



Teaching and Learning for Social Justice and Equity in Higher Education

Foundations

Edited by
Laura Parson · C. Casey Ozaki

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

C. Casey Ozaki and Laura Parson

As awareness of social inequity grows, higher education is often touted as a way to promote social justice and equity in society. Research suggests that higher education may reinforce societal inequity through teaching and learning practices that promote dominant ways of viewing and thinking about the world, practices that are formalized and reinforced in a neoliberal environment (Giroux, 2005, 2010; Hager, Peyrefitte, & Davis, 2018; Lynch, 2006). Similarly, the field of learning sciences (e.g., cognitive psychology, motivation research) has advanced significantly in the last decade, yet many teaching and learning practices are rooted in an outdated or incorrect understanding of how learning occurs (e.g., learning styles, andragogy vs pedagogy, personality tests). These outdated practices create a higher education environment that struggles to promote learning equitably and may extend as far as to be harmful to marginalized and underrepresented students (Howell & Tuitt, 2003). This environment has led to calls for actionable approaches to teaching and learning in higher education that promote social justice (Hager, Peyrefitte, & Davis, 2018).

Building on the work of scholars who have called for critical pedagogical approaches to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL; Hager, Peyrefitte, & Davis, 2018; Howell & Tuitt, 2003), the goal of this three-volume series is to provide a meaningful exploration of teaching and

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learning for social justice and equity specifically in current classroom and co-curricular contexts in higher education (see Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Our experience in teaching courses in and designing curriculum for college/university teaching courses has illustrated that faculty and graduate students lack understanding about current research on effective teaching and learning (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014; Carey & Bourret, 2014), how to apply teaching and learning to promote social justice and equity (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; hooks, 1994, 2009; Howell & Tuitt, 2003; Pulliam, Wininger, Derryberry, & Redifer, 2017) in content-specific ways in the classroom, and the application of SoTL in higher education but in co-curricular contexts to maximize the effectiveness of student affairs programming. This series is designed to address all three.

While Laura and I have had different walks through our education, we have shared similar observations and disappointments about the presence of higher education theory in our graduate programs and teaching. We both have experienced graduate education that was theoretically grounded and taught us how to apply theory and think theoretically. We also share experiences where we were underwhelmed by a lack of theory in a program's curriculum and approach, feeling that perhaps the educational preparation we were engaged in was strong in its focus on practice but hollow because of a lack of critical, theoretical foundation. As a result, our belief in the importance of theory for graduate education in higher education was reinforced and the desire to provide a resource that promotes and examines theory for higher education in the current era of social justice and shedding light on educational inequities. Volume One: Theory and Foundations is our response to that desire. The purpose of this volume is to appraise the scholarship of teaching and learning historically in the context of the modern university, and present and promote theory that is advancing understanding of college teaching and learning for diverse students, varied teaching modalities, and institutional settings with a goal of socially just education.

We believe that Volume One will be useful for a range of purposes. Higher education and other educational program curricula would benefit from having a text that can help students understand where we have theoretically been and what current scholars are theoretically advocating for advancement of teaching and learning. While faculty, instructors, and students are the most obvious audience for this text, there are other professionals on the college campus that both should and need to be current on the theoretical scholarship undergirding their work. Faculty development professionals, administrators who provide faculty leadership (e.g., provosts, deans, chairs), and, similarly, those accountable for student success are also responsible to understand how teaching is tied to equitable success and the theoretical underpinnings for best practice. Finally, many student services and student affairs professionals span the work of co-curricular and academic services

in their work with students. Advising, tutoring, career services, and other campus units rely on teaching and learning strategies without knowledge of or access to their literatures.

The first three chapters of Volume One examine the history of teaching and learning theory, its interdisciplinary character, and use a social justice lens to critique its current application to higher education today. In Chapter 2, Parson and Major review the theoretical biography of teaching and learning in higher education, arguing that they were both insufficient to explain learning and concurrently contributors to a reproduction of inequities in education. Similarly, in Chapter 3, White and Jackson examine behaviorism, an early learning theory, in the context of a neoliberal society. And, Lester, Strunk, and Hoover (Chapter 4) debunk myths about learning, grounded in psychological theories, that are often pervasive in education. These chapters lay the groundwork for the remainder of the book by demystifying the reader's understanding of traditional teaching and learning theories.

