

The Learner and What He Learns: Implication for Curriculum Implementation

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ABSTRACT

The place of the learner is very significant in the curriculum process, be it at the planning or implementation stage. The behaviour of the learner for whom the curriculum is planned and implemented, changes as a result of what he learns. Attempt was made in this paper to examine the concept of learning and holds that learning is a relatively permanent change in behaviour as a result of experience or practice. Four major issues about the learning process were x-rayed – relatively permanent change; change in behavior potentially; reinforcement; and experience or practice. The nature of the learner and his learning style are portrayed as being of vital importance to the learning process. The fact that the learner does not learn in the first instance because of the content itself, but learns because the teacher has learnt to make the content inviting, was emphasised. Factors such as motivation, learning environment, relevance of the material to be learnt, etc. were presented as factors that can influence what the learner learns. It was pointed out that in order to know the extent to which the learner learns, the teacher needs to carry out evaluation, using one evaluation tool or the other. Some Implications of the learner and what he learns to curriculum implementation were highlighted. It was concluded that the learner is the product of what he is exposed to - learning experiences and content. The learning experiences and content hence should be relevant to the extent that they meet the learner's needs alongside the needs of the society. One of the recommendations made is that teachers should endeavour to know their learners - nature, learning style, needs, what motivates each learner, etc., so that they can impact learning in the learner.

Keywords: Learning, Learning Process, The Nature of the Learner and Learning Style, What the learner Learns, Curriculum Implementation.

Introduction

Without the learner, there will be no need to plan and implement the curriculum. The place of the learner is crucial in the curriculum process. The curriculum is what guides the activities that happen in the school setting. In the course of implementing the curriculum at the classroom level, the learner is exposed to some content and learning experiences that will bring about the desired behavioural changes in him. Hence, learning takes place as a result of the type of content and learning activities that the learner is exposed to, or he interacts with. Content, being the knowledge, skills and information the learner imbibes to bring about changes in his behaviour; learning experiences are the experiences or activities that the learner is exposed to, to bring about the expected changes. Any educational system that does not bring about the expected changes in the learners is questionable (Ochoma, 2020).

For quite some time, the teacher has been the centre of attraction in the teaching-learning process. What the learner learns thus is dependent on what the teacher does in the classroom. It had been a teacher-centred affair. In recent time however, there has been a paradigm shift, from a teacher-centred affairs to a learner-centred one. The learner thus becomes the centre of attraction in the teaching-learning process; in his learning. He plays a pivotal role in his learning. He is both the subject and object of learning. He is expected to be active, inquisitive, take initiative, be confident, be inventive, and be reflective in the course of his learning. Emphasis is laid at present, on the fact that the learner learns through his actions. Learning thus happens as a result of what the learner does. The learner learns not just what the teacher teaches, but also what he does. The complexity of the human nature however, makes it difficult to know exactly what the learner learns. It is therefore the burden of this paper to explore what the learner learns and the implication it has on curriculum implementation.

Concept of Learning

The individuals in the school system tend to view learning as the major activity of the school. That major activity is to know what one did not previously know. Providing a piece of information enables one to know, and that knowledge is referred to as epistemology. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge. It studies the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge. Knowing and learning are closely related. The study of learning may be referred to as experimental epistemology (Iheanacho, 2002). One may be tempted to view learning as being very simple and narrow in scope to constitute a course of study. Its definition and scope would reveal its magnitude.

Learning has been defined by educational psychologists in different ways and yet, they have not been able to agree on a common definition of learning. Learning is seen as a quantitative increase in knowledge, memorising of facts, skills, and methods that can be retained and used when necessary. It is also viewed as making sense or abstracting meaning, relating parts of the subject matter to each other and to the real world, interpreting and understanding reality and comprehending the world by reinterpreting knowledge (Behlol, 2010). It has been defined as any relatively permanent change in behaviour which occurs as a result of experience or practice. In all, learner's behaviour should reflect a gain in knowledge, understanding, or skill achieved through experience. This may include study, instruction, observation or practice. Changes in behavior are reasonably objective and can therefore be measured (Ikegbunam, 2009).

