment conducive to self-actualization. In doing so, learners’ needs are met and they are then free to determine their own goals while the teacher assists in meeting those learning goals. |
| Connectivism | Informed by the digital age, connectivism departs from constructivism by identifying and remediating gaps in knowledge. | Strongly influenced by technology, connectivism focuses on a learner’s ability to frequently source and update accurate information. Knowing how and where to find the best information is as important as the information itself. |

**Why are learning theories important?**

It is part of the human condition to crave knowledge. Consequently, numerous scientists, psychologists, and thought leaders have devoted their careers to studying learning theories. Understanding *how*people learn is a critical step in optimizing the learning process.

It is for this reason that teacher colleges or educator preparation programs spend so much time having teacher candidates study human development and multiple learning theories. Foundational knowledge of how humans learn, and specifically how a child learns and develops cognitively, is essential for all educators to be their most effective instructors in the classroom.

Pamela Roggeman, EdD, dean of University of Phoenix’s [College of Education](https://www.phoenix.edu/colleges/college-of-education.html?link_id=CTMK-44448.497257), explains her take on the role learning theory plays in preparing teachers:

“Just as no two people are the same, no two students learn in the exact the same way or at the exact same rate. Effective educators need to be able to pivot and craft instruction that meets the needs of the individual student to address the needs of the ‘whole child.’ Sound knowledge in multiple learning theories is a first step to this and another reason why great teachers work their entire careers to master both the *art and the science* of teaching.”

Although espousing a particular learning theory isn’t necessarily required in most teaching roles, [online learning author and consultant](https://www.tonybates.ca/2014/07/29/learning-theories-and-online-learning/) Tony Bates points out that most teachers tend to follow one or another theory, even if it’s done unconsciously.

So, whether you’re an aspiring or experienced teacher, a student, or a parent of a student (or some combination thereof), knowing more about each theory can make you more effective in the pursuit of knowledge.

**Are there other theories in education?**

Like students themselves, learning theories in education are varied and diverse. In addition to the five theories outlined above, there are still more options, including:

* **Transformative**learning theory: This theory is particularly relevant to adult learners. It posits that new information can essentially change our worldviews when our life experience and knowledge are paired with critical reflection.
* **Social**learning theory: This theory incorporates some of the tacit tenets of peer pressure. Specifically, students observe other students and model their own behavior accordingly. Sometimes it’s to emulate peers; other times it’s to distinguish themselves from peers. Harnessing the power of this theory involves getting students’ attention, focusing on how students can retain information, identifying when it’s appropriate to reproduce a previous behavior, and determining students’ motivation.
* **Experiential**learning theory: There are plenty of clichés and parables about teaching someone something by doing it, although it wasn’t until the early 1980s that it became an official learning theory. This approach emphasizes both learning about something and experiencing it so that students can apply knowledge in real-world situations.

**How educational theories influence learning**

Educational theories influence learning in a variety of ways. For teachers, learning theory examples can impact their approach to instruction and classroom management. Finding the right approach (even if it’s combining two or more learning theories) can make the difference between an effective and inspiring classroom experience and an ineffective one.

Applied learning theories directly impact a classroom experience in a variety of ways, such as:

* Providing students with **structure** and a comfortable, steady environment.
* Helping educators, administrators, students and parents **align on goals and outcomes**.
* **Empowering** **teachers** to be, as Bates says, “in a better position to make choices about how to approach their teaching in ways that will best fit the perceived needs of their students.”
* Impacting **how** **and what** a person learns.
* Helping outsiders (colleges, testing firms, etc.) **determine what kind of education** you had or are receiving.
* Allowing students a voice in determining **how the class will be managed**.
* Deciding if **instruction will be mostly teacher-led or student-led**.
* Determining **how much collaboration** will happen in a classroom.

**How to apply learning theories**

So, how do learning theories apply in the real world? Education is an [evolving field with a complicated future](https://www.phoenix.edu/blog/future-you-and-education/?link_id=CTMK-44448.497257). And, according to Roggeman, the effects of applied educational theory can be long-lasting.

She explains:

“The learning theories we experienced as a student influence the type of work environment we prefer as adults. For example, if one experienced classrooms based heavily on social learning during the K-12 years, as an adult, one may be very comfortable in a highly collaborative work environment. Reflection on one’s own educational history might serve as an insightful tool as to one’s own fulfillment in the workplace as an adult.”

Educational theories have come a long way since the days of Socrates and even the pioneers of behaviorism and cognitivism. And while learning theories will no doubt continue to evolve, teachers and students alike can reap the benefits of this evolution as we continue to develop our understanding of how humans most effectively learn.

*Educational theories of learning are one thing.*[*Adult learning theories*](https://www.phoenix.edu/blog/adult-learning-theories-principles/?link_id=CTMK-44448.497257)*are another. Learn more on our blog.*

*Ready to put theory into practice? Explore*[*Foundations in Virtual Teaching*](https://www.phoenix.edu/professional-development/Education/course-details/foundations-in-virtual-teaching-v1-1/?link_id=CTMK-44448.497257)*at University of Phoenix!*