In the remainder of the chapters, the authors present and propose theoretical approaches to teaching and learning through critical and justice-oriented perspectives. While not in chronological order, the chapters fall into two categories—diversity education and pedagogy and curriculum. First, four chapters focus on models and theories that can (and often should) be part of efforts to build and support students' cultural competence. In Chapter 5, Buckley et al. use a case study of intergroup dialogue (IGD) to propose a theoretical framework for learning environments within social justice education that can serve as heuristic for educators who work to facilitate well-designed learning opportunities for students, rooted in fostering holistic development and learning for social justice. Chapter 13 also takes up diversity education as Conyers et al. describe a faculty-led workshop designed to uncover students' biases in hopes of proactively changing their perspectives and advancing cultural awareness. Not focused on a course but on learning through and from diversity experiences, Byrd, Rastogi, and Elliot, in Chapter 8, propose the use of a self-regulated learning perspective to examine how students respond to the cognitive and emotional challenges of diversity experiences. Finally, Yomantas (Chapter 16) describes an undergraduate elective course taught in rural Fiji as an application of critical pedagogy coupled with an experiential education framework for the purpose of fostering critical allyship.

The remaining chapters in the book are grouped by a shared focus on pedagogy and curriculum. Parson and Weise advocate for a postcolonial approach to competency-based curriculum (re)design and propose a framework that centers the knowledges and voices of marginalized people as a way to dismantle oppressive systems in higher education in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7, Loya examines how faculty members might create classrooms that include some voices and exclude others from a shared creation of knowledge and learning in the classroom, asserting that classrooms can become more inclusive through the authentic granting of epistemic credibility, or the recognition

that students are both receivers and producers of knowledge. Baggatt et al. (Chapter 9) use data from K-12 educators' practices, drawing on the concept of community of practice to articulate a critical responsibility in higher education as part of our efforts as teachers for social justice. Chapters 10 and 11 discuss the role of emotions in teaching and learning. Schoper and Amelse use the current cognitive and neuroscience research, to explore the important role emotions and feelings play in the learning process through deconstructing the myth that the learning process should feel easy with particular attention on gendered and racialized conceptions of emotions. However, Kanzanjian and Rossatto argue that incorporating the emotions of culturally diverse students as pedagogical resources facilitate improved academic performance, socio-emotional intelligence, and brain development. Specifically, they show how critical culturally relevant pedagogies that utilize students' daily life experiences are highly effective in stimulating the brain's emotional centers. Perun, in Chapter 12, takes a critical perspective and draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice to illuminate how course designs and pedagogies can help students from diverse backgrounds learn and practice the knowledge required for success in higher education and beyond. Similar to Chapter 7, Chapter 14, from Krikorian, addresses the role of epistemic ideologies advocating for the adoption of critical contemplative pedagogy to better serve holistic human development and transformative adult learning. Finally, in Chapter 15, Almond and Hall explore graduate-level mentoring and propose a mentoring program using social justice and equity lenses so that the process of mentoring practices becomes one of critical consciousness.

Volume One: Theory and Foundations is a collection of critical and equity-focused theories that the authors have cultivated and advanced theoretically and through examples in specific teaching and learning contexts. We hope this book provides fodder to examine theories of the past used to build knowledge and best practices for teaching and learning in higher education, while advancing theories and perspectives that are more suited to today's higher education and college student learning. We implore the reader to delve into the theory, while continuing to draw on the practical examples and artifacts to create more socially just and equitable learning environments.

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Learning Theory Through a Social Justice Lens

Laura Parson and Claire Major

Key Terms and Definitions

Behaviorism: Learning is when students can generalize and apply their newly acquired skills, knowledge, and understandings to new situations (Bryant, Vincent, Shaqlaih, & Moss, 2013).

