

Re: Darwin, Evolution, the Animal Kingdom, and Man

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.cognitive/2004-12/0229.html>

From: David Longley (*David_at_longley.demon.co.uk*)

Date: 12/06/04

Date: Mon, 6 Dec 2004 21:11:49 +0000

In article <LF_sd.16790\$dC3.309412@news20.bellglobal.com>, Wolf Kirchmeir <wwolfkir@sympatico.ca> writes
>Greg Alexander wrote:
>[...]
>>>"Wolf Kirchmeir" <wwolfkir@sympatico.ca> wrote:
>[...]
>>>>Have we humans figured out how to pass on our knowledge? Yes, but
>>>> not
>>>>very well. If we really knew how to do it, and if we also knew what
>>>>knowledge was worth passing on, human society would become pretty
>>>>well perfect within a generation or two.
>
>> I hadn't thought of it that way. Hmmm!
>> Is there a field focussed on how to pass on knowledge more
>> effectively. I mean, psychology has the application side, and the
>> research side is relatively distinct. But teaching is largely
>> application. Does sociology research learning?
>> I wonder how our learning systems could be improved.
>[...]
>> Just my thoughts :)
>> Greg
>
>Yes, our teaching-learning systems can be improved, but it's a hard
>slog. We know very little, and basically all we can do is wait for a
>child to exhibit some behaviour like the one desired, and then shape
>it. Sadly, curricula imposed on teachers and students assume that
>behaviours can be imposed or created rather than shaped, despite all
>the evidence to the contrary.
>
>IMO, the only attempt to understand learning that have had any success
>is EAB, in all its guises (many people who use EAB principles in their
>educational research either don't acknowledge that they are doing so,
>or explicitly deny it – there's some sort of political correctness at
>work here. Bah!).
>
>EAB shows that certain kinds of learning can be rather easily induced

>and controlled -- that is, any existing behaviour is more or less
>easily shaped. The kind of learning we expect children to do in schools
>works only with such behaviours. For example, it's quite easy to to
>teach young children to play games. Young children engage in
>game-playing without being prompted, so shaping this behaviour (eg,
>teaching chess, basketball, etc) is easy. For this reason, if some
>desired skills can be incorporated into games, game-playing is an
>effective teaching method, as all teachers know, and most teachers do
>(there are unfortunately some teachers and parents who believe that
>learning and fun are mutually exclusive.)
>
>Similar observations apply to, for example, "critical thinking skills."
>Humans exhibit such behaviour from about mid-puberty on. (It's one of
>the reasons for the difficulties between parents and teenage children.)
>Given critical thinking behaviour, it's relatively easy to shape it,
>eg, to develop "rules of clear thinking". The student must of course be
>willing to cooperate with the teacher, but in my experience, most
>student want to cooperate.
>
>As for "knowledge as such", observe that children from about 6 to 10
>years of age equate "being smart" with "knowing stuff." That IMO is a
>clue as to how to proceed. Children resist acquiring knowledge that's
>"boring," so the trick is to make it interesting enough that the child
>will go to the effort of learning "stuff" that you want him or her to
>learn. That merely involves finding a link between the stuff the child
>likes knowing, and what you want him to know - IOW, it involves
>observing the actual behaviour of the child, and shaping it, rather
>than imposing some paradigm on it. Again, that's what successful teachers do.
>
>BTW, all the above "teaching strategies" were explicitly taught in my
>pedagogical training. NB that whatever the current educational jargon,
>at bottom it's all about shaping behaviours.

Skinner was aghast at the state of US education. He fought to bring the technology of teaching to bear on education practice (and the training of teachers) just as one might expect any good empirical scientist with a proven track record. He spent a good part of the latter part of his professional life trying to get "educators" to adopt what comes down to self-paced programmed learning, but wasn't given the support he needed by folk like Connant. Half a century later we still see teachers struggling to do a combination of crowd control and mixed ability teaching four or five times a day, with such large classes that for most it's well nigh impossible (which isn't helped by an estimated 1:20 being ADHD). It often seems to come down to varying degrees of expertise in the ability to herd cats. Is this the consequence of "political correctness" or is it just human idiocy? People like Connant played a significant role in engineering these problems in the first place. Is it conspiracy or is it cock-up? Perhaps it depends on one's politics?

Despite the UK government's education policy publicly asserting that it discourages intake selection (suspected infringement can lead to court

action), it happens nonetheless through natural (and socially engineered) diversity in "cognitive ability" and social mobility. As a consequence, and in conjunction with other policies designed to keep delinquents out of custody (and in the community in the belief that most boys grow out of it) our inner city schools (in particular) are progressively finding themselves having to cope with more and more (serious) delinquency. As a consequence, "behaviour management" is becoming more and more important in our schools. We now have a new kind of "care in the community". The figures bearing on this are quite remarkable, and yet most folk aren't aware of them. To give a financial perspective on this, a rough estimate at the combined cost of crime and education in the UK is in the order of 120 billion pounds per annum.

Fourteen years ago, we began trying to redress some of this via a positive system of behaviour management based on attainment which explicitly drew on the EAB/AAB, and which was implemented under naturally controlled conditions. Whilst the words from the above system are now in wider circulation, I'm sure the practice is not. We have IT everywhere, but we still don't have effective programmed learning/behaviour management – at what cost?

In fact, I'm still not sure to what extent the basic principles were ever really understood. People seem to have a peculiar scotoma where it comes to grasping the nature of behaviour analysis [#1] – something Skinner frequently remarked upon and which we have seen all too often in c.a.p. In my own applied field, we gave new credence to the notion of "programmes" but the initiative was soon blighted by the introduction of "cognitive skills" courses (imported from Canada of all places!). The rationale for this flew in the face of all the empirical evidence that I was aware of at the time of their introduction, which is why I vehemently argued against their introduction. Over a decade later, they fly in the face of our government's independent research as well (which basically just replicates the earlier contrary evidence).

The price of "political correctness" is more than the reinforcement of idiocy. I get much the same feeling about all of this that I do about much that I see in c.a.p in response to expositions of what behaviour analysis comes down to. It's so absurd that one has to ask if there's more to all this than meets the eye?

If so, the question remains, at what expense? At whose expense?

#1 I'm sure the books by folk such as Huxley and Orwell didn't help matters – but people are more readily influenced by science fiction than they are by science. This is a serious problem and one which is, sadly, widely exploited to most peoples' detriment.

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David Longley
<http://www.longley.demon.co.uk/Frag.htm>