

Social Learning Theories

While social learning theories reflect many of the principles of behavioral learning theories, they place greater emphasis on the influence of external cues on behavior and on how thinking influences action, and vice versa. Social learning theories—which are widely endorsed by sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists—maintain that human beings have an unlimited capacity to learn. This capacity, however, *is* limited by social expectations and by constraints on behavior patterns that the immediate social environment considers appropriate. According to this view, the learning process is primarily social, and learning occurs through socialization. Socialization occurs in a variety of social settings, including the family, the peer group, the school, and the job, and it continues throughout life.

According to Albert Bandura (1977, p. 12), the originator of social learning theory, “virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experience occur on a vicarious basis by observing other people’s behavior and its consequences for them.” Bandura’s view of learning is often referred to as *modeling* or *observational learning*. For example, students often observe and then imitate their teachers, who act as models. “Modeling provides students with specific demonstrations of working with the content. . . . The teacher explicitly demonstrates how the students can be successful in the lesson” (Dell’Olio & Donk, 2007, p. 79).

Modeling is a dimension of the curriculum whenever a teacher uses the following three basic steps of mental modeling: (1) demonstrating to students the thinking involved in a task, (2) making students aware of the thinking involved, and (3) focusing students on applying the thinking. In this way, teachers can help students become aware of their learning processes and enhance their ability to learn. “For example, as a teacher demonstrates cutting out a construction paper square to serve as a math manipulative during the next lesson, she might ‘think out loud’ in class, saying, ‘I am cutting this square very carefully because we will be using it today to create fractional shapes. I need the sides of my square to be very neat. My smaller, fraction pieces should be accurate in size’” (Dell’Olio & Donk, 2007, p. 80).

COGNITIVE LEARNING THEORIES

Cognitive learning theories focus on the mental processes people use as they acquire new knowledge and skills. Unlike behavioral learning theories, which focus on observable behavior, cognitive theories focus on the unobservable processing, storage, and retrieval of information from the brain. According to cognitive learning theories, the individual acts, originates, and thinks, and this is the important source of learning; according to behavioral learning theory, however, the individual learns by reacting to external forces.

Cognitive learning theories emphasize personal meaning, generalizations, principles, advance organizers, discovery learning, coding, and superordinate categories. In “Structures in Learning” in Chapter 6, Jerome S. Bruner, a leading cognitive learning theorist, applies generalizations concerning the following to curriculum planning: structure, organization, discovery learning, the “connectedness” of knowledge, meaningfulness, and the “problems approach.”