Is Behaviorism Dead? Should HPT Care?

by Rob Foshay

The “classical” versions of human performance technology (HPT) are applications of behavioral psychology. B.F. Skinner, the leading theoretician of behaviorism, received ISPI’s highest award. But, most of the major advances in the theories of learning and instruction in the last 30 years have been based on various flavors of cognitive psychology. And in colleges of education these days, constructivism (more of a philosophy than a learning theory) is hot.

Sometimes, I feel as though HPTers are the last tribe to still honor and protect the old behaviorist tongue. Does all this mean that behaviorism is dead? Should HPT abandon behaviorism and move on? Or should HPT practitioners even care? To find out, let’s look at three issues.

First, we can argue that HPT is a field of practice, not a discipline. As such, it tends to judge its theories by their prescriptive value. If this is the case, then the current (behaviorist) framework of HPT still has lots of value: Employees respond to response contingencies today just as they did 20 years ago, and our interventions based on these principles work just as well. So, regardless of current theory, maybe behaviorism is good enough for HPT. After all, you don’t need the theory of relativity to play a round of pool—the Newtonian universe will work quite well enough, thank you.

Second, there is a somewhat more subtle utilitarian argument to be examined: Cognitive psychology and constructivism have focused almost exclusively on cognitive learning. Some important advances in the theory of learning and instruction for the cognitive domain have resulted. However, there has been very little work on learning in other domains; nor has there been application to organizational and social behavior outside education and training contexts. Thus, for many of the causes of performance problems and the interventions we develop, only methods rooted in behaviorism are of much use in guiding us to effective measures and interventions.

Perhaps these upstart theories will be of use to us some day, but not today.

A third argument is more controversial: For reasons that may have more to do with the academic reward structure than with the realities of theory building, it sometimes appears that each of the various theoretical camps has been at pains to argue that theirs represents a clean break from the past (if I hear the term “paradigm shift” or a reference to Kuhn again, I’ll choke!). But, on close examination, it’s quite possible to see many, if not all, behaviorist principles lurking inside many cognitive and constructivist theories—though with entirely different jargon, of course. So, if one takes the long view, it’s quite possible to argue that the newer theories have subsumed behaviorism, not replaced it.

If you agree with these arguments, then the debate in favor of one theory over another rests on utility. Which view gives us the best understanding of what issues and problems? In some cases, different theories seem to come up with amazingly similar prescriptive solutions to the same problem. For example, I once matched wits with Dale Brethower, one of the most reflective thinkers in our field, to test this very issue. We compared notes on how we would teach someone to do high-level, generalizable problem-solving. With Dale taking a behaviorist perspective and me a cognitive one, we came to amazingly similar conclusions. I argued that he had

continued on page 2
Is Behaviorism Dead?
continued from page 1

“cheated” by drawing on an “expert model” of behaviorism that included insights well beyond the standard published interpretations, and that cognitive theory would get you there more directly and simply. But maybe that was just the sour grapes of someone who had been debated to an impasse. Perhaps more revealing was that we really didn’t disagree on any of the basics of the instructional strategies involved, just on some refinements and details and the “reasons why” that underlay what we did.

So does all this mean that HPT can smugly ignore the evolution of learning theory in the last 20 years? I think not. In particular, I believe the new theoretical base can substantially advance our understanding of how to teach complex cognitive skills. But, our behaviorist roots are still strong and viable, especially for other domains of learning and other types of performance problems. As a field of practice, we need to recognize that no theoretical framework will meet all our needs, and pragmatically apply the framework to each problem which seems to work best. Behaviorism is dead; long live behaviorism!

Three Books by Thiagi

Each of these books from Thiagi contains a collection of 10 interactive strategies for improving human performance. Each strategy is clearly described in a structured-text format and illustrated with several examples. A complete, ready-to-use activity (with reproducible masters) follows the exploration of each tool.

- **Interactive Experiential Training** explores Board Games, Cash Games, Creativity Techniques, Framegames, Interactive Lectures, Magic Tricks, Metaphorical Simulation Games, Playing-Card Simulations, Read.Me Games, and Structured Sharing.

- **Interactive Strategies for Improving Performance** explores Classification Card Games, Closeys, Email Games, Improv Games, Instructional Puzzles, Jolts, Matrix Games, Paper-and-Pencil Games, Reflective Teamwork Activities, and Training Devices.

- **More Interactive Strategies for Improving Performance** explores Action Learning, Audio Games, The Case Method, Interactive Stories, Item Processing, Openers, Roleplaying, Simulation Games, Telephone Games, and Video Vitamins.

You can order any one book for $50 (plus $4 shipping) each. Any two books for $90 (plus $8 shipping). All three books for $130 (plus $10 shipping).

To order, visit our website www.thiagi.com, call 1-800-996-7725, or send a check to Workshops by Thiagi, Inc., 4423 E Trailridge Road, Bloomington, IN 47408.

Subscribe to **Play for Performance**, Thiagi's free electronic newsletter. For information, visit our website.

Order on-line at www.thiagi.com