

PSY 402-01 -- THEORIES OF LEARNING
Term Paper

The following written assignment is intended to help you think about how the principles of learning described in class may be applied to change behavior. The assignment involves the following steps:

1. Select and read one of the two books for the class (Walden II or Beautiful Child)
2. As you read it, look for information that will be relevant to the questions listed below
3. Write a paper answering the questions related to the book you read

Be concise, specific, and to the point. There is no need to summarize or describe what happens, except in support of your analysis. Assume that I know the content of both novels and just jump right into your answer. This is not intended to be a research paper but rather a reaction paper. The course textbook should be your only reference -- do not include external sources, references or criticism. I am most interested in your thinking and how well you apply ideas from the course to the content of the book.

Your grade will be based upon how well you understand and apply the principles of learning discussed in your text as you answer the questions for the book you selected. It is important that you include sufficient detail to show that you have read and understood both the textbook and the book you have chosen to read. Clear communication and correct use of language will improve your grade but are not a substitute for thinking about the subject of learning and how it works in real life situations.

Questions for Beautiful Child (Torey Hayden)

Please answer both of these questions in your paper.

1. The author and narrator of the book, Torey Hayden, describes herself as not much of a behavior modification enthusiast. Even so, she uses several behavior modification techniques. Analyze the behavior modification program she implements with her class in terms of operant conditioning. In your analysis, identify the stimulus, response, contingencies, reinforcers and punishers if any. Discuss concepts such as primary and secondary reinforcers, Premack's principle, reward size and timing as they relate to her classroom. Explain whether her system worked and give examples of success or failure.
2. What was the conflict between Torey Hayden and her teacher's aide, Julie? Explain both sides of the issue (Torey's and Julie's). Who do you think was right? What would your own position be on this matter? How did you feel about what she did with the children in her class? Should the results justify the methods used?

Questions for Walden II (B.F. Skinner)

Please answer both of these questions in your paper.

1. At the beginning of the book, Frazier explains to his visitors how sheep are trained to stay in a limited area of lawn, confined only by a string. Explain how this works in terms of learning theory, using the terminology from the textbook. Also explain why the sheep escape later in the book and how they are once again restrained. Skinner intends this to be a metaphor for the people at Walden II and in the larger society. How might the control of the sheep be extended to apply to people?
2. The book introduces many examples of social engineering (behavioral engineering or cognitive engineering). These raise interesting questions about whether nature (genetics) or nurture (environment) is responsible for different aspects of our culture. For example, can musical or artistic genius be nurtured, can deviant behavior be eliminated by early education or re-education, can force be eliminated as a means of controlling behavior. Pick an example of social engineering from the book and discuss whether it would work in today's world. In your response, discuss whether you think that social customs should be replaced by Frazier's idea of "experiments". State your reaction to what was proposed in the book and whether you feel it would be realistic outside the ideal circumstances contrived in the novel.

Paper Format

Papers must be typed or output using a computer printer. It is not necessary to use APA style. I prefer double spaced papers because it allows space to write comments. Length does not matter, but you should not need to use more than 10 pages to complete this assignment, and many may be able to do it in 5-6 pages. If you have difficulty writing more than a few pages, consider using examples from the book and giving more detail. If you quote from the text or refer to examples in the book, please give the page numbers.

IMPORTANT:

There will be several multiple choice questions on the final exam about these novels. You need only answer the questions for the book you read. If someone has read the novel from start to finish the answers to the questions will be obvious, without any need to intensively study the book. The point of the exam questions is to encourage you to read the whole book.