Thought Paper 1

It’s Just Like Riding a Bicycle

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Behaviourism has been criticised as a one dimensional approach to understanding learning. While reducing it to the Skinnerian model of reinforcement and punishment supports this observation, expanding the model to include techniques like modeling, shaping, and cueing prompts a re-examination of its role. Understanding behaviourism’s potential contribution to learning can be difficult when considering higher order academic tasks, like essay writing. Comparing this kind of task to one that is more concrete and accessible, like bicycle riding, may facilitate the process.

Riding a bike or writing an essay requires attention, understanding, and an organized response while teaching them requires considerable planning. Teachers welcome novices to the communities of bike riders and essay writers. Successful riding and writing are demonstrated. Teachers respond to learners and break tasks into steps to encourage mastery: starting with a push bike or a simple sentence and building toward the ten-speed or the doctoral dissertation. Strategies shape and cue behaviour: training wheels for bikes and writing templates for essays. Teachers praise, remind, and prompt: “Pedal faster!” or “Remember your thesis.” Assessment occurs on the fly: running beside the rider and observing the writer. Rewards and punishments are built in. Riding like the wind or persuading a reader to adopt your point of view builds pride and indicates success.

And so, how does this structuring, modeling, shaping, cueing and rewarding contribute to learning? These behaviourist techniques contribute to the moment when the bike is released and the student rides away or the first compelling essay is written independently. Behaviourism encourages students to replace teacher-managed external structures with personally-managed internal ones. While it may fall short in explaining how this transfer occurs, it does occur. Behaviourism’s emphasis on environmental control and modifying behaviour provides principles and techniques that help set the stage for learning. This is its contribution.

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