Learning can occur as a result of: direct exposure to events; watching others experience the event through language, being told; by reading (Eriega, 2001). Some types of learning include: (a) Signal learning - which involves attitudes, values and interests; (b) Verbal association and verbal sequence learning - learners are to associate a stimulus or event with a name; (c) Discriminant learning - entails ability to distinguish a thing from another; (d) Concept learning - entails ability to provide a term for a class; (e) Chain learning - requires a sequence of motor to induce an effect; (f) Rule/principle learning – concept have attributes and attributes are particular features; (g) Problem solving – applying other forms of learning to solve problem (Nwankwo, 2005).

Learning is a multi-domain process involving intellect, emotion and physical skills. The domains are connected, and the condition of one domain influences others (Tharp, Gould and Potter, 2009 in Ochoma, 2021). So much is therefore involved before learning takes place. It is crucial hence, to understand the learning process.

Understanding the Learning Process

Four major issues about the learning process that are essential and worthy of note are the issue of: *relatively permanent change; behavior or response potentially; reinforcement; and experience or practice* (Reber, 1995 in Iheanacho, 2002; Ochoma, 2016).

- **Relatively Permanent Change:** For learning to take place, there must be a change in behaviour, and that change must be permanent and not momentary or temporary. Temporary changes that happen as a result of fatigue, habituation, satiation, old age, drug, environment, etc., cannot be equated as learning. Learning can only be said to have taken place when the behavioural change is persistent or last for some time, or even for life.
- **Change in Behaviour Potentially:** The change in behaviour needs to be observed before it can be said that learning has taken place. This implies that the condition of the learner after the learning process should be different from what it was before the learning process. Reber in Iheanacho contends that the inclusion of the term ‘potentiality’ recognises the distinction in the learning performance and allows the latent learning and incidental learning phenomena to be included.
- **Reinforcement:** Reinforcement, the process of strengthening desirable behaviour often through the use of reward, ensures the continuous repetition of a given response. Reinforcement is one of the most important issues in the learning process. This is because it tends to eliminate the occurrence of extinction. If extinction occurs, the response will no longer be relatively permanent. Reinforcement has the potential of encouraging learners to continue to work hard in order to receive further reward and by so doing, learning is enhanced.
- **Experience or Practice:** A change in behaviour potentially may be relatively permanent and still be viewed as not constituting learning, even when there is reinforcement. This happens when the change does not result from an interaction between the individual and the environment. Thus, it is only when a relatively permanent change in behaviour occurs as the individual consciously or unconsciously interacts with the environment, events, objects or situations, etc., that learning takes place.

In the same vein, Bolarin (1994) in Ochoma (2016 p.30) identified the following five attributes that make up learning as a process:

- Learning is a permanent change in behaviour.
- Learning is often manifested in every activity of the learner.
- Learning depends on practice and experience.
- Learning proceeds step to step; from known to unknown.
- Learning results in some change of enduring nature.

Learning indeed progresses step by step; known to unknown. Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) is represented by a four-state learning cycle:

- Concrete Experience – The learner encounters new experience.
- Reflective Observation – The learner reviews/reflects on the new experience, observing carefully before making judgment.
- Abstract Conceptualisation – The learner logically analyses ideas, systematically plans and acts on intellectual understanding of a situation.
- Active experimentation – The learner plan and tries out what has been learnt.

It is worth noting that the process of learning may involve synthesizing different types of information. The individual that is exposed to learning situation acquires knowledge and skills that when put to practice, bring about visible change in behaviour.

Nature of the Learner and Learning Style

Knowledge about the nature of the learner and his learning style is vital to the success of classroom activities vis-à-vis, curriculum implementation. The following are pertinent as regards the nature of the learner:

- **The learner is a unique individual:** Each learner is unique with unique needs and aspirations. He is also a complex entity and multi-dimensional, and should be treated as such.
- **The learner's background and culture varies:** The learner's perception is influenced by his background, culture and worldview. Historical developments and symbol systems such as language, logic and mathematical systems are inherited by the learner as a member of a particular culture and these are learned throughout the learner's life.
- **The learner is responsible for his learning:** The responsibility of learning should reside increasingly with the learner. The learner should be actively involved in the learning process, rather than being passive.
- **The learner needs to be motivated for learning to take place:** The level and source of motivation for learning is another crucial assumption regarding the nature of the learner. This links up with Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), where learners are challenged within close proximity, yet slightly above their current level of development. By experiencing the successful completion of challenging tasks, learners gain confidence and are motivated to embark on more complex challenges/learning tasks (Vygotsky in Uche et al., 2014).

