Albert Bandura: Social-Cognitive Theory

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The idea of learning through a social environment has a broad base of support from a variety of theorists. Behaviorists believe that learning can happen through social imitation using a stimulus and response mechanism. Cognitivists value the learner’s ability to retain information that is received through social interactions with peers and the creation of symbols as a means to unite a culture. Constructivists focus on the role of peers and independent social observation and study to further the learning process. In order to take advantage of the rich resources of a social learning environment, it would be wise to adopt a learning theory that can embrace a variety of these theories of learning. Albert Bandura’s approach to learning, Social-Cognitive Theory, differentiates itself from a singular learning theory by bridging the gap between behaviorism and cognitivism.

**Key Concepts and Principles**

Social-Cognitive Theory is a theory that, as its name implies, includes a focus on cognition and the learner’s mental involvement as an essential component of social learning. “Bandura believed that humans can learn through observation without the need for imitation; learning could be either direct or indirect (vicarious) in that one could learn through observing others’ behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors” (Gibson, 2004, p. 195). For Bandura, the strict stimulus/response theory of behaviorism focuses too much on the learner’s actual behavior. He proposes that learning happens when we take observed behavior and assimilate it into our own knowledge database.

Bandura proposed that the key factors that influence learning begin with the observation of others. Through observation of modeled behaviors, attitudes, emotional reactions, etc., the learner makes decisions about how to act. However, this learning does not happen through a stimulus/response approach, such as an exact replication of observed behavior. According to
Bandura, the learning happens through a three-way relationship between the behavior, the environment, and the cognitive or personal events inherent in the individual learner (Gibson, 2004, p. 197). And it is this cognitive element of Bandura’s theory that helps to embrace both a behavioristic and cognitive approach to learning. “The learner’s ability to code and store transitory experiences in symbolic form and to represent future consequences in thought are essential to the acquisition and modification of human behavior” (Gredler, 2009, p. 361). The four foci to the learner’s cognitive process, according to Bandura, are attention, retention, motor production, and motivational processes. Finally, Bandura places an emphasis on the learner’s beliefs in their own capacity for learning (self-efficacy), as well as on the learner’s ability to focus on self-determined goals and self-evaluate and regulate behaviors (self-regulation).

In Bandura’s theory of social-cognition, the role of the instructor in the learning process involves three steps. And the instructional strategies best used to exemplify this theory are in alignment with the three roles the instructor uses to best meet the learner’s needs. The first step is to determine the appropriate model(s) for the learning process. These models can be “live”, including the instructor, peers, guest speakers, family members, etc. They can also be symbolic models, such as those found in mass media like television, movies, computer-based training programs, etc. “The major advantage of symbolic modeling is that the models may be viewed more than once by students” (Gredler, 2009, p. 373). In addition to determining the actual model, the instructor also needs to consider the behavior(s) that need to be modeled. By taking into consideration the behavior, an appropriate model can be chosen to best create a learning environment rich in examples.

Another element that Bandura asserts as an important role of the instructor is that of reinforcement. The instructor should create an environment rich in positive outcomes. By using
clearly defined and stated rules within the learning environment, the student is made aware of expectations and can actively work towards reaching their perceived goals. Finally, the role of instructor is to facilitate the learner’s ability to self-regulate. This role is dependent on the type of learning to be achieved, whether motor skills, attitudinal shifts, behavioral adaptations, etc. Ultimately the instructor should help the students to develop learning tools to not only encourage them to self-regulate, but also to create a sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy in their learning abilities.

Bandura’s Social-Cognitive Theory is considered a theory that focuses on learning in a naturalistic setting. It is this type of informal setting, in which learning happens in our daily lives, that is considered ripe with opportunities for learning through social venues. However, that doesn’t imply that Bandura believed that all learning needed to happen in an unstructured environment. In fact, he asserts that learning is instructor managed and that the student is at the center of their learning process. The environment around the student provides the rich resource for observing behaviors and mentally cataloging these examples for future use in their own learning environments (Gibson, 2004, p. 198).

Bandura’s Social-Cognitive Theory has a variety of strengths, especially as they relate to adult learning. The focus on learning through a social environment encourages the belief in life-long learning. In addition, Bandura puts the ability and motivation to learn squarely in the hands of the learner through the use of concepts like self-efficacy and self-regulation. Using these learner-centered tools provides a rich backdrop for creating an environment in which the adult learner takes an active involvement in their own educational development. Finally, by acknowledging the use of mass media tools (like television, computers, etc.) as a source of modeled behavior, Bandura opens up a variety of learning environments in our daily lives.
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without being hindered by the formality of the educational environment (Gredler, 2009, p. 380). Learning can happen at any time, anywhere.

There are two main weaknesses in Bandura’s learning theory and they both focus on the idea of self-efficacy. In order to develop self-regulation and self-efficacy in the classroom, there must be enough time to create a sense of mastery in each subject. Unfortunately, that time may not always be available (Gredler, 2004, p. 384). This challenge can be diminished through the use of positive class environments that include opportunities for self-reflection and self-direction. As students encounter experiences in which they are made aware of their abilities and rewarded for their achievements, they can begin to internally assess their skills and capabilities.

