

What Does It Take To Improve Schools?

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Module #3: Theories of Learning

The focus of schools on learning is often taken for granted. In fact, schools serve a wide variety of purposes beyond supporting the learning of students (including for example, including housing young people during the day; sorting students into programs and roles etc.). Furthermore, schools are often assumed to be the location where learning should take place. Yet, learning takes place formally and informally, inside as well as outside of schools and classrooms. While schools or other existing educational organizations and environments might fit the purposes of learning well, the questions – why learn? And why go to school? – always need to be asked. As a consequence, educators and school designers need to be able to consider and reflect on their purposes, the learning goals that need to be achieved to accomplish those purposes, and the elements of their design that they think will support the pursuit of those goals and purposes. Such consideration is a central aspect of articulating the theory of action underlying educational experiences, determining what’s working and what’s not, and pursuing productive improvements.

In order to support the development of new designs for learning, this module offers a quick overview of some key historical and contemporary theories of learning. In the process, the module seeks to deepen appreciation of the key role that theories of learning play in the design of educational environments and addresses key questions like:

- How do people learn?
- What difference does that make for schools? For education?

Assignment

Required:

Resnick, L. & Hall, M. (1998). “Learning organizations for sustainable organizational reform. *Daedulus*, 127, 89-118.

And one of a selection of books:

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Random House.

Garcia, O. & Kleifgen, J. A. (2010). *Education emergent bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practices for English Language Learners*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses*

- relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Hehir, T. & Katzman, L. (2012). *Effective inclusive schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jackson, Y. (2011). *Pedagogy of confidence*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Thomas, D. & Seely-Brown, J.S. (2011). *A new culture of learning*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Tough, P. (2013). *How children succeed*. Mariner Books.

Please read the Resnick and Hall article for an overview of some of the predominant theories of learning in the 20th Century. This article provides a quick overview of the similarities and differences in the work of Edward Thorndike and John Dewey in particular and an introduction to the contributions of key figures like Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner. Central here are differences in what these leading figures see as the goals of learning (e.g. developing skills, abilities, dispositions, cognitive capacities etc.) as well as the extent to which and the way in which they see context(s) playing a role in learning. The article also introduces the central ideas of social or “situated” cognition which suggest that abilities and dispositions are not just the property or characteristics of an individual but they also reflect the opportunities and constraints in the particular social, physical, and cultural contexts in which those abilities and dispositions develop. As such, abilities and dispositions can be viewed as “distributed” across the tools, resources, and people in particular contexts and embedded within the particular situations in which people live and learn.

In order to facilitate your reading of the article, feel free to use the attached summary chart to help you zero in on some of the key differences in these theories and their implications for instruction. To familiarize yourself with some more recent views and approaches to learning, skim the introductions and conclusions of the other books in order to select one that you would like to read and explore more fully. (Note that while some books are explicit in describing a particular theory of learning, others – like the Garcia & Kliefgen, Hehir & Katzman, and Tough books – highlight particular educational approaches and the discussion of the particular theory of learning under those approaches may be more implicit.) Once you have read your book, meet together (face-to-face or virtually) with the others who have read the same book to have a “book club” discussion. The goal of these discussions is to produce a short overview of the key elements of the theory of learning explored in your book.

To help you prepare for your group discussions, after you read your selected book, fill in the attached blank chart with your own notes and plan to bring it to your group meeting. In lieu of a regular class on Wednesday, October 28th, book clubs should make their own plans for meeting. Groups can use the regular classroom to meet during class time, they can meet face-to-face at another time convenient for all members, or they can use Google Hangouts to meet online at some point during the week. If someone in your group is familiar with and can support an

online discussion using a different platform, feel free to do so, but please let us know your plan. For the virtual meetings, please test out these platforms individually before your meeting time so that you can each be sure that your equipment is working properly and everything runs smoothly. By providing this opportunity for groups to arrange their own meetings (in person or online), we hope to accomplish the learning goals for the class at the same time that we explore some of the possibilities for teaching this course with a larger group of students, at least some of whom may not be in residence at TC.

Each member of the book group should be prepared to share the overview and answering questions about their book and the associated theory of learning with their colleagues.

C&T 4004: Summary table for Resnick & Hall (1998)

	Traditional Approach (from Thorndike)	Progressive Approach (from Dewey)	Progressive Approach (from Piaget/Bruner)	New Standards/New Learning Approach (From Resnick)
Goals	Develop academic skills and abilities	Develop knowledge and forms of reasoning and social interaction needed to be good Democratic citizens	Develop sophisticated conceptual structures and reasoning capabilities (like those of adults, experts etc.)	Develop the skills, knowledge, and habits of high performance in relevant domains.
Theory of Learning	Develop bonds/associations through rewards and punishment; Aptitude/ability is “paramount” in learning, and it is largely hereditary	Learning takes place in context, in interaction with others	Students use their developing perceptual and conceptual structures to make sense of the world and develop coherent interpretations of phenomena.	People build mental representations that impose order and coherence on experience and information; knowledge is essential to thinking and acquiring new knowledge. Habits and beliefs are acquired through socialization
Implications for Instruction	“stamping-in” and “stamping-out” of associations through practice, testing, and more practice; geared to the aptitude of different individuals	meaningful, “authentic” projects	Learning by discovery/doing (but it can’t be sped up – Piaget); learning by doing (anything can be taught to anyone at any time in an intellectually honest way – Bruner)	Disciplined invention; practice & experience; environments and tasks arranged to guide and support learning; modeling, observation, and scaffolding;

Guide for Theories of Learning Book Discussion

Book Title/Author : _____

**Feel free to redesign the template below to meet your needs.*

What are the main arguments they are making about learning/teaching?	
What key ideas/quotes should school designers remember?	
What are the assumptions? (what 's the basis or evidence for the claims?)	
What's problematic/missing?	
What questions do you have? (what are you confused about? What are you wondering about?)	