

How to Help Students Regain Hope When There Seems No Hope?

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Abstract

This paper is based on a student's problem in the realistic teaching context. It consists of an analysis of the problem with the application of theories and concepts that are germane to classical conditioning and learned helplessness, and practical solutions that address the problem in view of the evidence from empirical research. The suggested solutions include intrinsic reinforcement, schedule of reinforcement, and approaches to tackle learned helplessness.

Keywords: learned helplessness, classical conditioning, reinforcement

1. Description of Problem

There could be any kind of problem in the pragmatic teaching context, regardless of whether the students are children or adults. I worked as a lecturer in an education corporation in Tibet, and my job was to give lectures to college graduates who needed to pass the standardized exam to be public servants. There was a boy named Dawa in my class who never paid attention to the learning content from the very first lecture, despite the fact that it was becoming increasingly difficult to be selected among thousands of examinees, and most students were able to focus during the lecture.

In the first lecture, I noticed he kept talking with his classmates sitting next to him, so I walked towards his seat and stood there for a while while I was speaking. And this worked well when I was doing so, but once I left that spot, he continued what he did. This situation deteriorated with the passage of time. During the following lectures, once I started to impart the lecture notes, Dawa would begin to talk with other classmates, although he got occasional responses from those he spoke with, but it was enough to encourage him to continue. He totally ignored the constant non-verbal hints that I gave to him, so I verbally reminded him of the classroom rules. Fortunately, what I did deter the classmates around him from further responding, but he refused to change his bad behavior. Things got even worse when one day they were having a dry run in class. He was still trying to have a conversation with his classmates, but it seemed that they were less willing to get involved in it this time. His misbehavior severely disturbed other classmates who really wanted to concentrate on their quizzes. I finally lost my temper and yelled at him, apparently he didn't expect this would be coming, and he felt mortified, then he ran out of the classroom and never came back ever since. I heard from some teachers that he also behaved the same way in other subjects. Further, I talked to some of his classmates, knowing that since Dawa is from the ethnic minority group, he couldn't understand the learning materials conducted by Mandarin like other students. After failing the screening exams for three years, he didn't see any point in giving it another shot.

2. Introduction

The root of Dawa's behavioral problem was derived from his past experience, in other words, he was exposed to the lectures using Mandarin as a medium of instruction, which made him unable to fully understand what was being taught. And bad performance in previous exams results in his frustration and hopelessness in his later study.

I will use classical conditioning and stimulus generalization to analyze why Dawa constantly behaved badly in my lectures and even in all lectures, and what's the rationale behind. Finally, based on his problematic behavior, I will propose some practical solutions by applying some reinforcement theories.

3. Main Discussion

3.1 Theoretical Analysis

3.1.1 Classical Conditioning

Associative learning plays an important role in our daily lives and has a profound impact on our decisions and behaviors (Aggarwal & Wickens, 2021). As one type of associative learning, classical conditioning can be used to assist us in understanding people's emotional responses (Ormrod, 2020), and our attitudes could also be the result of classical conditioning (e.g., Walther et al., 2011, as cited in Ormrod, 2020). Classical conditioning refers to a type of learning in which a stimulus can elicit a response that is originally elicited by another stimulus (Slavin, 2018). Similarly, in Dawa's case, the alteration in his feelings was built up through three steps. First, prior to conditioning: the neutral stimulus (NS) is my lectures, which would not result in any particular feeling from him originally. Second, during conditioning: he found my lectures very obscure to him, which is the unconditioned stimulus (UCS), and he felt frustrated, which is the unconditioned response (UCR). Further, he was exposed to my lectures constantly, which caused the fact that he was confused about the learning content (UCS) and frustration (UCR) were paired together. Third, after conditioning: he associated my lectures with frustration, in this step, my lectures become conditioned stimulus (CS) and his frustration becomes conditioned response (CR). Due to this process, he acted like he didn't want to learn anything at all in my class. Figure 1 shows graphically what happened from a classical conditioning perspective.

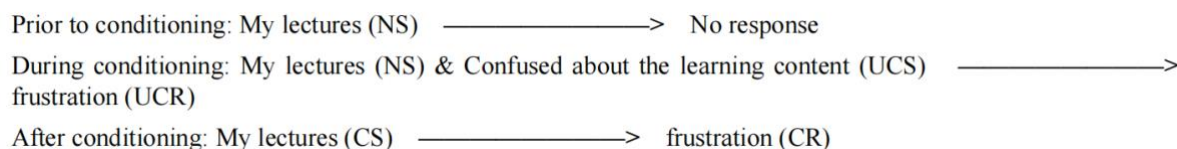


Figure 1.

3.1.2 Stimulus Generalization in Classical Conditioning

In classical conditioning, stimulus generalization refers to the tendency to respond to other similar stimuli in the same and previously learned way (Till & Priluck, 2000). In Dawa's case, firstly, he couldn't understand what I had taught in my class, which is mainly about language comprehension and expression. Since this is a fundamental course for those students from ethnic minority groups, it makes important contributions to other subjects, such as math, logic and reasoning. Therefore the aforementioned conditioning, i.e., the presence of my lectures would result in his frustration, generalized to other stimuli, other subjects in other lectures in this case, that are similar to my lectures (CS), then he gradually felt frustrated whenever he attended any lecture.

