

**UNDERSTANDING & USING  
EDUCATIONAL  
THEORIES**

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**2ND  
EDITION**

**UNDERSTANDING & USING  
EDUCATIONAL  
THEORIES**

**KARL AUBREY AND  
ALISON RILEY**



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



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SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

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Editor: James Clark  
Editorial assistant: Diana Alves  
Production editor: Nicola Carrier  
Copyeditor: Audrey Scriven  
Proofreader: Lynda Watson  
Indexer: Gary Kirby  
Marketing manager: Dilhara Attygalle  
Cover design: Sheila Tong  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

© Karl Aubrey and Alison Riley 2019

First edition published 2015

Reprinted 2015, 2016 (twice), 2017 (twice) & 2018

This second edition published 2019

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 018930989**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5264-3660-3

ISBN 978-1-5264-3661-0 (pbk)

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# PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION

The chapters are accessibly written and accurate, serving to set the selected thinkers in context and draw the student's attention to key themes. I expect that this book will equip and inspire students to engage first-hand with the texts of these creative and influential educational writers.

*David Aldridge, Brunel University London*

Aubrey and Riley have gathered the backgrounds, theories and criticisms of educational theorists into one easy to read book. I would recommend this book to anyone studying to become a teacher.

*Sam Emmett, Glyndwr University*

The book gives a concise guide to some of the most relevant educational theories, providing background to the theorist and notes on critiquing and using the theory in practice. This book allows the student to explore further the educational theories that are relevant to their teaching practice and to enable them to begin to embed educational theory into their own teaching practice. The book also provides an excellent reference for their continued professional development as teachers.

*Vikki Foley, Keele University*

This book is a brilliant introduction to educational theories. There are short biographies of all the important theorists and the links between them are highlighted. A must for all teachers.

*Malgorzata Hirst, University of Hertfordshire*

This book is an invaluable resource to complement initial studies in all aspects of child development and educational theories. It offers a simple and understandable approach to key individuals and their research.

*Elspeth Nelson, University of Hull*



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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Karl Aubrey** is a Visiting Tutor on the Professional Studies in Education programmes at Bishop Grosseteste University. Prior to this Karl was the Programme Leader for a range of initial teacher education and professional development programmes at a large city further education college. Between 2003 and 2005 he was seconded to the DfES Standards Unit as a learning and teaching practitioner in the East Midlands. Karl has contributed to the *Oxford Dictionary of Education*. His doctoral thesis explored the reforms in further education teacher education from 2000 to 2010, from the viewpoint of teacher educators. Karl's research interests include inclusion, education policy, pedagogy and work-based learning.

**Alison Riley** is the Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies degree at Bishop Grosseteste University, and she has also worked on a number of educational-related programmes at the university including initial teaching training courses. Prior to joining Bishop Grosseteste University Alison spent sixteen years working in primary education, as a classroom teacher, deputy head teacher and finally head teacher of a large junior school. She has been involved in a number of collaborative projects, and has recently been involved in an EU-funded project researching 'Creativity in Early Science and Mathematics Education'. Alison has recently commenced doctoral studies in which she is researching what influences the choices of pupils entering higher education.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SAGE would like to thank the following people whose comments helped to shape the first and second editions of this book:

David Aldridge, Brunel University London

Jane Andrews, University of the West of England

Ruth Barrington, Bath Spa University

Samantha Eason, Darlington College

Angela Fenton, Charles Sturt University

Wendy Garner, University of Chester

Glenn Stone, University of Chichester

Ian Summerscale, Oxford Brookes

James Williams, University of Sussex



# NEW TO THIS EDITION

Welcome to the fully revised and expanded second edition of *Understanding and Using Educational Theories*. The scope and content of the changes made are a result of our reflections following constructive feedback from the reviewers, colleagues and students from the first edition. These changes, we feel, give the book an even wider-ranging and analytical perspective of the ideas of the educational theorists. The major revisions for this second edition are:

- Three new chapters, which follow the same format as the first edition, on the works of the following key educational thinkers: Albert Bandura, Dylan Wiliam, and Carol Dweck.
- An expanded introduction which offers an overview of the key schools of thought which have influenced educational theory.
- Each chapter has a glossary of the key words which are pertinent to that theorist's work.
- All chapters from the first edition have been reviewed and revised. Where appropriate updates include new references, links to current educational socio-political developments, and expansions to existing sections taking discussions and critical commentary further.



