

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF REWARDS AND PUNISHMENT IN MOTIVATING SCHOOL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Motivation itself is a hodge-podge- a term of very complex dimensions. It is known to include the rewards and punishments among many other interacting drives, forces and incentives which affect or influence student's learning. 'Extrinsic' forms of motivation like rewards and punishments have always been used by lectures/ teachers educators to correct or stimulate certain forms of behaviors. Yet, what their effects and consequences are, whether they facilitate or hinder learning and to what extent, how they operate to increase, if at all, the efficiency of learning and many such allied questions have remained largely unanswered. Or, their answers have generally been improvised, for the most part, from intuition, conjecture or just intelligent guess- work rather than on research findings. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine these questions in order to discover (uncover, to be more specific) the role which rewards and punishment seem to play in motivating school learning. For purposes of analysis, rewards will include material and symbolic rewards like praise and marks, and punishment will include physical punishments, blame, sarcasm and ridicule..

Keywords: Rewards, Motivation, Classroom, School, Learning & Learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

The classroom, it is asserted, is at once the cradle as well as the grave yard of genius. Whatever the truth of this assertion, society no doubt expects certain outcomes from the classroom situation for the student. And the student's work at school is not merely determined by his intellectual capacity, his knowledge and abilities in various subjects, but also by motivation to learn. If the student is motivated strongly enough, his desire to learn may prove strong enough to keep him from the ranks of the swelling army of school dropouts. Furthermore, if students attainment of a goal is regarded as an important purpose of education, then the factors that provide the best learning situations should be understood as an integral part of educational theory.

2. TRENDS OF RESEARCH STUDIES IN THIS FIELD

The investigation so far made into this problem have given controversial results, and many of them have been concerned with the study of animal relatively few with human beings. Most of the earlier investigations, notable those of E.L. Thorndike, indicated that reward "stamps in" bonds, association or connections, while punishment weakens, or "stamp out" such connections. Learning is thought of as a reversible process. Just as reward causes it to proceed in a forward direction, punishment closes them, and the one action is assumed to be just as immediate and direct as the other.

Later investigations, on the contrary, ascribe a greater stimulating effect to rewards. The studies show a similarity on the point that a group of students given rewards have, to a greater extent, increased their achievement compare with the results of groups punished or controlled. This somehow revised hypothesis of the way in which punishment operates now integrates the views of Thorndike and Pavlov.

They stated that punishment achieves its effect of inhibiting action not by the direct stamping out of S – R bonds, but by the intermediation of fear. O.H. Mowrer, a prolific student and scholar on these issues, summarizes the results thus, "An action, previously strengthened by reward, which is followed by punishment, produces certain stimuli, both internal and external to the organism, which, by virtue of their contiguity with the punishment takes on the capacity to arouse fear; and when the organism subsequently starts to repeat such an action, the resulting fear produces a conflict with the drive or motive underlying the original act. If the fear is sufficiently strong, the act will, in consequence, be inhibited, or at least is some fashion modified".

It seems, however, that the results of investigation are not similar on the whole and in every case even when similar techniques were used; they are even controversial in some cases. For instance, the studies of Dennis (1957) among several groups in the middle East seem to indicate that differences exist in the way rewards and punishment affect the behavior of students of different cultural groups. These discrepancies among investigation results must depend upon the fact that other motivating factors are impinging upon the research situation. For, even when the experiments are supposed to study the effect of certain incentives or drives, such as rewards, for instance, the results are frequently influenced by important number of factors in the shape of needs and incentives of other kinds. And of these other factors, rewards and punishments are perhaps only partial influences. It seems, however, that on the whole knowledge in this area cannot be said to represent much of an advance over intelligent conjecture.

3. THEORIES AND EFFECTS OF REWARDS

Thorndike's earlier and the later experimental studies of others in this field report, increase efficiency in learning, at least up to a point, when students are given monetary or other material rewards.

