

Critical Education: Snake in the Grass **Patrick Whitehead – 2014**

Two recent studies of elementary school teaching confirm what everyone already knows: rewards are used constantly in nearly every classroom to try to motivate children and improve their performance. They are offered stickers and stars, edible treats and extra recess, grades and awards. New goodies are substituted as students get older, but the Skinnerian formula follows them. (Kohn 1993, p. 143)

Introduction

The present paper belongs to a much larger project that examines the dubious presence of behaviorism as a dominant trend in educational theory. How might a philosophy of science, as Watson (1962/1930) has indicated, that has received several decades' worth of criticism regarding its untenability and methodological implausibility, still be looked to for pedagogical insight well-into the twenty-first century? Either educational practice follows well behind scientific theory, or something else is inhibiting interdisciplinary dialogue. The focus here will be on the curious absence of motivation in students.

Motivated by various proponents of learner-centered teaching techniques (Moustakas, 1959/1972; Robertson, 2001; Whitehead, 1929; and Huba & Freed, 2000), my students have been given increasing autonomy with the content, assignment options, presentation style, and evaluations. Much to my profound chagrin, students demonstrated great reluctance in class attendance, assignment selection and completion, and self-evaluations. In retrospect, I would have benefited greatly from the observation by Aronowitz (2008) that a sudden imposition on students of their autonomy could just as easily be taken as oppression as the more punitive forms. By the time that students have reached college, many have become so good at delivering on curriculum-specific expectations that they have lost touch with those things they find most compelling about education. The electricity in the elementary school hallway has certainly long since dissipated. Distraught by this apparent apathy, I began to wonder how any other result could possibly be expected. Certain theories of teaching learning—ones that seem quite compelling—actually facilitate the displacement of intrinsic student-motivation.

Motivation can definitely play a role in student learning, but this is not necessarily the case. The first approach concerns the learning that comes by way of intrinsic motivation—this is marked by enthusiasm, creativity, spontaneity, and personally meaningful learning. The second approach concerns the learning that comes by way of extrinsic motivation—this is where the item learned is only desirable insofar as it provides access to some promised treat or has been incentivized. Finally, there is the approach to learning that disregards motivation entirely—this is the mechanical, causal, and scientized method of behavioral education. Once the comparisons between these three types of approaches have been made, a consideration of their efficacy in the classroom will be taken up. Because the lattermost style quite specifically ignores motivation, a move that cannot be understood by a subsequent increase in efficacy, its role in student apathy is easily noted. Similarly, because it emphasizes the singularity of the student, an approach that emphasizes intrinsic motivation is not likely culpable for student apathy. What remains in question, however, is the role that extrinsic motivation plays on students' learning. Does extrinsically motivating students lead to the alienation of students from their intrinsic source of motivation?; and, if so, can this be reconciled by the benefits of increased learning—that is, does it work?

However, in order for the present piece to stand on its own as a meaningful analysis, a few points must first be briefly discussed. This first includes the evidence of the continued behaviorist persuasion in contemporary educational theory—lest its subsequent critique be deemed unnecessary. Once the presence of behaviorism in the classroom has been acknowledged, a critique of its efficacy may follow. This includes a short annotated bibliography of what I have deemed the three chief problems with a behaviorist approach to learning and discipline—these may be understood as the two chief functions of a behaviorist classroom.

From here the conversation turns to the role of motivation in the classroom. By considering motivation, the scientific form of behaviorism may be distinguished from its pseudo-format, which I have called bureaucratization. These, however, are both distinct from methods that cultivate the intrinsic motivation of students. In review, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that behaviorism or its bureaucratized format, have been offered in the service of students and their desire to learn.

The legacy of behaviorism in education in brief. In order to understand the fit that behaviorism had for practitioners of education, several factors that contribute to its appeal must first be considered. First, at the turn of the twentieth century, modern science and technology had delivered impressive goods to the industrialized world, and education had yet to reap these benefits. Thus, behaviorism provided a scientifically rigorous method for the classroom. Second, the language and procedures of behaviorism are eminently simple and easy to learn. Third, the task that had been set up for early 20th century education—that of “social efficiency”—was one for which behaviorism was uniquely suited. And finally, behaviorism was peddled by some very ambitious and optimistic leaders with exceedingly compelling promises. These leaders include Watson, Thorndike, and Skinner; the promises included this one from Watson (1962/1930):

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. I am going beyond my facts and I admit it, but so have the advocates of the contrary and they have been doing it for many thousands of years. (p. 82)