3.1.3 Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness refers to the belief that when people are repeatedly exposed to an unpleasant stimulus that they couldn't avoid, they attribute their failures to a lack of ability, and "they have an I-can't-do-it-even-if-I-try attitude" (Ormrod, 2020). Buzzai et al. (2021) conducted an experiment aimed at investigating the role of learned helplessness and mastery orientation playing in the relationship between school alienation and academic achievement, and they recruited 1,316 Italian students (13 to 20 years old) as their participants, further based on the measurement of School-Related Alienation Questionnaire, School Learned Helplessness Questionnaire and students' average scores, they concluded that learned helplessness as a mediator plays a significant role in the correlation between students' perceptions of school alienation and academic achievement, and also could negatively influence students' academic performance. In Dawa's case, he couldn't understand the learning materials from the lectures and failed his exams for three consecutive times, he was repeatedly exposed to uncontrollable, unfavorable situations like these, and it seems that what happened to him was inescapable. Gradually he stopped studying and even stopped trying to change his circumstances.

3.2 Practical Solutions

Based on his behavioral problem, there are some practical solutions related to reinforcement theory that could be implemented as interventions.

3.2.1 Intrinsic & Extrinsic Reinforcement

Ormrod mentioned that the most productive forms of reinforcement in the classroom possibly are positive

feedback and intrinsic reinforcement (e.g., feelings of pleasure, pride or accomplishment) (2020). Based on the meta-analysis, the forms of rewards also matter, for example, getting a tangible reward would decrease intrinsic motivation, whereas getting a verbal reward or social reinforcement could increase intrinsic motivation (Lepper et al., 1994, as cited in Akin-Little & Little, 2019). And further study indicated that college students show more enhancement than children from verbal rewards, which means that it is more effective to use verbal rewards for college students (Deci et al., 1999, as cited in Akin-Little & Little, 2019). In Dawa's case, teachers could use verbal rewards to enhance his intrinsic motivation. For example, once in a while during the lecture, when he didn't talk to other classmates and behave well, teachers should praise him like this, "You really did a job today, I hope you could keep it up and set a good example for other classmates." By doing this, he would gain a sense of accomplishment, and therefore build up his intrinsic reinforcement to stop talking and behave well, which is the first and important step.

3.2.2 Schedule of Reinforcement

Due to the nature of unpredictability, it is less likely to be extinct and also has higher response rates if variable schedules (both ratio and variable) are adopted compared to fixed schedules, and a variable-ratio schedule predicts a higher rate of responding (Ormrod, 2020). Based on this, teachers could further give verbal rewards in an intermittent or partial schedule, that is, compliment on Dawa's good behavior and make sure the length of the time interval is unpredictable for him, and more importantly, use a changing number of compliments, for example, sometimes just give him a nod and smile, and maybe next time give him more verbal encouragement. This would lead to greater resistance to extinction for his newly established intrinsic reinforcement.

3.2.3 Strategies for Dealing with Learned Helplessness

Dweck (1975) also conducted an experiment on learned helplessness, which is aimed at investigating whether changing attributions for failure could make students react differently when dealing with low academic performance. In her study, the experimental group was instructed to attribute their failure to lack of effort, whereas the control group got no feedback, and the result showed that the experimental group appeared to be more persistent and resilient when faced with failure than the group, which indicated that it's very necessary to alter attributions for failure (Dweck, 1975). In Dawa's case, teachers should help him to believe that his failure is just a result of his lack of effort, rather than his lack of ability, then he would know the fact that he couldn't understand the learning content would not last forever, as long as he put more effort into study, things would get better.

More recently, Ghasemi (2021) pointed out that teachers and their practices are closely related to students' helpless attitudes and behaviors, and some potential interventions include: teachers provide supportive feedback to ease students' helpless attitudes, and be sensitive to students' emotional needs and give them constructive responses, then finally build a positive teacher-student relationship. Based on this, teachers should be sensitive to Dawa's helplessness before drawing a conclusion that he was undisciplined, and try to identify the reason behind his undesirable behavior and give him supportive feedback. However, for Dawa's actual needs, what he really needed could be more than just emotional support, there should be some strategies that emphasize the importance of his actual needs, like how to improve his Mandarin proficiency.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I used theories related to classical conditioning to analyze Dawa's manifest behavioral problem in class, and learned helplessness, which is the direct consequence of one kind of negative reinforcement to investigate how his misbehavior formed and its rationale behind. Last but not least, as punishment strategies previously utilized by me didn't work well, by applying reinforcement theories, I propose some practical solutions aimed at ameliorating this situation. Like Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar from Harvard University once said, "If we do not appreciate the good, the good would depreciate." From the perspective of giving our sincere care, we definitely could help students regain hope when there seems no hope.

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