

Adult Learning Lessons from the Film: *The Great Debaters*

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Abstract

College students in the film *The Great Debaters* demonstrated behavior modification and transformative learning experiences that align with adult learning theories. The experiences of the learners in the film will be compared and contrasted with learning theories by B. F. Skinner and Jack Mezirow to show that the latter theory had more influence in this instance.

### Selected Learning Theories in the Context of the Movie

Reward and punishment are powerful influences on behavior. B. F. Skinner's work with operant conditioning showed that changes in behavior could be influenced by rewarding positive behavior, punishing negative behavior and by ignoring negative behavior (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Advancing beyond external influences requires new perspectives for adult learners to transform beyond current limited views. Jack Mezirow (1997) demonstrated that "we transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based" (p. 7).

In the film *The Great Debaters*, the students encountered situations which showed the influences of operant conditioning and transformational learning (Winfrey & Washington, 2007). Ultimately, it was the transformational experiences and self-directed learning of the students that provided a more rewarding outcome for the students as they advanced beyond behavioral limitations.

### **Two Sides of Behavior Modification**

Early in the film, students are introduced to behavioral challenges. In order to audition for the debate team, students must be brave enough to step into a chalk drawn box on the floor and answer questions posed by the debate coach (Winfrey & Washington, 2007). The dominant behavior demonstrated by the students is that of sitting and watching as spectators. They are

hopeful to join the debate team and fearful of public failure. Some of the contestants receive praise for their answers while others face defeat by being unable to answer some of the questions.

Skinner's (1947) experiments used pigeons that were kept at 75% of their normal body weight so they would be motivated for food rewards based on behaviors. The motivation for the debate team members to make the team required them to overcome their fear of failure while being in front of a large audience (Winfrey & Washington, 2007).

Behavior modification has a negative side which includes punishment for not complying with imposed rules. In the film, the father of one of the debate team members is driving a car with the family when they run over a pig that ran out into the street. The encounter of the black family meeting with the white farm owners with guns shows the fear of punishment for non-compliance as the father turns over his paycheck from the school to pay for the damages. The son wants to stand up for injustice but the father insists on compliance.

### **Transformative Learning**

The conflict in the film is set with students on the debate team trying to advance beyond limits of imposed unfair rules of behavior. The recognition of a desire for change is limited by the consequences of stimulus and response based on existing behaviors. The need for a transformation beyond those limits requires some additional perspective to change the outcome among the members of the debate team.

Approaches to skill development and behavior change involve a variety of processes to experience, transform and reflect on learning. Mezirow's (1991) transformational steps to

learning involved an awareness of the context explored through reflective discourse and making actions based on the insight (p. 7 – 8).

One of the transformational experiences for the college students on the debate team was when they witnessed a lynching. The reflection on that disorienting dilemma caused the three remaining debate team members and the coach to explore their own drive and motivation about the potential to change the opinions and limited understanding of others.

The reflective exploration by the learners on the debate team initially included fear and anger which also matched up to Mezirow's (2000) motivated self examination process ( p. 22). The debate team members ultimately resolved to take social action to stand up for truth by building solidarity with each other (Winfrey & Washington, 2007). The process of searching out new perspectives is also demonstrated in Stephen Brookfield's (1995) critical reflection strategies which included replacing and reframing assumptions, searching out alternative perspectives and recognizing dominant culture values.

### **Concluding the Strongest Influence Among the Theories**

Learning is a recursive process involving experience and reflection which the learners may not be able to fully recognize or describe (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 137). The initial changes by the team members in *The Great Debaters* showed only limited success in behavior modification (Winfrey & Washington, 2007). The progressive changes and transformation on the part of the learners on the debate team occurred because they changed their view of the world rather than just increasing existing knowledge or repeating experiences. The

additional progress by the learners showed the stronger influence of the transformational theory over the behavioral theory in examples in this film.

## References

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