Ignore, if you will, the next sixty years in the history of psychology—which, incidentally, includes Skinner's (1955) admission that his operant reinforcement schedules were too much for teachers to maintain effectively—and travel to your university library's education section. Keep in mind this promise of Watson as you scan the spines that face you. You may be surprised to find such sinister titles as *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (Cowley, 2001) or *Bad Students, Not Bad Teachers* (Weisberg, 2010), others might be more subdued, for example *Classroom Management that Works* (Marzano, 2003), *Developing a Learning Classroom* (Cooper & Garner, 2012), and *Managing Classroom Behavior using Positive Behavioral Supports* (Scott, Anderson, & Alter 2012). To avoid the use of arguments of the low hanging variety, I have selected one of the more subtle examples for the purposes of demonstrating the employment of behaviorist language in the contemporary classroom. The Scott, et al. (2012) text will be used. Not only does this text provide rudimentary coverage of science as a behaviorist views it, but extends this approach into the classroom by supplying problematic behaviorist definitions of learning,

pedagogy, and various forms of disciplinary intervention.

The first chapter that follows the text's (Scott, et al., 2012) introduction bears the heading: "Understanding Behavior" (p. 14). Included in the subheadings, as one might expect from an introductory behaviorism textbook, one finds "Antecedent Events" (p. 22) and "Consequences" (p. 24), indicating classical and operant behavioral conditioning, respectively. Also provided is the evidence of the method's rigor and simplicity. Namely, that "Behavior is learned... lawful... and can be changed" (pp. 16-18).

A brief review of the "successes" and failures of behaviorism as an applied science.

While history has yielded a series of laboratory successes for the theory of behaviorism, that latter's impressive reputation has not generalized to more "real-world" settings.

This was first demonstrated in the classrooms where a behaviorist theory of learning pales in comparison to a more complicated problem-centered approach of understanding. The behaviorism that is being drawn into question here includes those instances of its successful implementation—instances where students do seem to be learning new behaviors. However, when compared to the problem solving as discussed by Wertheimer's (1959), the appeal of these successes is diminished. He offers the distinction between "productive" and "re-productive" thinking. Reproductive thinking, he explains, can be represented by the ability to replicate certain activities when prompted to do so; productive thinking requires the consideration of the problem components, in terms of their relevance with regards to the problem, before determining which solution is most helpful. The former style of thinking might be understood as an anonymous procedure—wherein the singularity and individuality of the thinker is as superfluous to the solution of a problem as is the calendar day. The latter style of thinking may be understood as a participative procedure—one wherein the singularity and individuality of the thinker is integral to the identification and synthesis of the problem-space and its context. Even the most successful form of behavioral learning amounts to an instance of "re-productive" thinking.

The second critique concerns the behaviorism that gets tested outside of the laboratory. If the behaviorist theory has any significance for everyday life as a system of psychological explanation, then its laboratory success must be generalized to additional, real-world environments. Breland and Breland (1961) make such an attempt on several hundred zoo animals, but find that its generalizability comes up supremely wanting. In tandem with this critique, Tolman (1949) designs a rat-maze experiment that directly challenges the behaviorist learning theory of association.

And finally, Seligman (1991) provides a "worst-case scenario" of behaviorism. This is what happens when carefully followed behaviorist protocols undermine its most fundamental element: behaviorism systematically eliminates behavior. "Learned helplessness" is the reliable consequence of punishment wherein organisms (or people) effectively resign themselves to avoiding any aversive stimuli.

Together, these three critiques strongly draw into question the prudence of any scientifically informed discipline—educational or otherwise—that relies on the behaviorist theory of explanation and experimentation.

Reconciling the continued presence of behaviorism with its demonstrated inefficacy.

The present status of contemporary schooling cannot be understood as having an exclusively behaviorist-persuasion. Indeed, Skinner (1955) has pointed out nearly six decades ago that scientific behaviorism has been poorly implemented in the classroom. In fact, he has explained how an earnest commitment to behaviorism would include the replacement of teachers by

