

In a nutshell

This feature covers the essentials of learning theories to provide some examples of how these can be used to inform your practice. This resource can be photocopied and used as a revision tool or a prompt for discussion with your peers.

Learning theories

Cognitivism – We develop mental or visual representations of events and create meaning from this information. Information is processed on how we learn to recognise and make connections. The emphasis is on structure, organisation and patterns.

Gestalt – We perceive selected parts of information and tend to create 'wholes'. Learning is about problem-solving through understanding the function of various parts and how they fit together.

Humanism – learning is a natural process and learners should be encouraged to be autonomous. The teacher is the facilitator of an active search for learning and supports individual development.

Behaviourism – based on principles of classical and operant conditioning. Learning is seen as a response to experiences and the use of positive and negative reinforcement is effective in helping us to learn. We learn from what we experience frequently, leading to behaviour changes.

Social learning theory – emphasises the importance of learning with and from others. Modelling describes how we learn by observing and imitating influential others.

Putting it into practice

Cognitivist approaches – provide opportunities for students to create their own meaning through active approaches such as games and practical activities. Use concept maps and graphical organisers to display key points

Gestalt – create opportunities for learners to explore and have insights into the connections between the parts and whole topics. Use experiments, concept maps and jigsaws.

Humanism – create opportunities for individual learning through differentiated approaches and student-centred activities. Use individual learning plans to set targets and track progress.

Behaviourism – use learning checks and short activities in order to revisit and reinforce learning. Provide opportunities for experiential learning.

Social learning theory – create opportunities for individuals to learn from each other. Use group work and peer teaching and assessment. Activities such as debates and discussion are effective.