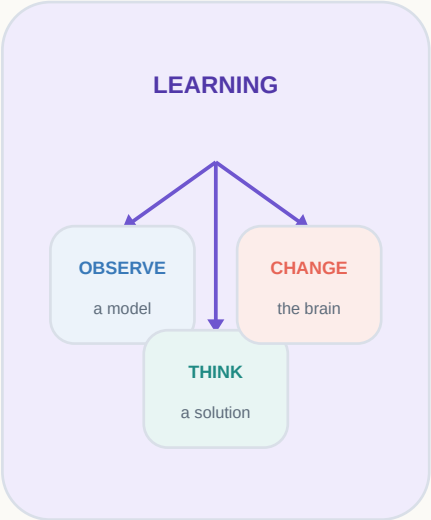
AP PSYCHOLOGY | UNIT 3

TOPIC 3.9

Learning Beyond Direct Conditioning

We can learn by watching others, forming mental representations, and changing neural pathways through experience.



THREE COMPLEMENTARY LENSES

SOCIAL

observe models and their outcomes

COGNITIVE

insight, hidden learning, mental maps

NEUROLOGICAL

experience changes active neural networks

BY THE END, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO...

1. Explain modeling, imitation, and vicarious reinforcement or punishment.
2. Distinguish insight learning, latent learning, and cognitive maps.
3. Use scenario evidence to choose the strongest learning explanation.

BIG IDEA

Learning and performance are not identical. Knowledge may form without direct reward and appear only when attention, ability, or motivation makes performance likely.

1 Social learning: watch, remember, perform

Observation can produce learning before a copied behavior is ever displayed.

THE OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING PATH

1 ATTENTION
notice the model and important actions

→

2 RETENTION
store a mental representation

→

3 REPRODUCTION
have the ability to copy the action

→

4 MOTIVATION
expect a reason to perform it

WHO EXPERIENCES THE CONSEQUENCE?

VICARIOUS

The observer watches another person receive the outcome.

reward observed -> imitation more likely

punishment observed -> performance less likely

DIRECT OPERANT

The learner's own behavior is followed by the outcome.

own praise -> own behavior increases

own penalty -> own behavior decreases

WHY SOME MODELS INFLUENCE US MORE

SIMILARITY

A peer or relatable model may feel more relevant.

STATUS / SKILL

Admired or competent models can attract attention.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Observed rewards or costs shape performance.

CAUTION Low imitation does not prove no learning occurred. The observer may have learned the action but chosen not to perform it.

2 Cognitive and neurological factors

Mental representations explain hidden or sudden learning; experience also changes the nervous system.

INSIGHT VS LATENT LEARNING

INSIGHT LEARNING

A solution appears suddenly after the learner mentally reorganizes the problem.

key clue: sudden new solution

LATENT LEARNING

Knowledge is acquired earlier, stays hidden, and appears later when there is a reason to use it.

key clue: earlier hidden knowledge

COGNITIVE MAP — A mental representation of a place or route. A new detour or rapid improvement after reward appears can reveal a map learned earlier.

WHAT THE BRAIN AND BIOLOGY ADD

PLASTICITY

Practice strengthens or reorganizes neural pathways; experience leaves a physical trace.

MIRROR NEURONS

Some neurons respond during both action and observed action, linking perception and performance.

PREPAREDNESS

Biological tendencies make some associations easier to learn than others.

SCENARIO DECISION ROUTINE

paired stimuli **CLASSICAL**	own consequence **OPERANT**	model / observed outcome **SOCIAL**
sudden solution **INSIGHT**	hidden knowledge later **LATENT**	

Name the process + point to the exact clue + rule out the closest alternative.