

A major construct of S-R behavioral learning theories is the *rewarded response*. A response must be rewarded for learning to take place. What counts as a “reward” varies from learner to learner; however, the reward must be important to the learner in some way. Rewards are often effective for certain types of learners: slow learners, those less prepared for the learning task, and those in need of step-by-step learning. Some teachers set up a system of rewards in their classrooms based on the concept of the rewarded response.

John B. Watson (1878–1958) was the principal originator of behavioristic psychology, and B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) was its best-known promoter. Watson asserted that human behavior was the result of specific stimuli that elicited certain responses. Watson’s view of learning was based partially on experiments conducted by Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936), who noticed that a dog he was working with salivated shortly before he was given food. Pavlov discovered that by ringing a bell when food was given and repeating this several times, the sound of the bell alone (a conditioned stimulus) would make the dog salivate (a conditioned response). Watson believed that all learning conformed to the Pavlovian S-R model, which has become known as *classical* or *type S conditioning*.

Watson was so confident that all learning conformed to this basic stimulus-response model that he once boasted, “Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in, and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors” (Watson, 1925, p. 82).

Expanding on Watson’s basic S-R model, Skinner developed a more comprehensive view of conditioning known as *operant* (or *type R*) *conditioning*. His model was based on the premise that satisfying responses are conditioned, unsatisfying ones are not; as he put it: “the things we call pleasant have an energizing or strengthening effect on our behaviour” (Skinner, 1972, p. 74). To implement a curriculum based on a Skinnerian view of learning, a teacher would elicit desired student behaviors by following four steps:

1. Identify desired behaviors in concrete (observable and measurable) terms.
2. Establish a procedure for recording specific behaviors and counting their frequencies.
3. For each behavior, identify an appropriate reinforcer.
4. Ensure that students receive the reinforcer as soon as possible after displaying a desired behavior.

Skinner believed that a “scientific” S-R approach to learning could serve humanitarian aims and help to create a better world. He maintained that notions about human free will based on an eighteenth-century political philosophy should not be allowed to interfere with the application of scientific methods to human affairs. In his novel *Walden Two* (1962), Skinner describes how a utopian society could be created through “behavioral engineering.” By focusing on external conditions that shape and maintain human behavior, educators could turn their attention from ill-defined inner qualities and faculties to the observable and manipulable.