# INTRODUCTION

## WHY A BOOK ABOUT EDUCATIONAL THEORISTS AND THEIR IDEAS?

Although there are a number of texts which explore the work of education theorists, we have often found that undergraduates and students studying at Master's level have difficulty linking theory with practice. Therefore, the aim of this book is to offer a range of selected educational theorists and examine and critique their ideas, highlight links with other key thinkers and consider how these theories can be applied in practice. It was our intention therefore to produce a book which would serve as an accessible resource in which to give you the confidence to use theory in order to demonstrate your level of knowledge and understanding, and also enable you to apply theory in practice.

We would argue that currently education is being ideologically driven and promotes a traditional view of teaching and learning which is focused on the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to compete in the global market, rather than for personal fulfilment and development. With this in mind, this book seeks to give a less competence-based view of education and proposes a more critically analytical approach based upon the research and ideas of the theorists discussed. Furthermore, we anticipate that the book will encourage you to reflect on your own learning development as adult learners as well as considering the learning development of the children and young people you may work with.

We should explain that this is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the work of each of the theorists included, but more an introduction to their works and applications of their ideas. It does however act as a valuable starting point for those who are interested in, and wish to delve deeper into, the thinking and background of the chosen theorists. Choosing which theorists to include in this book was a tricky proposition, especially with the vast array of thinkers who have made a significant impact on education. Having discussed the options between ourselves, colleagues and students, and amidst much disagreement on who to include and who to exclude, we were able to develop a set of criteria from which to work. We finally decided to include those theorists whose ideas covered a range of educational sectors: early

years, primary, secondary, tertiary and adult. From dialogue with colleagues we have included those from approximately the last one hundred years, and reluctantly discounted older classical thinkers. We have also tried to use a range of international educational thinkers.

A major justification for this book is that we feel there is a definite place for theory in education. We ignore theory at our peril because of the potential effect this omission could have on the children and young people of the future. There is a danger, with the recent government discourse, that classroom practice is becoming a competence-based activity, and the rhetoric seems to suggest a return to the more traditional, didactic and examination-focused approaches which the likes of Dewey and Freire cautioned against. Much of this goes against what many of the influential theorists believe. These beliefs have emanated from the theorists' findings and evaluations following empirical research and from substantial observations of practice. If theory is discounted in education we risk formulaic and step-by-step approaches to teaching and learning, where there is a set of strict rules for those who work with children and young adults to follow. However, education in practice is a much more complex and messy phenomenon, with a multitude of contrasting facets to take into account which need a reflective and professional approach, involving 'not just knowing about what you do and how to do it. It is also about why you do it' (Williams, 2004: 5). It is our contention that theory enables practitioners to make informed judgements about their learners and their own actions. Perhaps the difficulty of knowing about, and using, theory is that there are so many contrasting educational theoretical opinions to consider and wrestle with. However, these competing schools of thought also offer a greater depth of understanding for us to reflect on and make judgements in differing situations.

## EDUCATIONAL THEORIES: SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

There are a number of educational theories, mostly emanating from differing educational psychological schools of thought. These theories have undergone an evolution; different ideas have been disputed, modified, and in some cases disregarded. This process of change, dispute and advancement of educational theory is similar to other fields of study (Williams, 2004). There are three main psychological schools of thought which are of relevance to education and learning theory: behaviourism, constructivism, and humanism. It should be acknowledged that although each of these have differing perspectives, they can at times complement each other and add to a body of knowledge about education. Indeed, in practice, the ideas of each of the schools of thought sometimes overlap (Petty, 1998).