Individual differences abound among learners. This implies that all learners will certainly not learn the same way. Hence, there are different learning styles. Learning style has to do with the preferred way in which an individual learner assimilates, processes, comprehends and retains information. Soghr et al (2013) define learning style as a set of factors, behaviour and attitudes that enhance learning in any situation. Awla (2014) sees it as the complex manner in which, and condition under which learners most effectively perceive, process, store and recall what they have attempted to learn. It is the consistent patterns of behaviour but with a range of individual variability.

Different forms and models of learning styles have been identified. More often than not, the visual, auditory and tactile learning styles are talked about. Fleming (2001) however, classified learning style into four - V.A.R.K.

- **Visual Learning Style** – This implies learning by seeing. Students here prefer to see or visualise information. Ideas and concepts are associated with images and techniques. Visual learners learn better when charts, graphics, diagrams, pictures, films, displays, etc., are used. They learn better when a method such as demonstration is employed.
- **Aura (Auditory) Learning Style** – The learner here learns by listening to spoken words, of self or others, sounds and noise. They recite information, use recorder, attend lectures and discussion group. They perform tasks after listening to instruction.
- **Read/Write Learning Style** – Learners here prefer the use of definitions, reports, textbooks, printed handouts, reading manuals, webpage, taking notes, etc. They perform after reading and writing instructions. For instance, when they are given quiz to write down what they have learnt, they do well.
- **Kinesthetic/Tactile Learning Style** – Learners here learn best by doing. They are quick in learning physical skills. They prefer physical experience like feeling, holding, field trip, laboratories. They are eager to participate in hands-on activities.

Kolb (1984) remarked that an individual's learning style emerges due to his genetics, life experiences, and the demands of his current environment. He described learning styles basically on two dimensions: active/reflective and abstract/concrete. He identified four learning styles - The converger, the diverger, the assimilator and the accommodator.

Converger: Learners in this category have dominant abilities in abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Such learners are competent in practical application of ideas. They prefer dealing with technical problems than social issues. They do well in situations where there is a single best solution or answer to a given problem.

The Diverger: Dominant abilities of learners with this learning style lie in the areas of concrete experience and reflective observation. They observe, rather than take action. They are good in organising smaller bits of information into a meaningful whole. This is the opposite of the converger.

The Assimilator: Assimilators are good at abstract conceptualisation and reflective observation. They tend to understand and create theoretical models easily but they are not particularly concerned about the practical applications of theories. They focus more on abstract ideas than in people.

The Accommodator: Learners with this learning style are strongest in concrete experience and active experimentation. They learn mainly by ‘hands-on’; they are ‘doers’. They are interested in carrying out experiments and plans in the real world. Accommodator learning style is the opposite of the assimilator style. Accommodators are the greatest risk-takers when compared to the others. They are good at thinking on the spot and changing their plans abruptly, in response to new information (Kolb, 1984; Kolb in Cherry, 2020).

The Learner and What He Learn

It is paramount to note that the learner is not propelled to learn in the first instance because of the content itself, but rather because a teacher has learnt to make the content inviting. What invites the learner to learn vary because the learners, themselves are different. This notwithstanding, what learners learn on a general not, should meet their needs; the need of the society; and the need of the discipline.

- **The Learner and his Needs:** Since the learner is a unique individual with unique needs, what he learns should meet his needs. Thus, the present needs of the learner should be taken into consideration, both at the planning and implementation stages of the curriculum process. Experiences of recent times in most parts of the world leave people wondering if the present needs of the learners are taken into consideration in planning and implementing the curriculum.
- **The Learner and the Need of the Society:** What the society needs to a very large extend, determines the objectives of the curriculum. As such, what the learner learns follows the changes in the society to enable them to live effectively in the society, so that they can adapt to its changing situations. Compulsorily, whenever the society (her needs and values) changes, it is expected that what the learner learns should change.
- **The Learner and the Need of the Discipline:** The content – knowledge, skills, facts, etc., of the discipline the learner is exposed to, must be updated to meet the changing needs of the learners and those of the society. The present values upheld by a given society should be reflected in the curriculum content of the discipline in question, and passed on to the learners in the course of implementation.