Cognitivism: Learning is complex and consists of contextual internal processes.

Constructivism: Knowledge lies in the minds of individuals who construct what they know on the basis of their own experiences and do so within a social context (Barkley & Major, 2020).

Andragogy: Learning in adults is different from learning of children (“ped” in pedagogy).

Transformative Learning Theory: Learning is a process where one’s mind-sets become more open and reflective and, therefore, better at guiding action (Alfred, Cherrstrom, Robinson, & Friday, 2013; Mezirow, 2000, 2003).

The question of what constitutes learning has intrigued scholars for centuries, and today, there are many different opinions about what learning is and how it happens. Scholars hold different ideas about the nature of knowledge, knowledge acquisition, catalysts for learning, conditions that must be met

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in order for learning to occur, and the criteria by which one may judge that learning has happened. Despite the variability in opinion, most scholars agree that learning involves acquiring new or modifying existing knowledge, behavior, skills, attitudes, or values. At its most fundamental level, then, learning is change. The following definition of learning reflects this idea, “Learning is an enduring change in behavior, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience” (Schunk, 1991, p. 2).

Learning theories, for the most part devised by psychologists, offer a simple, succinct description of what learning is and suggest how it is possible to recognize whether learning has happened or not. Because of these functions, learning theories have the potential to help educators in two critical ways. First, they provide a vocabulary and framework for understanding observed learning. Second, they suggest where to look for solutions to practical problems that higher education instructors encounter. Both of these purposes have implications for pedagogical theory and research as well as the practice of instructional design, instructional delivery, and learning assessment.

These theories, however, are not perfect. At best, they offer only partial and incomplete descriptions of how humans learn. Generally, they do not paint a picture of the whole person as a unique individual existing within a system of academic and social constructs. At worst, learning theories can be misapplied in given context or situation and lead educators down the wrong pedagogical path. Thus, while they point to useful understandings of learning, none of them offer a single comprehensive view about how individuals learn. Thus, they have the potential not only to help but also to hinder the learning of individuals.

CHAPTER PURPOSE

Learning theory is and can be a useful tool for teaching and learning in higher education, but there is much to challenge and problematize about many of the traditional learning theories, from the epistemological lens that frames theories to the ways they conceptualize the ideal learner. Most of these theories were not created with social justice in mind, but even those that are critically oriented, such as conscientization and transformative learning theory, are used to maximize learning Western knowledges in the classroom setting. Altogether, there is room to do more. Much more.

Perhaps the eventual outcome from a critical review of learning theories, such as our overview in this chapter, will be a new theory of learning in higher education, but we suggest that any work toward an overarching theory should begin with a review of current and existing theories as they are applied to higher education. There is value in these theories, not only as a foundation for teaching and learning decision-making but also because there are applications to their use in the traditional higher education classroom. There is, however, significant risk of using any of these theories without an attention to them as

colonizing learning theories designed to replicate existing social structures. Indeed, without such problematization, higher education instructors will also replicate inequities in their classroom and risk not meeting the learning needs of their students. As such, in this chapter, we begin by reviewing traditional learning theories, discussing the core concepts of the theory, and, then, exploring the potential for each theory to be used in higher education to promote equity and diversity in the classroom, before concluding with a critique of each theory through a critical lens. Second, we review theories from the field of education that developed in an attempt to address the shortcoming of earlier foundational theories when applied to education settings. We also explore the potential for each of those theories to be used in higher education. Finally, we conclude with a synthesis of learning theory and provide what we hope is a comprehensive overview of the strengths of different theories to guide teaching and learning decision-making in the higher education classroom.

