

**Making Observations of Psychological Processes in Everyday Life [Student Handout]****[01] Learning****A. Introduction**

By the time you're even the youngest of adults you know that human beings learn things and that the big difference between small children and adults is how much the latter have learned.

Combine that with the insight from psychology that most of what happens in human minds happens behind the scenes and it suggests that people learn things all the time but seldom know they are doing so—let alone how they do it.

**Key Concepts**

- Habituation & Desensitization
- Classical conditioning
- Operant conditioning: (rewards & punishments)
- Cognitive Learning
- Social Learning

**B. Questions to Guide Your (Re)Search**

[1] How is it that you know that something has been learned? Think of babies and dogs, but don't forget that the same things happen to us.

[2] Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky introduced the term *zone of proximal development* to refer to the difference between what a child cannot do at a certain point in time, but can do when aided by another person. What does thinking about observing a person's zone of proximal development do for observing processes of learning?

[3] What might failures of learning tell you about the learning process? How many failures to learn can you observe in a day? Another hint: Watch out for people repeating themselves.

[4] If you ask someone 'What have you learned today?' most people come up with things, but since the vast majority of psychological processes operate outside of awareness there's good reason to think that the answers given aren't accurate. In fact, they're inaccurate in two different ways. On the one hand they tend to report things like, 'I learned that it's a bad idea to smoke,' that they already knew and don't actually act on (very few smokers stop smoking at such moments). On the other hand they almost never report things like, 'I learned that no new buildings were put up on the street where I live,' even though its true and powerfully affects their feeling of being at home. In the first case, it's questionable whether any learning has occurred at all. In the second, it's questionable whether anyone notices what they've learned.

See how many examples of such processes you can find over the course of an hour or two.

[5] Since learning frequently involves acting differently people are often disconcerted by what they learn. What might you be able to learn about learning by observing when people are surprised or confused?