

GESTALT THEORY OF LEARNING BY INSIGHT

❑ Meaning of Gestalt

The Gestalt theory of learning, also named as Learning by Insight, is the contribution of German psychologists who were studying the nature of perception. Max Wertheimer (1880-1943) was the founder of Gestalt psychology.

Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt Koffka were the other German psychologists associated with Wertheimer. Gestalt Theory of Learning (Learning by Holes) or Learning by Insight states that perceptual phenomena are only experienced as whole or Gestalts. Learning, according to Gestalt Theory, is not by random steps, not by trial and error, not by conditioning but by insight, introspection and understanding.

Gestalt psychology is primarily concerned with the nature of perception. According to it, an individual perceives whole and not parts. Learning is viewed as a purposive, explorative, imaginative and creative enterprise in which the total situation is taken into account by the learner. Kohler and Koffka conducted many experiments on Chimpanzees and brought out a book, 'Mentality of Apes' in 1925 (result of the experiments conducted during 1913-17). These experiments show that learning is not the result of trial and error but of insight and the ability to see relationships between various factors involved in a situation.

Experiment- 1

In one of his experiments Kohler shut the chimpanzee Sultan by name in a big cage. A banana was placed outside, at a considerable distance from the cage. Inside the cage there were two sticks, one of them a long one and the other a bit shorter. The shorter stick could be screwed into the long one. The long stick could not reach the banana but if the other one was screwed into it, the banana could be touched. Sultan tried to get at the banana. He tried the longer stick but it did not reach the fruit. The other was still smaller. He sat down and began to play with the sticks. But he was still brooding over the matter. Suddenly an idea flashed to him. He thrust the smaller stick into the hole of the longer one and thus managed to get at the banana with the help of the combined sticks.

Experiment- 2

In this experiment the chimpanzee was shut up in a room with unscalable walls. A banana was hanging from the ceiling. The animal was hungry. He jumped at the fruit but it was too high. He left the efforts and sat down. There was a box lying in the corner of the room. The animal began to play with the box. He then suddenly got up and pushed the box to the centre of the room below the banana, jumped from it and got the fruit.

❑ Laws of Learning

- 1. The Law of Similarity-** This law says that "other things being equal, the stimuli that are more similar to one another will have greater tendency to be grouped". Thus learning similar things is easier than learning dissimilar things.
- 2. The Law of Proximity-** According to this law, "perceptual groups are favoured according to the nearness of the parts." This means that we perceive all closely situated or located things as groups.

3. The Law of Closure- This law states that "closed areas are more stable than closed ones and therefore more readily form figures in perception." It is similar to Thorndike's law of effect. Unless the work is finished the individual does not feel satisfied. He is under tension which is over only when the work is completed.

4. The Law of Good Continuation- This law states that "organisation in perception which appears to go in a particular direction appears to be going infinitely in the same direction." So there is a tendency of factors to give direction, movement and continuation to perceptual organisation.

Factors upon which Insight Depends Insight involves the following:

1. The learner perceives the situation as a whole.
2. The learner tries to understand the relationships between various factors involved in a situation.
3. As a result of the understanding of the relationship, the learner is helped in the sudden grasping of the solution of the problem.

On the whole, insight depends upon the following factors:

- I. **Experience** – Past experiences assist in the insight of the problems.
- II. **Intelligence** - Basic intelligence of the learner is an important factor in insight learning.
- III. **Learning Situation** - As a common observation insight occurs when there is ample scope for observation in a learning situation.
- IV. **Initial Efforts** - The initial efforts in the form of trial and error open the way of insight learning.
- V. **Reception and Generalisation** – Learning gain in one situation helps the learner to react insightfully in other identical situations.

❑ Educational Implications of the Theory of Insight

The Gestalt theory brings the following points into focus:

1. **From Whole to Parts-** The whole is greater than the parts. Therefore, the teachers should present the picture of a topic or subtopic as a whole. It is especially more important in the case of small children. While teaching the topic parts of a flower, the flower should be presented before the students and thereafter the parts should be taken up. Similarly, the whole poem may be taken up as a whole.
2. **Problem-Solving Approach-** The theory rejects memorisation and rote learning. It stresses that the learners must be given opportunities for using their thinking power and power of observation. The students should be placed in the position of discoverers. They should be provided training, to ponder over questions. Why and How in place of What and When should be the key-note of the teaching-learning process. Spoon feeding in no way results in constructive and creative thinking. Progressive and scientific methods like Heuristic, analytical and problem solving should be made use of.
3. **Integrated Approach-** The contents of a subject should not be treated as the mere collection of isolated facts. They could be closely integrated into a whole. In the same way, all subjects and activities of the curriculum should reflect unity and cohesion.
4. **Motivational Aspect-** The child's curiosity and interest must be aroused. He should be fully familiarised with the specific aims and purposes of every task that is being undertaken.