



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help

Module 6.1: What Is Learning?

The topic of this lesson is learning. The relatively permanent change in knowledge or behavior due to experience. Although you might think of learning in terms of what you need to do before an upcoming exam, the knowledge that you take away from your classes, or new skills that you acquire through practice, these changes represent only one component of learning. In fact, learning is a broad topic that is used to explain not only how we acquire new knowledge and behavior but also a wide variety of other psychological processes including the development of both appropriate and inappropriate social behaviors, and even how a person may acquire a debilitating psychological disorder such as PTSD.

We will begin this lesson by discussing events in nature or natural events. Birds build nests and migrate as winter approaches. Infants suckle at their mother's breast. Dogs shake water off wet fur. Salmon swim upstream to spawn, and spiders spin intricate webs. What do these seemingly unrelated behaviors have in common? They all are unlearned behaviors.

Unlearned behaviors are innate behaviors that organisms are born with, which help them adapt to their environment. Instincts and reflexes are both examples of unlearned behaviors.

- **Reflexes** are a motor or neural reaction to a specific stimulus in the environment. They tend to be simpler than instincts, involve the activity of specific body parts and systems, and involve more primitive centers of the central nervous system (e.g., the spinal cord and the medulla).
- **Instincts** are innate behaviors that are triggered by a broader range of events, such as aging and the change of seasons. They are more complex patterns of behavior, involve movement of the organism as a whole (e.g., sexual activity and migration), and involve higher brain centers.

Learning, like reflexes and instincts, allows an organism to adapt to its environment. But unlike instincts and reflexes, learned behaviors involve change and experience: **learning** is a relatively permanent change in behavior or knowledge that results from experience. In contrast to innate behaviors, learning involves acquiring knowledge and skills through experience. Looking back at our surfing scenario, Julian will have to spend much more time training with his surfboard before he learns how to ride the waves like his father.

Learning to surf, as well as any complex learning process, such as learning about the discipline of psychology, involves a complex interaction of conscious and unconscious processes. Learning has traditionally been studied in terms of its simplest components—the associations our minds automatically make between events.

Our minds have a natural tendency to connect events that occur closely together or in sequence. **Associative learning** occurs when an organism makes connections between stimuli or events that occur together in the environment. You will see that associative learning is central to all

three basic learning processes discussed in this lesson:

1. **Classical conditioning** tends to involve unconscious processes.
2. **Operant conditioning** tends to involve conscious processes.
3. **Observational learning** adds social and cognitive layers to all the basic associative processes, both conscious and unconscious.

These learning processes will be discussed in detail later in the lesson. All of the approaches covered in this lesson are part of a branch of psychology called **behaviorism**, which you learned about briefly in Lesson 1 and which we discuss in the next section. However, these approaches do not represent the entire study of learning. Separate traditions of learning have taken shape within different fields of psychology, such as memory and cognition, so you will find that other lessons will round out your understanding of the topic. Over time these traditions tend to converge. For example, in this lesson you will see how cognition has come to play a larger role in behaviorism, whose more extreme adherents once insisted that behaviors are triggered by the environment with no intervening thought.

Check Your Knowledge

As you read your assignment for this lesson, pay close attention to the [key terms and phrases](#) listed throughout the chapter. These terms and concepts are important to your understanding of the information provided in the lesson.

Module 6.1 Flashcards

Click on the notecard to reveal the definition.

RESET

Learning

◀ Previous Card

Term 1 of 5

Next Card ▶

[Module 6.2](#) →



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help