teaching machines! The demonstration of the procedural untenability and inefficacy of a purely behaviorist paradigm of education is in the service of two goals. First, it demonstrates that the promises, proposed by behaviorism from the outset, break down when applied outside of the laboratory (indeed, even *in* the laboratory). The second can only be understood in consideration of the first. That is, if contemporary schooling cannot in principle appropriately employ scientific behaviorism (because it breaks down outside of the laboratory), then why does it remain in the discourse of educational theory (and show up in recently published textbooks)? Indeed, demonstrating the dubiousness of applied behaviorism is not enough to justify an amendment to the process or language of schooling because the failures of applied behaviorism cannot be traced to the classroom; behaviorism is not the problem. Instead, what one must be wary of is the use of behaviorist systems of explanation—that is, the defense that contemporary schooling has been “scientifically proven” despite the conspicuous lack of evidence. Thus, while contemporary schooling might avoid the accusation of being built on a shoddy foundation—that is, of an exclusively behaviorist science—it seems to be the vehicle of a far more pernicious offense. Something seems to have emptied the meaning from the vernacular of a once scientifically credible discipline in order to make it do something else under the guise of scientific credibility.

The Snake in the Grass of Contemporary Schooling Debate

Debates surrounding the intention and directive of schooling might be characterized as the confrontation between the left (progressives, e.g. Dewey) and the right (conservatives, e.g. Thorndike; Cf. Spring, 2011 or Aronowitz, 1993). Given a comprehensive critique of behaviorism in the classroom, it would seem as though the conservative right has received the brunt of the critique while the progressive left has received an approving nod. This is precisely why educational reform is not as simple as indicating a problem and suggesting an alternative. Were the project to conclude at this point, it would merely be one of a growing number of such projects that facilitates the continuing oscillation between conservative and progressive approaches to education. The mistaken assumption is that this binary sums up the factors of influence regarding schooling. However, there is a third factor, one that lies just beneath the surface of this rightist-leftist binary. While the former two continue to battle it out, this third factor remains un-phased—left orchestrating even the continued battle. It is the seemingly guileless presence of bureaucratization.

Bureaucratization. The notion of bureaucratization likely strikes the reader as insignificant given the serious topics of “learning,” “creativity,” and “motivation.” Its apparent harmlessness makes it particularly powerful. Its presence is often discarded as a trifling inconvenience—something of no meaningful consequence.

Part of the difficulty in defining bureaucratization is that it is a negative term—it may only be understood as the lack of something. The deficits that it promotes include individuality, personality, and democracy. If compelled to explain that “those are just words” or “are of no consequence”, then one demonstrates just how powerful bureaucratization can be! In the present section, it will be shown how bureaucratization systematically replaces an otherwise naturally-occurring intrinsic motivation with an empty, fabricated, and bureaucratically determined extrinsic motivation. This will be juxtaposed with the roles that intrinsic motivation and un-motivation play in the classroom. These, it should be noted, are both naturally occurring; the difference is that intrinsic motivation includes the role of self-as-choosing—a role that the latter, un-motivated style dismisses as impossible.

The Role of Motivation in the Classroom

Once more, given the scope of the present project in tandem with the present topic, we find a behaviorist method of learning compared with a proposed other, hopefully more beneficial, method of learning. Thus far, the former method has been critiqued on three different grounds of tenability and efficacy. But what of the dog that ostensibly “learns” how to poop in a certain section of the yard? That is, if it has been shown that behaviorism does not work for really difficult tasks, might it still be used to explain simpler ones? For instance, the students who employed “reproductive learning” in Wertheimer’s (1959) example were still capable of solving for the area of rectangle—they have apparently learned *this!* Let us consider this terrain in some detail.

The task, for a classroom of sixth-graders, is to find the area of a rectangle. Assuming the task is taken on at all, it is easy to suppose that there exists either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation for doing so. Were the task completely ignored, one would then assume that the rectangular-area problem has not received the requisite motivation. But there is still a third alternative—the one upon which behaviorism has staked its science: motivation has nothing to do with it. Organisms will repeat behaviors that receive adequate reinforcement.

Imagine yourself in this sixth grade geometry classroom. See how each of the sixth-grade students begins working on the rectangular-area problem. This might include looking at the rectangle; calculating side-lengths and angle-measures; drawing a geometrical grid or inserting measurements into equations. As a corollary to the three forms of possible motivation—intrinsic, extrinsic, and passive (unmotivated), the problem may be conceived one of three ways, and in each of these cases the role of the student is different. In the first it presents as an ambiguity; secondly as an unresolved certainty; or finally as a specific context of a particular behavioral repertoire (respectively).

