

# THEORIES OF LEARNING: THEIR MAIN FEATURES

These are the three main groups of learning theories. They form a continuum, ranging from the most structured (behavioural) to the least structured (social and phenomenological). It is important to recognise that the groups of theories are not mutually exclusive; that they overlap and interlink with one another.

## BEHAVIOURAL

- Emphasis is placed on learning from external stimuli e.g. being told information
- Focuses on doing something, repeating or practising it, and the consequences of this for behaviour
- Activity is important – learning must be active rather than passive
- Repetition/frequent practice is vital if something is to be learned
- Reinforcement is the prime motivator – either from a tutor (e.g. a reward or praise) or from a learner (e.g. their own satisfaction)
- Learning is helped when its objectives (the things a learner is expected to be able to do or know by the end of a session) are clear

## COGNITIVE

- Emphasis is placed on events internal to the learner – learning from inferences, expectations and making connections
- Learners acquire not habits (as they do in behavioural learning), but plans and strategies
- Teaching sessions need to be well organised and structured, so that learning becomes easier
- Prior knowledge is important; new learning must follow on from previous learning
- It is acknowledged that learners are all different and that this affects their learning
- It is important that informative feedback on their learning is given to learners, not just a reward
- Learning with understanding is better than learning by rote

## SOCIAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL

- Focuses on feelings, emotions and experience
- Learning is a natural process; we do it all the time, not just in school or at work
- Social situations affect learning, which is rarely an isolated event
- Learners have needs and goals, which motivate them to learn and to establish their future goals
- Significant learning only takes place when learners take responsibility for their own learning, choosing what they want to learn, when they learn it and how they learn it; and when they monitor their own progress
- Learning best takes place in a realistic setting in real-life contexts, rather than in classrooms and lecture theatres
- Discussion between learners and tutors is an important part of learning
- Anxiety and emotion affect learning, both positively and negatively