These studies tend to show that the child responds to cue and is rewarded for it. Rewards or reinforcements are thought to lead to tension reduction through satisfying drive conditions like learning is thought to be actually facilitated more than would normally have been the case. Thus, if a child knows that they will get a reward for completing a certain task he will be motivated to work hard to obtain the reward. Rewards may indeed lead to a change of interest in actual life situations so that an activity originally disliked becomes liked, at least for the reward that will come out of it for the time being and the interest may be sustained for some time beyond the immediate present.

The use and effect of rewards seem to go deeper than simply attaching a pleasant tone to an activity. In so as it is not inhibitory in its effects but is positively reinforcing, the actual reward permits more freedom of action to the individual. Students have been known to meet the teacher's challenge and produce excellent work just because they expect to adult (Teacher or Parent). approval or praise, or obtain good marks. An experiment by Hurlock on that relative effectiveness of these forms of rewards showed that school mathematics improved most under praise next under reproof, and least when the child was one of the ignored group. Although the results of such an isolated piece of research cannot be conclusive, since other motives besides praise and blame may have been aroused to strengthen or weaken connections. Similar studies have however tended to yield the same results.

In a recent classroom study in the United States, for example, three teachers were selected to follow three different methods. The first teacher used fear and domination to motivate his students; the second merely presented his lessons; the third used a positive warm approach, encouraging the students work with warm praise. Both the first teacher and they third motivated their students to high marks. The second teacher's class did worst. But the students motivated by fear stopped work as soon as the teacher left the classroom, fought among themselves, were easily confused and tensed. The praised group continued to work even when the teacher was away and got along better as a team. Again, there may have been other unknown factors impinging on the research situation. For instance such things as the basis of distinction, between the three classes the personality of each teacher and the relations between him and the students in each particular group may have played a significant part in the results. But the fact that there is a high degree of correlation between several such experiment which seems to suggest that rewards facilitate learning, at least in the short run.

It is important to note that when rewards are to regulate learning what the rewards signify is much more important than the rewards themselves. Thus, for example, school marks, grades and material rewards are valued not so much for what they are as what they signify or represent. Rewards are valued for such learned motives as desires for prestige recognition, prestige, exemptions from certain tasks. It is perhaps this aspect of theirs that make them appealing not to the rank and file but to only a small number within the larger group.

Most studies done so far on this question (they are as yet quite few) seem in the whole to indicate that success in achievement is a strong motivating force to further action. Students who are successful and who therefore derive satisfaction from a learning activity are motivated toward additional learning. This seems to call for the arrangement of learning situation in such a way that every learner experiences a reasonable degree of success. It may not be an absolute truth that "nothing succeeds like success", but the teacher would be making the classroom a 'grave-yard' of possible genius if he allows continued failure to frustrate the student who is trying his best.

This is perhaps one of the strongest arguments advanced in favor of programming. In this regard, Skinner himself considers reinforcement an important ingredient in learning, and knowledge of the success of a response is an example of this. The more of his time learner spends in making responses that are thus 'reinforced' the greater will be the opportunity for this important factor to operate. Every learner at whatever level knows how eagerly he expects to know his performance- marks or grade and comments- after completing a learning task. If the marks are high and comments favorable, he is considerably reinforced and if his expectations are not fulfilled he feels some qualms. This simple experience is a further illustration of the value or rewards in motivating learning whether for adults or children.

3.1 The Limitations of Rewards

Though, to some extent, rewards tend on the whole to motivate learning the problem is how to use them appropriately. Their limitation stem from the fact that they are a kind of bribe given by the teacher (an authority), and this kind of tip may breed in the student the unhealthy attitude that an activity is only worthwhile for the remuneration it brings in praise, recognition or financial gain. If this attitude becomes general, then what happens to those activities or learning tasks which must be performed for their own sake? Also, there is the danger that children's attention may be narrowed to what is strictly relevant to getting the reward thus excluding incidental information from learning yet, incidental knowledge may add significantly to one's stock of knowledge.