Intrinsically motivated learning. Here, the rectangular-area problem presents as an ambiguity. In ambiguity, a problem presents as not yet recognized as solvable. It might seem familiar, but the verdict is still out. That is, insofar as the student recognizes it *as* a problem (otherwise it may merely look like a picture or drawing of a rectangle), the procedure for its solution is not initially known to the student. It could very well be the case that there *is* no solution, but this also is not yet apparent. In order to perceive the problem as initially ambiguous, the student must identify as the one not yet capable of the problem’s solution. Notice that here the identity of the student is subject to change. If one finds oneself within the throes of an ambiguous rectangular-area problem-space, there are many possibilities. Here one must begin to play around with any means available in order to circumscribe the details integral to the problem’s understanding and subsequent solution. After a necessary investment of time, the perceived ambiguity that the student initially held will increasingly dissipate, yielding either the solution or lack thereof. In either case, the assertion that the problem is understood will belong to the student. Once understood, the student may employ the necessary equations or identify which element is missing if the problem is unsolvable. This approach to a problem has been related to intrinsic motivation because no extrinsically motivating impetus can improve this process; no amount of reinforcement can engender the identification of “self” as a “problem-solver”.

One might even imagine a problem-solving continuum wherein the more harrowing the problem, the more elite the problem-solver. Indeed, a student that has arrived at a solution in this manner would hardly require consultation with the answer-key in the back of the textbook. The idea of being given the solution—by consulting the back of the book or looking it up online—

would serve only to circumvent the process of identifying as a problem-solver. These actions would be of the “answer-finding” ilk. *Cheating would not be inherently good or evil, but would seem rather purposeless if the motivation is to identify and develop as a problem-solver.* One might also imagine such a student working on additional problems encountered outside of class—something inconceivable in a contemporary classroom—because the motivations and subsequent solution would thus belong to the student in efforts more akin to play than to work. Note that intrinsically motivated problem-solving may be likened to the productive learning mentioned in the previous section.

For future reference, this self-motivated style of learning may be understood as personal insofar as it recognizes individuality, meaning, sociality, etc.

Extrinsically motivated learning. The second approach to the rectangular-area problem, which relates to the extrinsic motivation, begins in a manner similar to the ambiguity of the intrinsically motivated style of problem-solving. The difference is that the resolution of the ambiguity is the *means* to an end. The problem itself is arbitrary; its solution is currency for something better. Because students do not have a choice in their role as students, their circumstance is a forced one. In this manner, the set-up is much like that of the behaviorist protocol: something external to the student decides what the latter must do. If the student meets the external expectations, she is rewarded; if she does not, she is punished. Regardless of their identification with the problems with which they are tasked, students are subjected to contingencies of punishment or reward. They are either punished with labels such as incompetent, failure, unintelligent, and unmotivated, or they are lauded with labels such as competent, successful, intelligent, and motivated, provided they do or do not solve the problem, respectively. *Motivation to solve the problem amounts to avoiding the contingent punishment or gaining the contingent reward.* In this manner, the problem has been incentivized; *it has been loaded with extrinsically motivating contingencies as if with the express purpose of increasing the desirability of arriving at a solution.* The solution, however, is a mere means to the incentive—moreover, an incentive chosen by someone other than the student. Indeed, the problem itself is superfluous in light of the more compelling contingencies (of punishment or of reinforcement). However, notice that the contingencies of punishment and behavior have left the purview of behaviorism. Punishment, in this regard, may not be understood as “that which decreases behavior” and reinforcement may not be understood as “that which increases a behavior.” This is because *the target behavior is secondary* to the anticipated reinforcement or punishment. Such second-order behaviors are impossible according to the behaviorist theory, amounting to witchcraft and the like (Watson, 1930). For it would be possible for students in this situation to take the reward without performing the behavior—that is, cheat—because it is the reward that is motivating, and not the solution of a problem.

Given Skinner’s (1955) dissatisfaction with instructional protocol, it is really no surprise that contemporary schooling fails to employ the scientific method of behaviorism. In a way, the incentive-based motivation goes much further than behaviorism, because it acknowledges that students can think in first- and second-order behavior. However, this surplus of higher-order thinking has been commandeered by the fixed-choice punishment-or-reward arrangement. As a result, students are manipulated into being extrinsically motivated. Moreover, this is a motivation with which they cannot identify—it is something to which they are subjected. This, it turns out, is far more menacing a problem, and its consequences exceed even the worst that behaviorism has to offer.

If there is a contingent of readers that experienced some relief when reading the

contemporary education practices are not guilty of the ineffective methods of behaviorism (since the former fails to adequately employ them), I'm afraid that the commandeered version is no more successful. The ineffectiveness of the extrinsically-motivated style of learning will be demonstrated later in the present section, but the far-reaching consequences will be continued in section IV.