ORGANIZATION

Our first goal in this chapter is to explore learning theories through a critical lens and to consider how those theories inform teaching in higher education in ways that promote equity and diversity in the classroom. As Jarvis suggests:

Profound doubt is cast on many contemporary theories of learning as providing logical understanding of human learning, including behaviorism, information processing, and all forms of cognitive theory. This is not to say that they are not valid in as far as they go, simply that they do not go far enough: they all have an incomplete theory of the person. (Jarvis, 2018, p. 26)

As we explore each predominant theory, we identify who was the theory was for (i.e., who was the learner), who were the participants in research conducted to validate the theory (and the identities of the researchers), and what interests the theory promote(d) (e.g., educated workforce, lifelong learner). Finally, we explore the theory through a critical lens, seeking to understand the theory from a social justice perspective. Specifically, for each theory we asked:

1. How/why/for whom was the theory created? What is the research base for the theory?
2. What does research suggest about the validity of the theory (and who has been the sample in those studies)?
3. What knowledge is assumed to be “normal” or accepted as valid forms of knowledge in this theory? What outcomes are viewed as valuable?
4. How are differences in background taken into account (or not) in the application of the theory? Who is left out?
5. How can the theory be used to promote equity and diversity through pedagogical decisions?

First, we begin by exploring traditional learning theories as they are most often organized. Second, we explore education theories, asking the same questions. For each predominant theory we review, we also include a briefer discussion of theories that built on or were developed from that theory. Finally, we make suggestions for future theorizing and research.

LEARNING THEORIES FROM THE FIELD OF PSYCHOLOGY

Behaviorism

One of the oldest and most familiar learning theories is behaviorism, an approach devised to aid in understanding the learned behavior of animals and humans. Many people have heard of behaviorism in large part due to the work of early behaviorists, such as Pavlov, who investigated stimulus and response behavior of dogs that were conditioned to salivate at the sound of a bell in expectation of food, an experiment leading to the theory known as classical conditioning. Likewise, Skinner (1991), another well-known behaviorist, studied rats (along with pigeons) to determine whether they could be conditioned to push a lever to receive food, an experiment that led to the theory known as operant conditioning. The work of these early behaviorists has often been generalized to humans and extended, by more recent behaviorists, in an attempt to explain human learning.

Position on knowledge and learning. Behaviorists see knowledge as a collection of behaviors. In a similar vein, they view learning as an outward and demonstrable change in behavior. This change, behaviorists believe, occurs as a result of positive and negative reinforcement individuals receive from their actions and experiences (Bryant et al., 2013). Behaviorists believe that all behaviors can be measured, trained, and changed. Core assumptions of behaviorism are as follows:

- Behaviors are “observable and measurable”;
- Behaviors can be “predicted and controlled”; and
- Behaviors are a product of individuals working within the context of their environments (Bryant et al., 2013, p. 92).

Behaviorists believe that learning has happened when students can generalize and apply their newly acquired skills, knowledge, and understandings to new situations (Bryant et al., 2013). The entire United States educational system reflects the influence of behaviorism, largely through reward systems related to demonstration of learning (e.g., high grades, bonus points, praise, recognition strategies for the best work, and so forth).

Application to teaching in higher education. In higher education, instructors who have views of learning that align with behaviorist theories believe

that they can help students learn by reinforcing desired learning behavior (such as attentiveness in class, careful and thorough work on assignments, thoughtful and frequent contributions to discussion, and so forth), thereby encouraging students to continue these behaviors. If students are not able to engage in these behaviors immediately, behaviorists believe that students will gradually improve if the correct behaviors are reinforced and less effective behaviors are extinguished through non-reinforcement or, if necessary, suppressed through disincentives or even punishment.

According to behaviorists, learning activities should be organized to leverage acquisition of content knowledge and skills. The instructor is centered in the learning environment and effective teaching strategies include providing students with reinforcement, whether positive (grade bonuses) or negative (point penalties), to encourage desired behaviors or discourage undesirable behaviors. Behaviorists also believe that frequency and repetition reinforce learning, and hence, they believe that students benefit from multiple opportunities to practice new skills and demonstrate understandings. Moreover, the student's key responsibility is to learn to make the best responses to assigned learning activities and assignments (Barkley & Major, 2020).

