The Learning Theories

Confucius who lived in the 6th century BC already gave us the Theories of Learning through his wisest Words and I quote: By 3 methods we may learn wisdom: first by Reflection which is the noblest, second by Imitation which is the easiest and third by Experience which is the bitterest.

Generally, when we think of learning we visualize a classroom full of students’ books open on the desk listening to a teacher or professor in front of the room. However, contrary to this image, learning takes place in individuals through 3 different processes. And all our behaviour is a result of these three processes.

i) Conditioning: Classical and Operant or Instrumental Conditioning

ii) Social Learning Theory

iii) Cognitive Theory of Learning

In the 1890’s Evan Pavlov conducted an experiment with a Dog where he made the Dog learn to Salivate at the sound of a Bell. Pavlov observed that the Dog salivated naturally when it was given food. Just before the Dog was served food Pavlov rung a bell. With continuous pairing of the Bell and the food over a period of time the Dog learnt to salivate even when only the bell was rung in anticipation of the FOOD it knew would follow.

Let me give you an example before I explain the theory to you. In my school my Principal made important announcements over the Public Announcement System. Every time the PA system was switched on we students could hear the speaker turn on. When the Principal was talking teachers made the class quiet and if students failed to stop talking they were reprimanded either at that time or after the announcement was done. I have noticed that this act of discipline has persisted in me over the years. Now every time a speaker is turned on I stop talking immediately. I am sure you too can think of many of your behaviours which are a result of classical conditioning.

Another landmark experiment for better understanding of learning is the one conducted by Burrhus Frederic Skinner better known as BF Skinner- for who in their right minds would like to be called Burrhus. BF Skinner made a major breakthrough when he explained learning in relation to responses and the contingent consequences.

Skinner placed a Rat in a box called the Operant Conditioning Box which had a lever. His aim was to teach the Rat to press the lever and then to make it unlearn the response too. When the pressing of the lever was followed by a pellet of food the Rat quickly learnt to press the lever. But when the pressing of the lever was followed by an electric shock the Rat quickly unlearnt what it had learnt before…Smart Rat.

Thus, Skinner concluded that behaviour can be learnt or unlearnt depending on the consequences that follow after a response is made. If behaviour is followed by a reward the behaviour is more likely to be repeated and if followed by punishment is less likely to be repeated.

That brings us to the third theory of learning. Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura proposes that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modelling. What Bandura is proposing that we need not go through a situation ourselves or get rewarded or punished ourselves for us to learn a behaviour. Merely by watching Skinners Rat his assistant could conclude when was it safe to touch the lever.

 Cognitive Theorists however propound that learning is not just change in behaviour. Learners come to a situation with prior knowledge and how much a person learns in a situation is largely dependent on the Individual, the environment he comes form and the environment he is placed in and his past knowledge. Which means how much a person will learn depends on the individual, his mental makeup and memory & the environment.

But my dear friends these social psychologists propounded their theories in the 19th and 20th centuries but the great Confucius who lived in the 6th century BC already gave us the Theories of Learning through his wisest Words and I quote again: By 3 methods we may learn wisdom: First by Reflection which is the noblest, second by Imitation which is the easiest and third by Experience which is the bitterest .

**T M Hawabibi**