Another challenge is Bandura’s assertion that efficacy expectations (the “feeling” component) are separate from the outcome expectancy (what the student is expecting to achieve). Many scholars argue “that efficacy expectations were defined in such a way that it included within them expectations of outcome, and thus could not be regarded as conceptually distinct” (Eastman & Marzillier, 1984, p. 215). In other words, a learner’s belief in their ability to achieve a certain outcome is directly related to the actual outcome.

Although there may be challenges to Bandura’s learning theory, he is a prolific writer and continues to defend his theory through examples of how it can be used in real-life situations. He has published numerous articles and participated in a variety of discussion presentations on learning theories. A quick search of the internet finds mention of Bandura with regards to Social-Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy theory, human resource development, health and mental support, educational environments, and the Bobo doll experiment, to name just a few. In addition to various noteworthy accomplishments, academic searches also include numerous mention of Bandura’s position as an influential theorist and psychologist. He is a professor
emeritus for Stanford University’s Department of Psychology and received the American Psychological Associations’ Outstanding Lifetime Contribution to Psychology award in 2004.

**Implications on Instruction**

Bandura’s Social-Cognitive Theory has a variety of applications within the instructional/training environment. As most educational events involve social aspects, whether in academic settings with either child or adult learners; or in adult vocational training, the opportunity for learners to observe and model desired behaviors are numerous. In addition, the ability to observe behavior and then transfer that learning to real-world experiences makes it ideal for the goals of life-long learners. While Bandura’s theory provides instructional ideas for all age groups, it affords a strong argument for adult learning opportunities.

Using symbolic models, such as mass media or web-based learning environments, this theory provides a source of information and knowledge that can be transmitted without the need for in-person learning opportunities. Web-based learning environments that can be found in many distance learning courses “enable learners to interact and observe the results of their interactions while responding to and engaging with others, leading to a possible development of a more cohesive community of learners” (Hill, Song & West, 2012, p. 89). In addition to fostering a community of learners and peer modeling opportunities, the use of web-based learning environments support growth in student self-efficacy. For many students, this increased belief in their own capabilities comes as a direct result of the student’s comfort level with web-based tools as well as the perceived anonymity of the distance community (Hill et al., 2012).

In addition to the formal adult distance learning arena, the use of Bandura’s Social-Cognitive Theory can play an important role in human resource development. The use of Bandura’s theory in workplace training provides an ideal setting for learning in the form of
organizational socialization. “At the individual level, new members imitate other members performing their roles…They also are actively and implicitly taught the skill, behaviors, and values necessary for career advancement” (Gibson, 2004, p. 201). In addition, Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy provides a strong argument for motivation as a key support in career advancement. Research indicates that “self-efficacy was one of the factors that were positively related to motivation for skills upgrading” (Gibson, 2004, p. 202). This relationship between self-efficacy and performance improvement provides yet another example of how Bandura’s theory can be useful for adult learners in a workplace setting.

**Real World Example**

In examining Bandura’s learning theory with relation to weight loss and the Weight Watchers community, they are a variety of benefits to using Social-Cognitive Theory in order to affect lifestyle change in members. Bandura himself examined the effectiveness of his theory with relation to self-health promotion and management. In an article in Health Education & Behavior, Bandura states that “social cognitive theory offers both predictors and principles in how to inform, enable, guide, and motivate people to adapt habits that promote health and reduce those that impair it” (2004, p. 146). Through the use of internet technologies, health information can be disseminated to a large population. This ability to quickly share information can increase the potential impact of health education on society. Within the Weight Watchers community, members have the ability to acquire a vast amount of information. Through meeting room discussion, online articles and database searches, as well as a variety of reading material, the members are quickly and adequately informed with regards to the potential health benefits of weight loss.
However, Bandura cautions that while this wealth of information creates an opportunity to gain knowledge, it will only be effective if people believe they are capable of change. This availability of information “cannot do much if individuals cannot motivate themselves to take advantage of what they have to offer” (Bandura, p. 150). Therefore, while the Weight Watchers community can be informed and guided in the process of health promotion, it is ultimately up to each individual member to develop the requisite skills and motivation to reach their desired goals. In order to encourage self-motivation in the members, social support and modeling are an important component of their learning outcomes. The information that is provided, in conjunction with the social support, must be structured in a manner in which the member is taught how to build self-management skills and create long-term habits and the members must believe they are capable of making this health change.

Finally, Bandura stresses the importance of the cognitive aspect of health promotion in creating true change. “Health habits are not changed by an act of will. People have to learn to monitor their health behavior…and how to use proximal goals to motivate themselves and guide their behavior” (Bandura, p. 151). The environment and personal goals and learning characteristics play an important role in health change. However, without the third element in Bandura’s theory – behavior – the health changes will not materialize. Within the Weight Watchers community, one can attend meetings and hear about how other members are successfully losing weight and they can desire weight loss. But if they do not make the required behavioral changes, their goals of weight loss and health promotion will not be realized.

**Conclusion**

Bandura’s Social-Cognitive Theory provides a tool in which to use the natural learning environment provided by social interaction to develop knowledge that can be adapted for
personal learning. Through the use of self-efficacy and self-regulation, Bandura actively involves the learner in the educational process. While an instructional theory based on Social-Cognitive Theory may not be explicit, the implications of modeling, cognitive processes and self-awareness all provide valid tools in creating an environment ripe for learning.


