Observational Learning for the Future Teacher
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When planning to become a teacher there is much to learn. We first need to be taught how we learn in order to understand how to properly teach our future students. In figuring out how we learn we can than design lesson plans and teaching strategies that target the various ways in which we learn, optimizing our student’s understanding of the lessons we cover. One of the ways in which we learn is that of observational learning, which is learning by watching. In an effort to understand how all the aspects of our learning can come together in a real life situation, I used my observational learning sills and visited a teacher that inspired my decision in becoming a teacher.

John Schut is teacher at Caledonia High School. He is the FFA (Future Farmers of America) advisor, teaching leadership, equine science, and horticultural classes. He has been teaching for seven years now and does his best to design lesson plans that require the students to use various learning strategies, causing them to become academically successful.

When I entered Mr. Schut’s class on a Friday morning, I found the room to be somewhat bare. There were a few posters on the wall showing which students paid their FFA dues, a few college banner flags hanging on a bulletin toward the back of the room, and many club trophies on top of the cabinets running along the side wall. With an environment that has minimal stimulation the students are able to focus more on the lessons then on what is around them. Without having to suppress their environmental distractions they can pay full attention to the material presented by the instructor.

One strategy that Mr. Schut used to help his students pay attention was having each student talk about what they had planned for the weekend at the start of the class. At first I was not sure the relevance of doing this, but as I thought about it he was getting
them to interact socially, and get anything they may talk about during class out of the way. Since each student was given an opportunity to talk in the beginning of the class they were less likely to be disruptive when they were suppose to be listening to the teaching that was occurring. If a student did however become disruptive Mr. Schut would say “you have already had your chance to talk to the class, now it is my turn, when I am done lecturing you can go back to visiting with your friends, but for now you need to be respectful and pay attention to me like we all did when you shared with us, thank you.” Addressing this issue in this way, in my opinion, was a form of punishment. There was no direct punishment for the student that was being disruptive, however Mr. Schut used the students self concept and observational learning in a form of punishment. Since most of Mr. Schut’s students are at the age where they are most concerned with their social self, or how others see them, he is able to single disruptive students out and use them as an example to the rest of the class. When he tells the student they need to be respectful he is showing the rest of the class that particular student is behaving poorly. He was using the disruptive student as a model in a way to use observational learning for classroom management.

To regain classroom management when all the students began to be chatty, Mr. Schut would simply snap his fingers once. In doing this he gained the attention of his students and they would respond by snapping their fingers twice and settling down and listening to his next instructions. When he did this I was reminded of Pavlov and the salivating dogs. Like Pavlov, Mr. Schut conditioned (classical conditioning) his students to respond to his snapping fingers by settling down. I can’t say exactly how he conditioned his students, but they did respond in the way that proves they had been.
Another way Mr. Schut provided classroom management was in writing the attentive schedule of the call on the front board. Writing the schedule for the class assignments on the board enabled the students to be aware of what is going to be asked of them, as well as allowing them to prepare themselves and their thinking for the topics that will be covered later in the class. Since the students are well informed as to what they may encounter, it reduces the chance of disequilibration. If the students had no sense of what to expect within the class they would become confused when new topics were addressed, but because Mr. Schut understands the need for students to have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and what they will need to be doing he has set the class up for a successful learning situation.

In teaching the students about a topic Mr. Schut tries very hard to use many teaching strategies to insure his students get the most out of each lesson as they possibly can. He had previously given a lecture to the class about a particular topic and had given the assignment of reading the text and answering various questions that pertained to the material they read. Varying how the students were gaining the information is a way to encourage plasticity, and give the students multiple interactions with the material to promote long term memory storage. If the students are reading about the information and answering the questions they are most likely actively processing the text which is a form of deep processing, pushing the information into their long term memories. Also, since they had encountered the information within the lecture the day before, they have multiple interactions with the information which enables them to make more connections to what they learned and making it be put into their long term memories with a greater chance for easy retrieval of that information.
Mr. Schut uses statistical learning to teach whenever possible, as a way to promote long term storage and easy retrieval of the information. He had the students of his horticultural class start seeds in the greenhouse while learning about seed germination. He had the students plant the seeds that they started and keep track of the germination rates. Having the students actually plant and grow something was an experience they encountered through class that they may not have had the opportunity to do elsewhere. Having the opportunity to learn first hand aided in the students learning history, which will enable them to look at things in a whole new perspective later in life.

Mr. Schut also designed a study review that the whole class was a part of which prompted the student to actually retrieve that information they have previously put into long term memory. With the review the students were broken up into teams, and would compete to see which team new the most about the topics that would be covered later on the exam. The review game was a game of jeopardy, where the student could pick the category and the amount of points they could gain. When the question appeared there was much color in the background and a limited amount of time allotted for answering the question with a ticking time bomb that made noise. Since there was a lot of color and noise it was more difficult for the students to answer, or at least answer correctly. This was due to the fact that there were many distractions. These distractions made it hard for the student to concentrate on what was really being asked, and on the retrieval of the correct information. When a student got the question wrong, it could be only because of the fact that they were not as successful at retrieving the information fast enough, or that they failed at suppressing the distractions (the color and noise) to even begin thinking about possible answers.
Another distraction the students faced while participating in the review game is that of their environment. The classroom in and of itself was not distracting, however at times other students were. One student said that she got the question wrong because she couldn’t hear the question, so it was not fair. In response to that Mr. Schut, being the good teacher that he is, used an analogy of her actions to teach the class how to properly respect the other students. He replied “Oh so you couldn’t hear the question because other students were talking while it was your turn…kind of like when you were talking while it was other peoples’ turn.” In saying this, Mr. Schut again used observational learning to express to his students how to behave properly.

In participating in this review game, the students were motivated to do well both intrinsically and extrinsically. If the students answered the questions correctly they were given points moving their team into the lead. Since they were rewarded with points, which is an external thing, they were extrinsically motivated. Another reason they were extrinsically motivated was because the questions that were being asked were likely to appear on the exam. If the student wanted to do well on the exam and pass the class that again is extrinsic motivation. Peer pressure also plays a part in the extrinsic motivation, because the students at this age are most concerned with their social self and how others see them. If they answer the questions wrong then the other students, their social group, may think they are “dumb” and that would decrease their social appeal. On the flip side some students were also intrinsically motivated for the reason that they enjoyed what they were learning about and wanted to get the most out of the material that was being covered. One student was trying very hard to answer all the questions, even those that were not his to have to answer. When one of the other students asked him why he was
answering when it wasn’t his turn he replied “for my personal education”, which is one hundred percent intrinsic motivation.

Since the students had been taught through various teaching strategies they had developed a deep understanding of the material Mr. Schut covered. He had presented the material to them in multiple ways including lectures, deep processing of the text, and experiencing things first hand (statistical learning). He also used observational learning, punishment, and classical conditioning as a way to maintain good classroom management. In doing all of this Mr. Schut was successful in teaching his students not only academic lessons but life lessons. The students learned about seed and plant germination as well as respect. What Mr. Schut did in the little amount of time he had with his students gave them a good environment where they were able to learn and grow as individuals in both the academic world and the world as a whole.