For future reference, this extrinsically-motivated style of learning may be understood as bureaucratized—incentivized and anonymous; anybody can do it; consequences will befall anyone based on performance which is determined by a seen or unseen paternalistic entity.

For the purposes of comparison, what will follow is an example of an instructional method that aptly portrays behaviorism. This will explain what a purely behaviorist protocol in education might look like, and will also illustrate the ways in which contemporary schooling differs.

Passive or A-Motivational learning. For the subject learning to solve the rectangular-area problem in the third-style—the passive or unmotivated style—there is no thinking involved. There is also no motivation. There is necessarily no recognition that “if I do this then I will get that”. There is only behavior. Learning begins with the “recognition” (recognized only insofar as the intended response behavior follows) of a specific context of a particular behavioral repertoire. For example, the presentation of the rectangle is the stimulus, and the multiplication of base-measure by height-measure would be the response. According to the principles of operant conditioning, this occurs due to the previous reinforcement of the aforementioned multiplication response. Thus, the solution is merely what happens after repeated exposures to the particular stimulus-presentation. Notice, there is no identification of “self” and “problem-solving”. Indeed, the problem solution comes about—is caused—by the problem presentation; reinforcement is what keeps it there.

Assuming that Skinner has had his way and has replaced all teachers with teaching-machines, then students would be learning the whole host of behavioral repertoires that correspond to all pertinent problem-contexts. However, Miller (in Baars, 1986) has made it clear that the behaviorist methods of classical and operant conditioning have been played out to their demise. This does not mean that the language is not still in use; nor does it mean that the systems of explanation have not been commandeered by bureaucratized forms; finally, it does not mean that behaviorism-proper is not still in use in some classroom contexts.

For future reference, passive learning may be understood as mechanical. Here classroom elements are assumed to fit together predictably and may be manipulated based on scientifically understood, causal relationships.

Bureaucratization of Behaviorism: School Reform

The purpose of this final part of the present section is to reconsider the efficacy of contemporary schooling protocol that hinges on the extrinsic form of motivation. What began was a critique of schooling that is founded on the methods of behaviorism. However, upon further consideration, these critiques do not merit attention because contemporary schooling does not adequately employ the methods of behaviorism. This has been illustrated at the level of procedural untenability through the example that Skinner (1955) has provided: there cannot be enough teachers to reinforce target behaviors in the small latency window of effectiveness. This has also been illustrated at the level of motivational explanation: the contingent system of reward and punishment that is seen in the contemporary classroom requires that the student understand first *and* second-order behavior—something that exceeds the behaviorist system of explanation.

What thus remains is a consideration of the efficacy of the behaviorist revision in schooling: do the second-order behaviorist contingencies of reinforcement work better than behaviorism? Do they work at all?

If it is the case that students are more likely to learn if they are promised something for their effort, then we would have an example of effective school-reform. Namely, the behaviorism that had been introduced into the classroom by Thorndike had, after several decades, demonstrated its ineffectiveness. Not only does the protocol required by behaviorism present too great a task for teachers, but the reflex behaviors upon which behaviorism operates are not always predictable and adequately manipulatable. What has been stumbled upon instead is a form of refurbished behaviorism. This is a behaviorism that grants organisms the ability to think about first and second-order events. Refurbished behaviorism is exempt from the critique of behaviorism because it appreciates a higher level of cognitive capacity in organisms, i.e. humans. But does this refurbished form excel in ways that behaviorism has failed? In what seems to be the primary focus of his scholarship, Kohn (1993) has impressively concluded that refurbished behaviorism, which he calls “pop behaviorism”, does not work. He writes:

My premise here is that rewarding people for their compliance is not “the way the world works,” as many insist. It is not a fundamental law of human nature. ... I believe that it is long past time for us to [rethink this ideology]. The steep price we pay for our uncritical allegiance to the use of rewards is what makes this story not only intriguing but also deeply disconcerting. (4)

“Pop behaviorism” does not work. Kohn has an impressive resume of scholarship that has been dedicated to the systematic evaluation of what he terms “pop behaviorism.” This includes the counterintuitive yet robust finding that provisions of reinforcement actually *decrease* motivation, effort, ability, and in some cases quantitative output (Kohn 2010a, 2010b, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2003, 2001, 1996, 1993). This questions the efficacy of many common practices such as grading and offering students verbal praise—practices celebrated by pseudo-behaviorist classroom protocols.

