Behaviorism

“Reinforce what you want the individual to do again.

Thorndike’s most significant contribution to understanding learning has come to be called connectionism, or the S-R theory of learning. Using animals in controlled experiments, Thorndike noted that through repeated trial-and-error learning, certain connections between sensory impressions, or stimuli (S), and subsequent behavior, or responses (R), are the weekend by the consequences of behavior. Thorndike formulated three laws of learning to explain his findings: the Law of Effect, which states that learners will acquire and remember responses that lead to satisfying aftereffects; the Law of Exercise, which asserts that the repetition of a meaningful connection results in substantial learning; and the Law of Readiness, which notes that if the organism is ready for the connection, learning is enhanced, and if it is not, learning is inhibited (Ormrod 1995). Although Thorndike himself and later researchers modified these laws, they are nevertheless still applied widely in educational settings.

Thorndike’s connectionism became refined and expanded on by his contemporaries and by those who followed (for a detailed discussion, see Hergenhahn & Olson, 2005; Ormrod, 1995). Working in Russia, Pavlov, for example, added concepts of reinforcement, conditioned stimulus, and extension to the basic notion of the stimulus-response connection. Guthrie stated that one law of learning based on contiguity is all that is needed to make learning comprehensible: “Whatever you do in the presence of a stimulus, you do again when that stimulus is re-presented” (Grippen & Peters, 1984 p. 61). Important as the work of these and other researchers was, behaviorism was most developed as a theory of learning by B. F. Skinner.

Skinner’s major contribution to understanding learning is known as operant conditioning. Simply stated, operant conditioning means “reinforce what you want the individual to do again; ignore what you want the individual to stop doing” (Grippen & Peters, 1984 p. 65). Reinforcement is essential to understanding operant conditioning. If behavior is reinforced are rewarded, the response is more likely to occur again under similar conditions. Behavior that is not reinforced is likely to become less frequent and may even disappear. Within this framework, even something as complex as personality can be explained by operant conditioning. Personality, according to Skinner, (1974, p. 149) is a “repertoire of behavior imported by an organized set of contingencies” – in effect, a personal history of reinforcements.

* image found through Bing image search – license is “Free to share and use”