Application to higher education research. While behaviorism is no longer as prominent in education research as it once was, it is still present. Examination of task-based English language teaching (Ahmad & Farrukh, 2015), influence of delayed learning feedback (Polat, Doğan, & Demir, 2015), and student perspectives of learning (Smith & Kimball, 2010) are current examples for how education researchers continue to acknowledge the presence of behaviorism in higher education settings and to study student learning through this lens. Behaviorist principles have been applied to student learning and teaching since nearly the inception of their study; however, because behaviorist principles do not fully explain the acquisition of higher-order skills or level of processing, research does not trend in this direction.

Critique. Despite its influence on higher education research and practice, behaviorism has its challenges. Among these challenges is the focus on behaviors as manifestation of learning rather than examination of cognitive process. In short, treating behavior as the only evidence of internal states does not present a full picture of learning. Some educators argue that simply considering behaviors as the only evidence of learning in essence means conflating humans with animals rather than seeing humans as complex, evolving, and occurring within their environment and, therefore, contextual beings (Bryant et al., 2013). Moreover, behaviorism's assertion that continued behavior may be understood simply as a stimulus followed by a response fails to take into account human development, disposition, motivation, and social and cultural interaction as factors (Bryant et al., 2013).

The process of learning in the behaviorist tradition also has some challenges. Behaviorism, for example, suggests that the instructor is fully in charge of the classroom and administering rewards and punishments (Bryant et al., 2013), which does not allow for sharing authority and control; shared authority and control can be motivating to students. Moreover, the behaviorist promotes direct instruction, which can be useful, but more research (see, for example, Freeman et al., 2014) indicates that active learning can be beneficial to learning. Behaviorism suggests that there is a “correct” answer to be rewarded, which does not support a contextual view of knowledge or apply in subjects where answers are not clear or there is no one correct answer. In addition, behaviorist theory does not consider that individuals with different backgrounds might react differently or find “reasonable explanations” for differences in behaviors for individuals from different cultures (Bryant et al., 2013, p. 98).

In sum, behaviorism persists in higher education and, as a result, even though it has largely been abandoned as a theory to guide pedagogical decisions, behaviorism is written into the structure, practices, and procedures of higher education. This not only creates problems because humans are not reducible to action and responses but also raises questions about how punishments and rewards are distributed in higher education. As researchers have pointed out, humans do not operate within a simple reward-repetition paradigm, so even in higher education things that might be viewed as rewards might not mitigate the challenges of being a minoritized individual in higher education. Similarly, punishments might also be a deterrent beyond what was intended if those punishments are interpreted as further evidence that one does not belong or cannot be successful in higher education settings. It is important to understand behaviorism as it is a historic and dominant framework of higher education but critical thought needs to occur about how to dismantle behaviorist systems that are not leading to results that maximize learning for all students (see additional discussion of behaviorism in Chapter 3).

Cognitivism

The second major category of theories from psychology, cognitivism, grew as a direct reaction to the behaviorist tradition, springing from the idea that “learning takes place through unobservable mental actions within the mind/brain that are influenced by the learner’s own thoughts and experiences” (Paciotti, 2013, p. 105). Cognitivism began with the concept that learning is complex and consists of contextual internal processes; this theory was revolutionary in its approach because it suggested learning might occur without external evidence (Paciotti, 2013). While early behaviorists focused on external measures of learning (behavior), early cognitivists believed that learning occurs through mental internal processing of information. Early cognitivist scholars also were interested in complex cognitive processes such as thinking, problem-solving, language, and concept formation (Snelbecker, 1983).

Cognitivists believe that the “black box” of the mind can and should be opened, studied, and understood. Their work focuses on the conceptualization of student learning processes. There are several well-known underpinning cognitive theories that indicate this focus including cognitive development theory, schemata theory, and the information-processing model. Piaget’s (1936) cognitive developmental theory is one of the more famous of these models; it suggests that children construct their understanding of the world and go through specific stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational period.