In *Punished by Rewards*, Kohn (1993) explains how the apparent contradiction in the title is not so contradictory. Rather than detail the sum of examples of this identity between rewards and punishment, a few of his broad conclusions will be considered.

In order to test the efficacy of extrinsically motivated “learning” against those of its intrinsic ilk, experiments were designed that would provide the experimental condition with an obvious incentive—e.g. money for college students and toys for children—and the control condition with no such incentive. Given the collective agreement that “the promise of reward will increase behavior”, one might expect that students in the experimental condition would complete the task in order to get the reward whereas students in the control group may or may not complete the task as there is obviously no purpose for doing so. Notice how any effort put forth by the control group would necessarily be self-motivated—even a null-effort. Thus, if the control condition subjects did nothing, it could be explained that they simply were not interested in the particularities of the target task. Despite the perfectly acceptable choice not to complete the target task, the control condition regularly and reliably outperformed the experimental—incentivized—condition. Kohn (1993) explains:

By the 1980s, anyone who kept up with this sort of research would have found it impossible to claim that the best way to get people to perform well is to dangle a

reward in front of them. As the studies became more sophisticated, the same basic conclusion was repeatedly confirmed. College students exhibited “a lower level of intellectual functioning” when they were rewarded for their scores on the more creative portions of an intelligence test. In a separate study, third graders who were told they would get a toy for working on some “games” (i.e., IQ tests) didn’t do as well as those who expected nothing. (p. 44)

Study after study has continued to demonstrate the same result: the promise of a reward does not increase effort, accuracy, or interest. Indeed, Kohn cites McGraw (1978) who concludes that “Incentives will have a detrimental effect on performance when two conditions are met: first ... that the offer of incentives is a superfluous source of motivation; second, when the solution to the task is open-ended enough that the steps leading to a solution are not immediately obvious” (p. 40). Which amounts to the following: incentives only increase student participation when they are ignored. That is, they not only fail to increase participation, but they often *decrease* it. The second point sounds a little bit more like the intrinsic motivation discussed above. Here, the problem presents as ambiguous; there is some uncertainty as to whether or not a solution is even possible. Thus, with or without incentives, the student must identify as the source of the problem’s incipient solution, thus circumventing the anonymity that extrinsic-motivation requires.

The insistence on the efficacy of a “reward-dangling” procedure cannot be explained by its results. It also cannot be explained by the apparent cogency of its explanation—as the discussion in Section Two concerns the penchant of behaviorism to have an “explanation for everything.” It seems as though *the only available explanation for the continued commitment to the idea that behaviorism* (and its “pop”-form) *works is precisely the commitment to the idea that behaviorism* (and its “pop”-form) *works!* It is not *behaviorism* that is being advertised as the solution to education, it is the *idea* of the solution to education—behaviorism is just the most contemporary form. Behaviorism is not the problem; the ideology that has governed the use of behaviorism is the problem. It is *this* ideology that Kohn has urged his readers to reconsider.

Conclusion

The impressive strength that “do this and you’ll get rewarded” has had on present social consciousness is disconcerting. This might be understood, in part, by the behaviorist system of explanation (reflex theory). That is, if a student fails to learn following a particular instance of “instruction”, then it may be explained away without accusing the method of being ineffective. For instance, the reward wasn’t strong enough or issued quickly enough. Neither of these explanations constitutes scientific proof of the efficacy of said instructional protocol.

“Pop behaviorism” is just one of a number of proposed amendments to schooling. And just like “pop behaviorism,” all of the other amendments are certain to fail at facilitating meaningful learning because this is not their main objective. Indeed, these amendments do not seem to be in the service of cultivating students’ intrinsic motivation, but are instead implemented for the sake of keeping students in an environment that will contribute to their bureaucratization—a process that cultivates the anonymity of the student and the arbitrariness of the task with which they are involved.

Student apathy must not be understood as the unavoidable downside of effective teaching. Instead, the question must be asked if student apathy and alienation are not the very goals behind contemporary instructional protocols. Thus it may be argued, just as Althusser

(1970) has maintained, that the contemporary classroom serves as an Ideological State Apparatus. Given their aptitude for alienating students, classrooms that employ extrinsic motivators or mechanical systems of behavioral control are uniquely suited to the task of reproducing continued generations of capitalistic production. The process through which this occurs may be understood by analogy to the analysis performed by Berger, Berger, and Kellner (1973) where systems of mechanization and bureaucratization are shown to systematically alienate workers from their labor.

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