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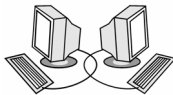
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Chapter III

Learning Theories

with

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Making Connections

In the last chapter, we discussed critical issues that impact the design and delivery of distance education programs. You were asked to write your own philosophy of education statement to serve as the foundation for your instructional decision making. For our final chapter in Part I-Foundations, we will introduce the historical and philosophical frameworks that continue to guide and direct instructional decisions—learning theory. Consider these questions as you read: Which learning theory best matches my own philosophy of education? What are some assumptions about the nature of learning that are built upon theory? How can I apply learning theory when developing and using practices in distance education?

Introduction

Many learning theories guide our understanding of the learning process. While instruction and learning are explicitly correlated, the philosophy of learner-centered instruction is that educators and trainers should focus on the need of the learner. Gage (1972) noted that instruction focuses on methods used by educators to influence learners and that learning focuses on how learners learn over time.

To be effective in distance education, instructors should have examined their own beliefs about how people learn and how the learning process can be fostered in others. That is why we had you write your own philosophy of education in the application exercise at the end of chapter II. We suggest that both the distance education instructor and the distance education learner take time to think critically about how learning occurs and what they (individually and collectively) can do to facilitate learning. “Learning is a complex set of processes that vary according to the developmental level of the learner, the nature of the task, and the context in which the learning is to occur” (Gredler, 1997, p. 13). Models of learning introduced in this chapter include examples from behavioral, cognitive, and social learning theories.

Developing a Model of Learning: From Traditional Wisdom to Scientific Theory

How does learning occur? How can we explain, predict, and improve learning, both in ourselves and in others? To be an effective instructor, you must answer these questions for yourself. While perhaps not the earliest of all questions, people have been asking them for ages. They have answered them by developing models of learning from the sources of knowledge most accepted in their time. We will examine the foundations of each of the major sources of knowledge and some criticisms of the models of learning developed from each. The goal is for you to develop your own model of learning to guide you in your decision making about applications and practices in distance education.

Learning was modeled using folklore or traditional wisdom. General rules governing learning were passed down through a mostly oral tradition. These rules were applied to guide all learning activity. For instance, learning was

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