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**Title: Does Behaviorism Prepare the Modern Student for Top Jobs?**

Today's workforce is too complex to be viewed through the lens of simplistic behaviorism. Take nurse manager Jillian Halfpenny. On a typical Tuesday, she steps through the front doors of the Valley Community Hospital from the early morning darkness. Her morning starts with a team briefing, discussing daily patient objectives, and various scheduling needs. Next, there is a meeting with the administration where they develop deployment strategies for upcoming compliance regulations. Between meetings, she reviews and signs off on patient discharge orders. After lunch, she mediates and counsels a dispute between staff members. Finally, before leaving, she reviews and edits the department's budget cut plan requested by fiscal services. Her job requires a sophisticated set of skills, involving critical thinking and collaboration.

Higher education needs to prepare students for complex careers like Jillian's. So, we must ask ourselves, how can we advocate for the use of a simplistic behaviorism model to guide our instructional design?

**Foundation**

Behaviorists subscribe to the idea that "only observable, measurable, outward behavior is worthy of scientific inquiry" (Bush, 2006, p. 14). In terms of learning theory, the concept is that creating specific input results in the desired outcome. Several popular sub-theories exist to further develop the behaviorist idea such as contiguity, classical, and operant conditioning. These sub-theories range from processes such as using drills and practice to achieve rote memorization, using emotional responses to

achieve a specific outcome, or applying positive or negative reinforcements to encourage and discourage desired behaviors.

Education in itself is an ever-evolving field that builds from previous theories and improves itself as knowledge is accrued. Behaviorism set an early foundation for the basis of educational psychology which ensured the effectiveness of all areas of education. However, we need to embrace concepts that behaviorism does not address, such as the cognitivist and constructivist perceptions.

### **Impact of the Industrial Revolution**

In the late 18th century to the early 19th century education and training changed to support the industrial revolution and the effect it was having on society. This shift from the mostly agrarian to cutting-edge urbanized factories changed the needs of educators as well. Behaviorism became key in the training of students and workers in such a shorter amount of time (Gokmenoglu, Eret, and Kiraz, 2010, p. 294). To be effective, workers required new skills to perform repeated tasks, making rote memorization a critical training element.

We now face a similar divergence to the times of the early part of the 20th century. Society as a whole has made a significant jump in technology since the days of computers the size of small buildings. These technological leaps, over the past 80 years, have changed the landscape of the workplace and the way society interacts with that technology. Because of today's technology, today's workers do not need rote memorization skills but, like Jillian, they need to have a new set of skills.

### **Critical Thinking**

The idea of using operant conditioning to apply a system of positive and negative reinforcements is a hard sell for most areas of education. However, placing some sort of gold star sticker on a term paper is probably not the best way to prepare someone like Jillian with the skills she needs to be successful. Her job demands strong problem-solving and critical thinking skills so she can administer the highest level of patient care and empathy.

Behaviorism, at its foundation, focuses on observations. In contrast, cognitivism makes “knowledge meaningful and helps learners organize and relate new information to existing knowledge in memory” (Silber, 1998, p. 62). In behaviorism, “instruction is structured around the presentation of the target stimulus and the provision of opportunities for the learner to practice making the proper response” (Ertmer and Newby, 2013, p. 50). This conflicts with today’s workplace where workers need to make decisions for different scenarios. In many situations, there may not be a precise answer to every question. It may take critical thought and inventiveness to solve. As we learn how cognition supports the creative thinking skills needed, we can understand the value it can give to the entire process.

### **Collaboration**

Jobs like Jillian’s require the ability to work in varied groups in multiple situations, just as she interacts with her team, doctors, patients, and administrators. Students need to build effective skills to communicate and work with diverse cultures (Ertmer and Newby, 2013). Behaviorism is too limiting in this context. Could direct instruction provide the student with the required skills needed? We argue it could not. A traditional lecture might instruct the when, how, and where of these skills, but it does not provide first-hand experience working in a group building knowledge together.

Constructivist theory may provide a better option. With collaboration “more capable students can provide peers with new information and ways of thinking so that all parties can create new means of understanding” (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997, p. 507). This is especially true for many modern jobs working with individuals from other cultures and backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

Rote memorization along with behavior modification, through consequences, have their place in specific settings. Nevertheless, the key factor in higher education is to provide individuals, such as Jillian,

with a robust toolkit. It is possible to produce students that can be effective in today's top jobs, but the application of behaviorism in higher education is not an effective method for this particular task. It simply doesn't provide the tools for critical thinking and collaboration that are essential in modern careers.

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