

Thiagi on

Learning Theories:

14 Things

Thiagi Wants You To Know About Learning

Excerpted from “Who Needs Learning Theory Anyway?” by Ron Zemke, *TRAINING*, September 2002, pages 86-91.

Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan reaches even further for his models and theories. “I want my students to know the central ideas from all the great theories,” he says. “We even talk about the ‘14 Laws,’ the commonalties that come from this huge body of work. But I remind my students to reach beyond the psychologists and their theories as well. I ask them to look at the practice of magic and improvisational theater and even to stand-up comedy to learn how people hold an audience’s attention and make an impact.”

Which theory or theories of learning should guide your work? That will depend upon your situation—the people you serve, the nature of the skills they must master and the context in which they are to perform—and, frankly, your comfort with the tenets of and confidence in those theories. But make no mistake, social psychology pioneer Kurt Lewin’s reply to the question of why he labored so hard over his theories is as true for us as it was for him: “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.”

14 Things Thiagi Wants You To Know About Learning

Cutting through the clutter and getting to the useful stuff in the ever-increasing body of learning theory and research can be, and is, daunting. Sivasailam Thiagarajan, Thiagi to friends and admirers, has distilled from that mass of knowledge, wisdom, obfuscation and speculation 14 pithy “Laws of Learning” that we all would do well to post on the cubical wall and read anew every morning before attempting any act of instruction, facilitation or instructional design.

APPLIES TO ALL LIVING CREATURES:

1. Law of reinforcement: *Learners repeat behaviors that are rewarded.*

APPLIES TO ALL HUMAN BEINGS:

2. Law of individual differences: *Different people learn in different ways.*
3. Law of emotional learning: *Events that are accompanied by intense emotions result in long-lasting learning.*
4. Law of practice and feedback: *Learners cannot master skills without repeated practice and relevant feedback.*
5. Law of active learning: *Active responding produces more effective learning than passive listening or reading.*
6. Law of response level: *Learners master skills and knowledge at the level at which they are required to respond during the learning process.*
7. Law of learning domains: *Different types of learning require different types of strategies.*

APPLIES TO ADULT LEARNERS:

8. Law of previous experience: *New learning should be linked to (and build upon) the experiences of the learner.*
9. Law of relevance: *Effective learning is relevant to the learner's life and work.*
10. Law of self direction: *Most adults are self-directed learners.*
11. Law of expectations: *Learners' reactions to training sessions are shaped by their expectations related to the content area, training format, fellow participants and the trainer.*
12. Law of self image: *Adult learners use a variety of standards to judge their learning*
13. Law of multiple criteria: *Adult learners use a variety of standards to judge their learning experiences and accomplishments.*
14. Law of alignment: *Adult learners require the training objectives, content, activities, and assessment techniques to be aligned to each other.*