Since rewards invariably go to a few in the group, the fate of those who fail and will continue to fail to get a reward must be considered. Suppose there are three prizes and many contestants, the problem of losers is to be faced along with that of the winners. A winner may be encouraged through the effectiveness of his reward, but what happens to the losers? The question is whether the price in disappointment to losers is worth what the gain (risk in Nigeria?) is for the few winners. In the Nigerian situation, true to the findings of Dennis (1957) elsewhere, the winners may face the risk of being victims of jealousy; they may even find themselves ignored or isolated by their peer group. In such a case the privileged winners find that they have lost rather than gained after all. Or should the school be ruthless regardless of what the effect may be for the student?

Another major limitation of rewards is the fact they have to be regulated by authority. The teacher or lecturer some other authority must set up barriers against their attainment

by any short cuts may obviate the honest completion of a specific task. In setting up this kind of barrier the value of the reward become related to the task only through the artificial arrangements set up by an external authority. Furthermore, the fact that an authority has to regulate the reward may be encouraging docility and defense to authority rather than originality and spontaneity of effort. Students soon learn that they receive attention and praise through doing primarily what teacher expects or want and , with stifled initiative, they become over- dependent in later years, An unhealthy development such as this is hardly compatible with the activity called education.

3.2 The General Role of Punishment

Punishment may be thought of as being in gradations varying from spanking or thrashing, as sometimes happens in some Nigerian schools, to ordinary sarcasm, reproof or blame. (The present writer would exclude the word ‘wrong’ as signifying punishment in the Thorndike context.) The relative effectiveness of each type of punishment will depend on the individual child’s personality, his cultural milieu, his relationship with the punishing authority and the situation under which the punishment is inflicted. While it is generally agreed that rewards facilitate learning to some extent, especially if properly used, there is much confusion and controversy regarding the role of punishment in motivating learning. This confusion has led Stone (1950) to state, in a mood of sheer pessimism: “The task of resolving apparently conflicting result in the experimental literature on the effects of punishment is all but impossible in the present state of incomplete knowledge”.

Although earlier findings had simply stated that punishing wrong responses eliminated them and speed up learning (a common- sense enough position since one would not continue to do what was punished), later experiments supported by factual observation seem to indicate that the conditioning of fear is the primary consideration and that here it is the onset of a drive and this alone that is mainly important. A hypothesis that emerges from all this is that a weak drive (learning) can be tied to a strong one (fear of pain resulting from punishment or loss of face or prestige resulting from ridicule) to strengthen the motive to learn. In fact, this kind of fear plays a considerable part in the learning of the child- fear of teacher’s criticism, of report cards, of parental reproof at home. It is perhaps correct to infer from the evidence that many students tends to be motivated to do any work at all this way. Even then the fact that mere force plays a large part in all education (for instance, children are not asked for their consent in taking examinations) may explain why some students would not work without such drive conditions.

An analysis of a typical situation where punishment is used is shown in the following illustration. The individual dislike the activity A (see figure below); to make him carry out the activity a second even more disagreeable possibility is set up in such a way that the individual has to face one of them. The individual now finds himself in a particular type of conflict situation, namely the individual now finds himself in a particular type of conflict situation, namely, a conflict between forces fp- A and fp-p and away from the two anomalous areas, i.e. A & P

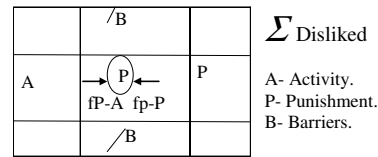


Fig.1- illustrating what happens when an individual faces a conflict situation when punished.

Unless barriers (B) are set up against the way out- barriers strong enough to keep the individual within the conflict area- the individual will tend to run away from both activities. If the barriers are so strong that individual has no freedom of action to get out and the punishment is repeated, the activity demanded may become intensely disliked and the subject sinks into apathy and helpless surrender.

