

Learning

Learning: Human learning has been the focus of organized study for many decades, and the results of this work have become ever more important as societies intervene on so many levels to promote and influence learning. Today there is no one single way to define learning. Rather, what is found is a range of explanations, each of which provides an important frame of reference for thinking about learning as a human endeavor. Generally speaking, over the past 60 years, three major conceptual frameworks have emerged, and these three will be the focus of this entry.

The first of these frameworks looks at learning in terms of observable behavior. In simple terms, learning is defined as any relatively permanent change in behavior that is not the result of normal growth or maturation. There is no limit to the range of behaviors that might be considered or the contexts in which they occur. When people drive automobiles or operate machinery, perform school tasks such as writing and calculating, or engage in social activities with others, generally their behaviors are fairly complex behaviors that have been acquired over time and with much practice. People who study learning from a behavioral perspective want to know how these complex behaviors are acquired and how they change over time.

The second framework, which began to appear in the late 1960s and early 1970s, deliberately moved away from behavioral explanations, focusing instead on the information-processing activities that occur in the human brain. This movement, known as the *cognitive revolution* in human learning, developed largely around questions about memory and meaning. For example, when a person listens to people talk—or reads from text—how does he or she process and store what was heard or seen? How does the person represent information in memory for later use, and how does he or she gain access to the large amount of stored data? These and other related questions have dominated the study of learning for many decades, and they continue to be prominent in researchers' thinking about learning. Thus, viewing learning as a cognitive activity, it can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to use knowledge to solve problems.

A third framework for investigating human learning began to be noticed during the early 1990s. In contrast to the cognitive point of view, in which learning is defined in terms of an individual's computation of information, this framework focuses more on how people work and learn in cultural settings. Here learning is defined not as the acquisition of knowledge but as participation in meaningful social practices. Examples of cultural practices naturally include a broad range of activities, such as child rearing, office work, professional endeavors, trades, hobbies and the like. As people participate in social practices, they develop roles relevant to their particular type of participation, and as these roles develop, people acquire identities as legitimate practitioners. One important distinction between this framework and the cognitive viewpoint is that in this framework, learning from a social perspective is never separated from doing.

When looking across this history of progress in learning research, there is a natural temptation to simply focus on the latest prominent explanation that may be enjoying most attention. Certainly today there is very little discussion of behaviorism as a viable framework for understanding learning. In fact, the intention and purpose of the cognitive revolution was not simply to modify behaviorism but to replace it altogether.

It can be argued, however, that each of the three frameworks outlined here provides an important window on learning and allows us to see human learning as the rich and multifaceted phenomenon it really is.

Reference: Salkind, N. J. (Ed.) (2008). *The Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology* V 1 (pp. 573-574). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.