LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

LEARNING THEORY SYSTEMS

AND HOW THEY AID IN PREPARING LESSONS

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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I. Introduction

There are many different ways students learn, and their ability to retain what they have learned is aided by a sound teaching structure. For the teacher, understanding how students learn is vitally important to what you may hope to achieve as a teacher, whether they are college students just starting out, or the learned congregant who has been sitting in church for 30 years. Ultimately, the goal as a teacher should be to assist the student in applying knowledge properly, according to God's will, and thus attaining a heavenly wisdom, which is then able to manifest a positive change in the student (James 3:13-18).[1] This critique will examine and interact with five learning theory systems, presented by *Created to Learn*, and the three possibilities to achieve specific teaching goals, presented by *Communicating for a Change*, to better understand how these will influence the way lessons are prepared and presented.

II. Brief Summary

In the two texts, Yount and Stanley present two different types of students, or audiences, and two different methods of learning for each. First, Yount, in *Educational Psychology and Learning*, gives the reader five different learning theory systems, which are traditionally taught as a form of a teaching-learning process by "analyzing differences in personality, mental maturity, and moral reasoning."[2] The five systems: Traditional Behavioral Learning, Social Behavioral Learning, Cognitive Learning I and II, and Humanistic Learning, each addresses a specific type of learning through an historical perspective by considering the ideas of the leading thinkers in each system at the time.

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references come from the Crossway ESV bible translation. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jas 3:13–17.

[2] William R. Yount, *Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher's Introduction to Educational Psychology*, 2nd Edition (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 167.

Most of the systems evaluated have their roots within the last century of behavioral learning, but the analysis begins with the historical evaluation of the classic philosophers such as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) who "established the foundation for contemporary behavioral learning theory in his Laws of Association."[3] From there the author quickly moves into the more modern era starting with the famous British philosopher John Locke, and then into the very well known works of Ivan Pavlov. After the historical foundation is presented the process of evaluating our modern day tools, such as computers, is discussed before diving into a thorough section on cognitive learning.

Next, Stanley, in *Communicating for a Change*, takes a look at three different possibilities, or goals, for "communicating from the Scriptures," challenging his students to learn, but also to teach teachers how to transform their presentations to effect change in their listeners.[4] First, the author identifies the three most common ways people can be taught the Scriptures; to teach the Bible to people, to teach people the Bible, and to teach people how to live a life that reflects the values, principles, and truths of the Bible.[5] Second, Stanley examines what a teacher's goal is in teaching his students by asking two very important questions: "What is the one thing I want my audience to know, and what do I want them to do about it?"[6] The author's preferred method of teaching is the last method of the three, and ideally one that utilizes these two questions. To do this, the traditional style of teaching the Scriptures, a point-by-point basis of preaching, is examined to be a less effective approach than to "pick one point and focus on it."[7]

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[3] Yount, 172.
[4] Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change: Seven Keys to Irresistible Communication*, 1st Edition (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2006), 92.
[5] Stanley, 93-95.
[6] Stanley, 103.
[7] Stanley, 104.

III. Critical Interaction with Author's Work

Yount, like James, knew teaching required a serious commitment with serious consequences if done wrong and therefore; James warns his readers that "not many of you should become teachers" (James 3:1). Likewise, Stanley lines up with Paul who knew it was vital for preachers to preach effectively, otherwise "how are they to hear" the Scriptures taught (Romans 10:14b). Students have so many different ways they can learn, and often they will respond to more than one methodology. For that reason, it is important for teachers to learn a wide variety of systems and methods. This is not so as to teach in a checklist type format, but to be able to recognize and respond to each individual student in a way in which the student can best apply the given knowledge.

In *Created to Learn*, the learning theory systems mainly focus on the more traditional or formal student, but the best methods can be applied to any learning situation. The information presented here is slightly less practical than Stanley's work, but more technical and based firmly in historical psychology roots. There are times when the author discusses the theories in a more practical way such as in the examination of the Information Processing Theory within the Cognitive Learning II section. Here, Yount shows how the method works when applied to something most readers would be familiar with today, "the computer as a model of learning."[8] This leads into an excellent study on how short-term and long-term memory functions, and how best to utilize these for teaching. If there were a weakness in the author's discussion on learning theories, it would be slight imbalance of theory and practical application for how to best use the information provided to solicit a growth-applied knowledge for the student. This was not the stated or intended goal of the author's work in this section, but it is the overall purpose of the text

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[8] Yount, 279.

to "help in tangible ways" to teach others.[9] Yount could have handled this a little better, but for his overall objective it was not as expected as with the Stanley text.

In *Communicating for a Change*, the approach is given more from the perspective of the pastor or minister to a congregation than that of a teacher or professor to a student, but all of the methods discussed aid in the overall understanding of how to best teach students. Stanley approaches the topic on the most practical level possible, and confronts the norm of preaching with clear steps. The point of practicality is made clear when the author gives an example of a typical set of sermon points, and then concludes the problem "is that it doesn't reflect the world we live in. We don't live our lives by points. We live by our emotions."[10] This directly relates back to the cognitive learning experience, and how students learn through either short-term or long-term memory. Teaching or preaching point by point does not effectuate the memory in the same way something does, which we can "see, taste, and feel."[11] Moving people "systematically through an outline" is one way to teach, but if "life change is your goal," Stanley concludes, this method of teaching just is not "the most effective approach."[12] If there were a weakness to this section of the text, it would be the lack of technical research and backing to support the ideas the author concludes, based on his suggestions. It would be well to note this section is written from a perspective of life experiences of a pastor who has authored over 15 books and leads one of the largest congregations in the country.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has examined the learning theory systems, and possibilities to achieve specific teaching goals to better understand how these methods influenced the way lessons are presented.

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[9] Yount, xvii.
[10] Stanley, 102.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

The process of learning through the teacher-student relationship is one as old as Scripture itself. It is a relational method Jesus used, one that sometimes included great emotion, and perhaps he perfected it in a way we still struggle to do today. The approaches developed in *Created to Learn* and *Communicating for a Change* are quite different in method, but with the same goal in mind, to transform the life of the student. Combined they make for a stronger understanding of how a student learns, and how to apply new techniques to effect change in that student's life. While Stanley fights the status quo of preaching methods, he also steps on the long tradition of more formal classroom training as well. These methods specifically can, and will, have a direct impact on how this author prepares and presents a message, though practical application could be difficult. When there is a clear control of teaching methods, such as in a small group, or a Sunday school class, preparing lessons according to Stanley's suggestions would be far easier than in the more formal setting Yount describes.

It is more than obvious to this author that learning by following a dry and lifeless outline of bullet points is hardly an easy way to experience, and learn new material. This method is so engrained in our culture of teaching it would be difficult to manifest a change away from that structure. But in the process of "developing a one point message" that is personal, and appeals more to the emotional senses, the teacher would make the lesson far more memorable. To build a new structure, one like Stanley addresses, would enable better retention, and ultimately give the student a better chance to apply knowledge properly, hopefully resulting in the wisdom of a changed life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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