# Behaviourist approaches

#### **(Taken from the Times Educational Supplement Great Minds booklet)**

#### Available online from:

#### <http://www.lancashireadultlearning.net/pluginfile.php/109188/mod_resource/content/0/Great_Minds_1_.pdf>

If you like Derren Brown (the British TV illusionist) and wonder how he gets normal, well-adjusted people to do crazy things, such as rob an armoured van or press a button that will apparently electrocute a kitten, then you’ll be interested in a behaviourist approach to teaching and learning. A simple example is the work of Ivan Pavlov, the Russian physiologist, sometimes referred to as classical conditioning.

Pavlov studied reflexes in animals and noticed that dogs salivated even if there was no food. The dogs were reacting to lab coats. The people who fed them wore lab coats, so they reacted as if food was coming whenever they saw a lab coat.

Pavlov tested his idea by striking a bell when the dogs were fed, so the dogs associated the sound of the bell with food. A similar thing happens in school. When the bell sounds students instinctively get up to go,

Leading to the classic teacher comment: “The bell is for me and not for you.” Pavlov got involuntary responses, but it’s possible to condition animals and people to respond with voluntary or operant actions.

B.F Skinner, the American psychologist, made a number of contributions to understanding how learning and behaviour are linked, in particular his operant conditioning theory.

## What’s the theory about?

Skinner’s theory is based upon the idea that learning happens when there’s a change in a pupil’s behaviour. The changes result from responses to events (stimuli). Each response produces a consequence, such as defining a word, hitting a ball, solving a maths problem or not mis-behaving. When a particular stimulus response pattern is reinforced (rewarded), the pupil is conditioned to respond positively. Reinforcement is the key part of his theory. A reinforcer, positive or negative, is anything that strengthens a desired response. It could be verbal praise, a good grade in a test or a feeling of accomplishment or satisfaction. Adverse stimuli or punishment can result in reduced responses.

## How can you put the theory into practice?

Operant conditioning is similar to classical conditioning in that both are concerned with how we can teach others how to behave. When students display behaviours that we want, it should be followed by something pleasurable (a reward) so that the behaviour will be reinforced and repeated. Observe a class carefully at the beginning of the school year to identify its baseline behaviour. This will be different for each pupil. For example, when you ask students to line up, some do so quickly and quietly, others will mess about. If you want them all to line up quickly and quietly, you need to change their behavior in small steps. Begin by reinforcing how students should behave then focus on reducing the time it takes.

* Positive reinforcement gives the reward immediately following the desired behaviour, for example awarding stars or commendations for good work.
* Negative reinforcement is the removal of a negative stimulus or punishment, following a desired behaviour, for example allowing a pupil to read quietly if they complete all their class work properly ahead of the rest of the class, rather than giving them more work to do.

Each pupil will have different ideas of what constitutes a reward, so different types of reinforcers will be more or less effective at modifying behaviour. If rewards are not leading to modified behaviour, it may be that the reinforcers being used are not valuable to the students and you will have to find new rewards.

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## How to use behaviourism to improve your lessons

In a noisy environment, such as a music class, it’s often difficult to get students’ attention. Try using a specific piece of music that builds to a crescendo as a signal for silence to follow. Some teachers use pieces of music to signal certain events. The Countdown theme could mean you have 30 seconds before you have to be quiet. The Mission Impossible theme tune could be a cue to tidy the room. With everyone in place and the room tidied by the time the music ends. This uses classical conditioning.

Perhaps you are impressed with the overall behaviour of your class, but still the students make mistakes such as forgetting homework or not raising a hand before answering questions. Rather than punishing the students, try devising a system of points where they can redeem their mistakes by earning points for a better than average effort on homework or for remembering to put a hand up to answer questions. Acknowledge them when they earn points with positive verbal reinforcement.

### For further information:

<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/skinnere.PDF>

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