learning theorists every trainee teacher must know
Piaget was one of the first theorists to study how children think and learn. While his contemporaries saw learning as either intrinsic, from the child, or extrinsic, from the environment, he believed that neither fully expressed learning. He saw children as constructors of their own knowledge, taking information from the people and objects in their environment and making meaning from them. Piaget was of the opinion that children’s own curiosity would drive their learning, and that the most effective way of enabling learning was to provide an environment which promoted curiosity and challenge and allowed children to control their own learning.

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LEV VYGOTSKY
Cultural–historical social activity theory
1896 – 1934

BORN IN: Russia

KEY WORDS: zone of proximal development (ZPD); internalisation; social constructivism

Vygotsky argued for a radical idea of learning, in which children thought for themselves. This idea of learning was opposite to the rote-learning model practised at the time. He believed in a developmental and dynamic process where children make sense of what they learn. Vygotsky’s ideas are firmly situated in social constructivism, which stresses the significance of both culture and environment in the way in which we understand the world around us. His notions centred on the belief that a child’s own social and cultural background would shape their cognitive development and allow them to adjust and grow.

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Skinner defined his own branch of behaviourism ‘operant conditioning’, a theory that supposed behaviour is determined by consequences, such as positive and negative reinforcers, and the application of these will increase the possibility of a behaviour occurring again. His theories became popular as a means of modifying behaviours for those suffering from phobias or addiction or in schools and clinics. Although his experimental work was undertaken with animals Skinner saw no reason why this should not be applied to human behaviour too, and had a keen interest in how human behaviour could be modified.

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Jerome Bruner argued against the traditional view that children should learn facts and systems and was in favour of children constructing knowledge in a scientific manner. In so doing, if the child comprehended the fundamental process in a particular curriculum area, the child could then progress to think in a holistic way about newly introduced topics. He argued for a ‘spiral curriculum’ where themes were initially presented to learners and then revisited later on in the programme to reinforce understanding and give added vigour. The child in Bruner’s eyes was an active problem-solver with his or her own ways of understanding the world.

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Schön’s theories centre on his desire to support organisations in managing learning and change, particularly through the vehicle of self-reflection. His ideas have encouraged practitioners to critically reflect on their own work as a means of developing and improving their practice. He believed that skilled practitioners are reflective practitioners who use their experience as a basis for assessing existing theories and their observations to develop new theories. In Schön’s view it is the practitioner’s ability to deal with unexpected or unexplained phenomena which truly reveals their ability to think on their feet and reflect-in-action.

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Hattie believed that how learners see themselves, and what they perceive as most important in terms of their learning and their desired outcomes, will have a significant effect on their motivation to learn and subsequent behaviour in class. In the rope model, Hattie argues that there is no single strand underlying an individual’s self-concept but rather many overlapping concepts of self. The strength of the rope lies not in any single strand but in the combination of many overlapping strands. He claims that when any of the strands become weak, the learner will start to experience such a sense of helplessness that they feel they can’t cope with the learning; the result being that they disengage with learning activities.

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Carol Dweck has developed a theory of learner motivation based on the learner’s own beliefs about their ability to accomplish tasks, achieve goals and function successfully in life. She suggests that people have two extremes of belief about themselves - people who believe their ability is fixed and there is very little they can do to improve it, and people who believe their ability is enhanced by learning. She argues that about 20% of learners are in the middle of these extremes and that the rest are equally divided between the two extremes. She categorises the extremes into fixed mindsets (intelligence is static) and growth mindsets (intelligence can be developed). Dweck argues growth mindset learners are motivated by an inner desire to improve rather than by external stimuli.

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From her work as a clinical paediatrician, Maria Montessori developed a unique approach to teaching originating from her work with special needs children. Relying on careful observations of the children in her care she identified where learning potential lay and maximised this in terms of the materials and experiences she provided. Through allowing children a sense of freedom in their education and the opportunity to select their own learning experiences, within the boundaries of respect for the materials and one another, Montessori observed that children could sustain interest in an activity for significant periods of time and would frequently repeat experiences until mastery was achieved.

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bell hooks’ significant contributions to education have emerged and are embedded in her convictions of the inequality that is still evident where matters of race, gender and social class are concerned. hooks feels that democratic education in the United States has been weakened because of capitalism’s influence, whereby student’s view education being solely a means to material success. This materialistic notion of education values the gathering of information. Whereas the democratic model of education values the process of attaining knowledge and critical thinking. She laments that progressive university lecturers who strive for a democratic education are often ostracised or urged to leave academia.

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Henry Giroux can be considered one of the most notable present-day thinkers and writers on education. His central themes call for an emphasis in an education which embraces the community, and focuses on democracy, fairness and social justice. For these themes to be realised he contends that teachers and others concerned with education should be politically active. It is only through democratic processes and the advance of a critical and progressive pedagogy that neoliberalism and what Giroux considers a society driven by class structures can be challenged. For Giroux, schools ought to be centres of cultural creativity and transformation but not reproduction. They should be the focus for critical and participatory democracy which welcomes diversity and a range of different cultural and social alliances.

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