4. SOME MAJOR OBJECTIONS TO PUNISHMENT

The evidence of research studies indicate that although punishment does suppress a response, mere non-reinforcement is more effective in permanently eliminating an unwanted response. Appropriately combined with rewards, the however, punishment may redirect behavior: under circumstances such as this punishment may redirect behavior, the response is punished and when the desired behaviors is occurs it is rewarded. Under circumstances such as this punishment may allow the more permanent effects of rewards to become operative, even though its effect may be temporarily disturbing.

Punishment must however be regarded as a temporary drive. Students motivated by fear of punishment will stop work, as has been shown by research studies quoted above, even avoid study once the fear is removed. They will always associate fear of pain with study, and it is not healthy to keep students under a permanent state of siege. Human subjects sometimes have a conception of themselves which makes them feel that it is unworthy of them to be deterred or moved by pain. Mowrer(1960) has aptly put it; “there are always the subtle - tide of ago psychology to reckon with, and preservation of self-esteem (prevention of guilty and anxiety) may cause a person to rise above the influence of both rewards and punishments of a segmental nature.”

As illustrated in fig.1 research evidence also supports the view that more severe forms of punishment, like thrashing, (although not allowed in university system) can effectively suppress the punished response of a learner, but they do so by setting up conflicts between the punished response and others evoked by punishing stimulus. Punishment says ‘stop it’ but does not tell what to do, and the result is simply confusion and emotional upset. Under some circumstance, punishment tends to fix the punished behavior rather than eliminate it, and some forms of discordant behavior tend to be aggravated rather than cured. For instance, if a student doing something which he does not understand or is too hard (as often happens in mathematics and many other sciences), he may prefer to face the familiar punishment than face the uncertainty of change and additional frustration.

In this regard, therefore, punishment is mortifying, produces anxiety and is fraught with hazards in teacher-student relationship. All the evidence thus point to one conclusion, that it is difficult to use punishment effectively to motivate learning of a more permanent character.

5. OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

It seems that no rule-of-thumb can be set down to guide the teacher in the use of rewards and punishments. But the picture seems fairly clear, nevertheless, that the effects of these forms of motivation are less generally and less permanently effective than those practice in which motives are part of the learner (i. e., intrinsic) and are functionally related to learner's goals. But since rewards and punishments have become permanent features of the classroom situation and parents even use them in those aspects which concern school work, the best thing would be to understand their effects and use them, where necessary, with care and discrimination, and also in full recognition of their limitations.

The evidence on the whole is that such a complex thing as motivation or any aspect of it is not something divorced from the total personality of the student nor is it something applied apart from the learning situation. Students react differently to different cues in the environment. A student may be motivated, and often is, because he is the sort of person he is, surrounded by the sort of adults and peers he has in his immediate environment, and so on. For a creature of such infinite dimensions as the student, the whole motivational settings which include him may be more important than isolated make-shift attempts to energize his learning. As it is, even though rewards and punishments may be temporarily effective, their effect is of doubtful value and, under certain circumstances, they may prove to be definite harm. Moreover, patterns generalized from isolated experiments may not account for several individual cases.

A desirable objective will be for teachers and lecturers to study their students carefully for clues as to what it is that motivates them to learn. The most effective lecturer may well be the one who knows how to fit his teaching methods to each student's needs instead of resulting each time to temporary stimulants. The art of good teaching may lie in these realms of adapting methods to individual and group good teaching may lie in this realm of adapting methods to individual and group differences of learners - definite differentiation in instruction.

Much investigation has been done and continues to be done into this question of incentive that motivates students to learn. But these are as yet insufficient and the results inclusive to answer definitely certain questions relating to their use and effectiveness. There is therefore a great need for experimental studies to throw light on such question as:

- (1) the relative effects of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in terms of speed of learning, desire to continue learning, retention of learning, and changed behavior patterns as a result of something learned in this way;
- (2) How learning and retention are affected when the amount of reward and recognition, punishment

and non-reinforcement increase and/ or decrease;

- (3) How and to what extent children's attitudes to learning are affected when their parents reward or punish them for their grade at school.

In general, more precise analyses, measurement of progress in this development of motives and data regarding various ways and means of developing these drives provide important problem for future research in learning theory.

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