

Assimilation theory

General

Assimilation theory is one of the [cognitivist learning theories](#) developed by an American educational psychologist [David Ausbel](#) during 1960s. According to Ausbell, **learner's cognitive structure is central to learning**. Cognitive structure is, in his own words “hierarchically organized in terms of **highly inclusive concepts under which are subsumed less inclusive subconcepts and informational data**”. Learning, according to Ausbell's theory, occurs through **development of new cognitive structures** that will hold newly acquired information.

What is assimilation theory?

Ausbell defines cognitive structure as “individual's organization, stability, and clarity of knowledge in a particular subject matter field at any given time”. The **cognitive structure**, if well organized, **enables faster learning in terms of adding new ideas** and structures to it. If it is unorganized or **badly connected**, the **acquisition of new information will be more difficult**.

Knowledge is in assimilation theory organized hierarchically in a **pyramid shaped** way where more **general ideas** and concepts appear **at the top** of the pyramid and get more and **more specific to the bottom** of it. **New knowledge is assimilated** in this hierarchy by **anchoring to already existing** more general concepts. The closer to the top of the pyramid an idea is, the more general it is and the longer is its life time.

Ausbell distincts between *meaningful* and *rote learning*. **Meaningfull learning** is learning that is **well anchored and integrated** in the cognitive structure. **Rote learning** on the other hand represents knowledge that **remains unrelated and unanchored to existing concepts** and is therefore easily forgotten. Meaningfull learning won't occur unless the new **ideas are presented in a clear way** that enables their **relating with other ideas**, unless the learner already possesses those other ideas he can relate the new ones with and unless he actually makes an attempt to do so. If so, new ideas will remain anchored in his knowledge and if not, learning will remain rote.

As a result of a successful meaningful learning, the **new idea will remain anchored to a so called subsumer**. That of course doesn't mean that the learned idea can't be forgotten: this process, referred to as *obliterative subsumption*, happens as more specific idea becomes less and less distinctive from its subsumer until it is finally said to be forgotten.

Another important and rather controversial part of Ausbell's theory are *organizers*: **abstract ideas on a higher level than the content that will be presented for learning**, purpose of which is to **help replace the missing concepts** necessary for successful acquisition of new information. **Organizers** should be of greater help to students with less organized cognitive structures, since organized cognitive structures already possess quality anchoring ideas. Critics of Ausbell's theory often reflect the fact that he doesn't describe construction of organizers so different researches provide different results of their efficiency.

What is the practical meaning of assimilation theory?

Meaningful learning suggested by Ausubell's assimilation theory presents a valuable method for educational process, in which **rote learning examples** can today be found more frequently. **Foreign language learning** often requires learning by heart numerous exceptions or grammatical structures (like German strong verbs), rote learning which would be easier and longer lasting in case of **connecting it with already learned language concepts**. That link should be suggested by teachers but is often hard to find so it remains ignored.

A successful **instructing process** is **dependent both on learner and teacher**. In order to fulfill meaningful learning requirements **learner has to have crucial higher level concepts** that will serve as anchoring sites (**subsumers**) or has to be provided with appropriate organizers. **The teacher** then first has to **present learning material in an organized and structured manner**, continue with sufficient amount of drill to complete assimilation of material.

Keywords and most important names

- **Association learning theory, cognitive structure, concepts, subconcepts, hierarchy, anchoring, obliterative subsumption, meaningful learning, rote learning, subsumer, organizer**
- [David Ausubel](#)

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[Ausubell's assimilation theory \(graphical overview\)](#)

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