Behaviourism is a school of thought which contests that 'behaviour can be predicted, measured and controlled, and that learning is simply a matter of stimulus and response' (Wallace, 2008: 32). Early behaviourists such as the Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov researched the behaviour and reflexes of animals, in particular dogs. He found that the

dogs he worked with could be conditioned to respond to environmental factors, and this he termed classical conditioning. Pavlov's research discovered that the dogs salivated when a bell sounded at the same time as their food was provided. In due course food was not required as a stimulus to start the dogs salivating, as the sound of the bell was sufficient to start this response. In classical conditioning, the recipient has no control over their behaviour. John Watson also used the general concept of classical conditioning in an attempt to illustrate human, rather than animal, behaviour. However, the idea was considered to be rather uncaring, simplistic and insensitive to be applied in any learning setting. A further development in behaviourist thinking was advanced by the American psychologist B.F. Skinner who further developed the work of Pavlov and Watson. Skinner's concept was termed operant conditioning; a more relevant and applicable concept for learning. Operant conditioning refers to the learner being conditioned to respond gainfully to a stimulus. Reinforcement is a crucial element for operant conditioning, such reinforcement can either be positive or negative as long as it produces the preferred responses. Disapproving stimuli or the threat of censure could bring about reduced responses from the learner (Williams, 2004).

The constructivist school of thought argues that learning is not something that can be delivered to students by them passively listening to a teacher dispensing knowledge. The constructivists believe that meaningful knowledge and understanding 'are actively constructed by learners ... which builds on what they already know causing them to change and adapt and invent ideas' (Wallace, 2008: 61). It is proposed that there are two main forms of constructivism: cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. Cognitive constructivism refers to the notion that for successful learning to take place any new knowledge encountered needs to be analysed in relation to what the learners already know. Theorists who were advocates of cognitive constructivism are Dewey, Piaget and Bruner. Social constructivism contends that the crucial aspect of effective learning is social interaction, which emphasises language and discourse, also taking into account the importance of the use of the cultural and social backgrounds of the learners in the construction of that learning. The main exponent of social constructivism was Vygotsky (Wallace, 2008).

The humanism school of thought argues that education should focus on the needs of the individual learner, and that what is important are the aspects of personal and emotional growth. These values they feel are being disregarded by society at large, and particularly in schools which promote academic achievement and give what they consider undue credence to test results. Humanists contend that the purpose of schools is to 'meet the needs of the individual learner not the other way round' (Petty, 1998: 8). They also feel that learners should be allowed to follow their own interests so that they can grow as a whole person in the way in which appeals to them as individuals. Humanists believe that students are thwarted in their learning because of oppressive classroom environments. Williams proposes that learning is hindered when students 'feel uncomfortable making mistakes or are afraid that their failure to grasp a new idea will result in ridicule or humiliation' (2004: 17). Instead teaching and

learning should be learner-centred, and teachers should act as facilitators of non-threatening learning. There are a number of educational thinkers whose work can be aligned with humanism. Carl Rogers argued that facilitation, rather than didactic teaching, and the creation of positive and supportive classroom environments were key to meaningful learning. Rogers and Abraham Maslow also contended that learning should not be considered a finite objective but a process to advance the full potential of each individual learner. A.S. Neill's Summerhill School which encouraged learner choice and an environment of equality between students and staff offers an illustration of humanism in practice (Wallace, 2008).

Before we leave the overview of these schools of educational thought, and before readers delve into the contents of this edition, it is fitting that we offer a few words of caution about being too stringent in classifying the thinkers themselves. Some of the thinkers will come naturally within one of these three schools of thought and this will become apparent, while the concepts of others may overlap or indeed appear not to fit into any of the three. Others will transcend both educational psychological schools with wider issues of philosophy, including socio-economic and political aspects, most notably John Dewey and Paulo Freire.

## **WHO WOULD FIND THIS BOOK RELEVANT?**

Firstly, we hope that many readers will find this book to be of interest, beneficial in their professional development and helpful in the synthesis of theory and practice. Perhaps you will be introduced to theorists you have never encountered before or have an opportunity to refresh your understanding of those you already know; this book will additionally allow you to make associations between theorists. Our aspiration is that it will be useful for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and practitioners who are involved with learners in all sectors of education from early years through to adult education. We appreciate this is a wide remit; however, we are committed to reaching a broad range of readers whose practice does, or will, involve work with learners in formal education, such as in schools, further education (FE) colleges and universities, as well as informal education, such as early years, youth work and offender education. This breadth of readership will encompass those on work-based programmes, such as foundation degrees and their progression routes, as well as those traditional undergraduates undergoing initial teacher education for teaching in schools and FE colleges, education studies, and youth work undergraduates.