Beyond the needs of the learner; those of the society; and those of the discipline, it should be noted that there are forces acting either on or within the learner to initiate learning. This suggest that there are activating properties or a set of one or more conditions which activates and turns on behaviour; directs the behaviour towards some goal; and maintains behaviour until the goal is reached (Nwankwo, 2007). In the course of implementing the curriculum, teachers should not lose sight of the fact that very few learners are drawn to list of facts; not many of them find computations, theorems, and

proofs inherently interesting; and that worksheets evoke little satisfaction in them, particularly the young learners (Tomlinson, 2002 in Duru, 2011).

Although there might be learners who dutifully attend to such activities outlined above, the question is: Does such activities make these learners to be eager learners? The best that can be gotten from such tasks is promotion of intellectual compliance, and a hunger to be a 'star' and not necessarily, the desire to learn. For curriculum implementation at classroom level to be a success, it is vital to be aware of factors that influence what the learner learns.

Some of factors that can influence what the learner learns are internal, while others are external. Internal factors include: intelligence, memory, readiness, interest, locus of control, anxiety, previous experience, emotion, etc., while external factors include: environment, social climate in the classroom, teacher factors, feedback, reinforcement, motivation, etc. Few of the external factors are discussed below.

- **Motivation:** What the learner learns is highly dependent first, on what motivates the learner in the teaching and learning process. When a learner does not for instance, have needs that are compelling enough to motivate him to learn, he may not learn. Such a learner will lack the inward drive to propel him to learn. For such learner, whether he passes or fails does not have any effect on him. He goes through school or learning activity without leaving any mark of excellence. The reverse is the case when the learner has needs that are compelling enough and thus have inward drive to learn. For the category of learners in the former group, the teacher can extrinsically motivate them to learn. One way of doing this is to make the material to be learnt as well as the activities, interesting. Moreover, the teacher should be able to know the learners to enable him figure out what and how an individual learner can be motivated. It should be noted that inward drive, that is intrinsic or internal motivation, has been found to be more effective than external drive that comes for instance, from parents, teacher, peers, and society (Ochoma, 2016; 2020).
- **Learning Environment:** Learning environment is the environment which learning takes place. It is the setting, all of it, inside and out. This can be physical or social. The environment is the third teacher in every setting. Enabling environment may indicate appreciation for successful activities and provision of facilities that will promote learning and teaching. When learners are exposed to adequate learning experiences in the learning environment, they learn faster, hence the need for enabling environment. Creating an enabling environment provides opportunities for the learner to lead their own learning; to explore and discover; feel safe and valued. Learners need settings that will enable them grow and develop with the support of practitioners. An enabling environment is one which provides a rich, varied and safe space in a setting in which children can play, explore and learn (Ellström, 2001). Getting the environment right for learners will support their holistic development. Proper selection of learning experiences is necessary in order to get the conditions and practices right for the learners. When learners are exposed to appropriate learning experiences in an enabling environment, they learn faster, hence the need for enabling environment.

- **Relevance of the Material to be Learnt:** A learner will learn materials that are relevant to him. Material to be learnt should have functional relationship with real situation. They should relate to life experiences in and out of school. Moreover, learners should be able to derive satisfaction from such materials as they engage in learning them.
- **Challenging Nature of the Learning Activities:** Learners learn when materials to be learnt are commensurate with their intellectual ability. When what is presented to the learner is not challenging enough, he may not want to learn. Similarly, if the material is too complex, the learner may not be able to learn. Suitability of the material to be learnt, is key.
- **Validity of material to be Learnt:** Materials presented to learners should be such that relate directly to the intended outcome. Such materials should be true and authentic, and should bring about behavioural change(s) in the learner(s), in the right direction.