A key concept within cognitivism is schemata. While British psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett (1932) first introduced the idea of schemata, it was Anderson (1977) who introduced schemata theory to education. A schema is a cognitive structure that consists of facts and ideas organized into a meaningful system of relationships. The idea behind schema theory is that individuals have existing knowledge and, when they learn, they add to their existing mental models. Thus, cognitivists see learning as a relatively permanent change in a learner’s schema or, in plural form, schemata. Human brains have schemata for events, places, procedures, and people. Each learner’s schema is the organized collection of bits of information that has gone into constructing their unique and individual concept of the college. Schemata change and grow as new events, filtered by perception into the schema, are organized and connected to the existing structure to create meaning. Thus, new information results in meaningful learning only when it connects with what already exists in the mind of the learner, resulting in change in the networks that represent our understandings.

Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968) advanced information-processing theories that individuals manipulate information, monitor it, and strategize about it. In this view, “learners attempt to build meaningful connections between words and pictures and that they learn more deeply than they could have with words or pictures alone” (Sorden, 2013, p. 155). Meaningful learning occurs when “learner engages in five cognitive processes: 1) Selecting relevant words for processing in verbal working memory; 2) Selecting relevant images for processing in working memory; 3) Organizing selected words into a verbal model; 4) Organizing selected images into a pictorial model; and 5) Integrating the verbal and pictorial representations with each other and with prior knowledge” (Sorden, 2013, p. 157). Cognitive overload occurs when working memory capacity is exceeded. The three types of cognitive overload are intrinsic—when the content exceeds the knowledge/expertise of the learner; extraneous—when the methods and content are too split between multiple sources; and germane—when material is delivered at an inappropriate rate for working memory to process (Sorden, 2013).

Cognitivist theories applied to education. Cognitivism is the foundation for several theories of teaching and learning, some that are still widely used to guide teaching and learning decisions in higher education. An example is

Gardner's (1991) theory of multiple intelligences. While the theory of multiple intelligences is still widely used, it has also been widely criticized (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4). For Gardner (2018), the theory of multiple intelligences informs teaching and learning decisions as a tool for assessing deep learning, "a concept can only be well understood – and can only give rise to convincing performances of understanding – if an individual is capable of representing that core in more than one way, indeed, in several ways" (Gardner, 2018, p. 134). This informs teaching and learning decisions by directing teachers to spend a lot of time on a topic, to present the topic in multiple ways, and those approaches need to call on a range of "intelligences" (Gardner, 2018). The concept of "intelligences," the most controversial portion of the theory, suggests that topics have different intelligences associated with it and those topics should be presented to incorporate those intelligences. However, many have taken the theory of multiple intelligences to mean that individual learners also have intelligences and therefore teachers must identify a learner's intelligence and then teach every topic using a variety of methods that address every intelligence in the room. Despite that misconceptualization, the theory of multiple intelligences has contributed positively to teaching and learning in higher education by reinforcing that multiple representations of content are important and that even in a large classroom, individualized instruction is possible and necessary.

Building on and from the theory of multiple intelligences, experiential learning theory (ELT; Kolb, 1984) emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through experience and that learning occurs through adaptations that happen as a result of interactions with the environment (Zijdemans-Boudreau, Moss, & Lee, 2013). According to Kolb (1984), learning consists of four stages:

1. Concrete experience;
2. Reflective observation;
3. Abstract conceptualization;
4. Active experimentation (Zijdemans-Boudreau et al., 2013).

Through ELT, learning experiences in the classrooms should facilitate these four stages through the following steps: (1) introduce the topic through a real-world experience to students that results in some sort of disorienting emotion or question; (2) prompt students to reflect on that experience and possible responses; (3) provide direct instruction on how to respond to or conceptualize the experience; and (4) facilitate an opportunity for students to practice or apply what they learned. Critics of ELT point to differences according to gender in validation research (Zijdemans-Boudreau et al., 2013) and ask if ELT is a theory or a practice. As a practice, critics find the ELT model reductionist and inflexible (Zijdemans-Boudreau et al., 2013) and suggest that a more representative model must consider context, power, and learner differences (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).