## **ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE OF CHAPTERS**

Chapters in this book are sequenced in an approximately chronological order, starting with John Dewey and finishing with Carol Dweck. We have adopted this arrangement

so that readers can follow how educational thinking has evolved over time. Furthermore, the sequence makes it possible for the reader to make links not only between the theorists included here but also other significant thinkers they may wish to explore further. We have, again in this second edition, avoided organising this book into various schools of thought such as behaviourism, constructivism and humanism. This is because, as previously argued, we feel this is too simplistic and does not reflect the complexity and the multidirectional nature of many of their ideas.

Each chapter considers a particular theorist and follows a common arrangement of sections. Firstly, the learning outcomes indicate what readers should be able to do having read the chapter; this is followed by a list of key words which are pertinent to the theorist's work. The introduction aims to set the scene, by outlining the significance and impact of the theorist's work, before briefly considering their biography. The next section explores the theories in greater detail, then links these theories with other educational thinkers. This is followed by a critical examination of their ideas, based upon evidence from other theorists and other academic sources. The subsequent section offers suggestions of ways that a particular theorist's ideas could be applied in the reader's practice. Then, ahead of the summary, readers are invited to reflect upon the chapter and complete a task which ventures to consolidate theory with their current or future practice. Following the summary a glossary of the chapter's key words is included. Each chapter ends with a suggestion of further reading, which readers can follow for further in-depth study, as well as a list of references that have been cited in the chapter.

As we have noted, the opening chapter is about John Dewey. It is, we feel, a good place to start as many of those included in the following chapters have been influenced by his emphasis on reflection, learner-centred pedagogy and social learning. Chapter 2 then goes on to examine Montessori's impact on education, particularly in the early years, focusing on her child-centred approach to early years provision, which underlines the importance of the learning environment. Chapter 3 focuses on Piaget's notion of a staged cognitive development and the significant impact his prolific theoretical ideas and observations have had on how we perceive children's learning. This is then followed in Chapter 4 by an exploration of Vygotsky's concepts of cultural-historical activity, social constructivism and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), as well as the embryo model of scaffolding (which is later developed by Bruner, as discussed in Chapter 8, along with Bruner's concept of the spiral curriculum).

In contrast, Chapter 5 considers Skinner's behaviourist concepts of operant conditioning and positive and negative reinforcement. This is followed by Bloom's taxonomies and domains of learning in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 takes us to the domain of adult education exploring Malcolm Knowles' standpoint on adult education that offers the thought-provoking concepts of andragogy and social pedagogy. Chapter 9 explores the work of Albert Bandura, and the concept of learning through observation. In Chapter 10 we examine Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory, which argued that an individual's learning is heavily influenced by their social, historical and

cultural background and circumstances. Chapters 11 to 14 return to more adult-based theories, starting with an exploration of Freire's progressive notions of problem-posing and liberating education. After this, Chapter 12 considers Schön's theory and his emphasis on the value of reflection 'in action' and 'on action' for educators, followed by Chapters 13 and 14 which examine the work of Kolb, then Lave and Wenger and their theories on experiential learning, situated learning and communities of practice, respectively. Chapter 15 evaluates Claxton's concept of learning power. Wiliam's ideas relating to assessment for learning are reviewed in Chapter 16. Finally, Chapter 17 appraises Carol Dweck's concepts of motivation and mindsets.

## USING THE BOOK

There are a few ways in which this book can be used. It could be read as a whole text from start to finish and the chronological manner in which it has been written would certainly allow for this. Alternatively, you could dip into the chapters and use it as a source for each of the theorists to better understand their individual ideas, find out possible flaws in their concepts and consider ways to apply the theories. Another complementary option would be to follow the threads and links between theorists; and the further readings and references are presented as sources for those who want to get a deeper insight. We also suggest readers engage in the reflective tasks given towards the end of each chapter, which offer the opportunity to think not only about the theories but also about how they do, or could, complement professional practice. Whichever way, or combination of ways, this book is used we hope it will enhance your knowledge and understanding of the characters and their theories. It is also our wish that it will give food for thought, not only to help with building powers of critical analysis and synthesis in assignments but also to allow readers to critically reflect on the implications that these theories have on practice.

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