Knowing the extent to which the Learner has learnt

It is one thing for learner to learn, and another thing for the teacher to know if the learner has learnt. Knowing how much the learner has succeeded in attaining the set target can only be determined through evaluation. Evaluation is essential for instance, if a teacher wants to find out about his teaching methods; how useful the instructional materials were; etc. Most importantly, the teacher evaluates to ascertain the extent to which the learner has learnt. Welch (2006) views evaluation as an applied inquiry process for collecting and synthesizing evidence that culminates in conclusions about the state of affairs, merit, worth, significance, or quality of a programme, product, person, policy, proposal, or plan. Gronlund in Chikwe (2005) cited in Ochoma (2016, 2020) views evaluation as a systematic process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information to determine the extent to which learners are achieving instructional objectives.

As regards knowing the extent to which the learner has learnt, evaluation is about determining the value or worth of data collected so that value judgment can be passed concerning the worth of the teaching/learning process. In doing this, the teacher makes use of one evaluation tool or the other. The evaluation tools that a teacher can use to ascertain the extent to which learners have learnt what they are slated to learn include: verbal questions, observation, test, examination, etc. Whatever tool a teacher decides to use should have diagnostic value; should be reliable and objective; and should be comprehensive in scope. The data generated via the evaluation tool(s) is analysed and interpreted in order to pass judgment about what the learner has learnt, for the purpose of grading and reporting. It is about getting feedback so that decisions can be made about the teaching/learning process.

The Learner and what He Learns: Implication for Curriculum Implementation

A curriculum that is planned has to be implemented. The planning stage of the curriculum involves making choices about the learning experiences, which are appropriate and desirable for learner(s) of a given society. The implementation stage on the other hand involves putting into practice the choices made about the learning experiences

that will bring about the desirable changes in the learner(s). The learner, as mentioned earlier, is an important factor in the curriculum process, be it at the planning or implementation stage. This is because the curriculum is planned and implemented for the learner; It is from the learner that it can be ascertained whether the curriculum is relevant, functional, or not.

The whole essence of implementing the curriculum at the classroom level is to effect changes in learners' behaviour. As such, knowledge of the learner is so vital, even right from the planning stage. The answer to the question: "who is the learner?" will provide adequate data for curriculum planning and implementation which will determine what will be included in the curriculum and how the curriculum can be implemented. The following are some of the implications that the learner and what he learns have on the implementation process of the curriculum at the classroom level:

- A clear understanding of what constitutes learning is important as it will guide the teacher in the choice of the content of the lesson and the teaching procedure.
- The teacher needs to know the learner. Knowledge about the nature and the need of the learner(s) will enable the teacher address the learners' individual needs in term of his preferred learning style and the like.
- Materials presented to learners to learn should relevant to them, in and out of the school; should have functional relationship with real life situation; and should relate directly to the intended learning outcome.
- Observable changes in behavior should always be the essence of any teaching and learning process.
- The teacher needs to be conscious of the impact of motivation on learners. Where the learners do not self-drive to learn, he should put in place measures that can motivate them externally.
- The actions of both the teacher and the learner also facilitate retention. This is because, the manner in which the material is presented, determines to a large extent, the extent to which the material will be retained. For instance, materials should be presented from known to unknown, step by step.
- Enabling environment should at all times be made available so that learners can learn optimally.
- Feedback in the course of teaching and learning is very important. The teacher must not fail to elicit response from the learner(s) using one evaluation tool or the other. This is to ensure that the intended outcome, which is behavioral change, is achieved.

Conclusion

The learner is what he learns; He is the product of what he is exposed to - learning experiences and content. The learning experiences and content hence, should be relevant to the extent that they meet the learner's needs alongside the needs of the society. The learner's motivation is vital in the learning process. Where the learner lacks the self-drive that is capable of propelling him to learn, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to externally motivate him to learn.

Recommendations

Based on the discourse so far, and to further improve on what the learner learns, the following recommendations are vital.

1. Teachers should endeavor to know their learners; their nature, learning style, needs, what motivates each learner, etc. The knowledge of all of these about the learner(s) will enable the teacher address learners' individual needs, and make them learn better.
2. Teachers should make what is presented to the learners, content and learning experiences, inviting taking into consideration their peculiarity.
3. The materials to be learnt should be relevant and address the needs of the learners, and those of the society.

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