

Connectionism

General

Connectionism, today defined as an approach in the fields of artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology, cognitive science and philosophy of mind which models mental or behavioral phenomena with networks of simple units¹⁾, is not a theory in frames of [behaviorism](#), but it **preceded** and influenced behaviorist school of thought. Connectionism represents psychology's first comprehensive theory of learning²⁾. It was introduced by [Herbert Spencer](#), [William James](#) and his student [Edward Thorndike](#) in the very **beginning of the 20th century** although its roots date way back.

What is connectionism?

Connectionism was based on [principles of associationism](#), mostly claiming that elements or ideas become associated with one another through experience and that complex ideas can be explained through a set of simple rules. But connectionism further expanded these assumptions and introduced ideas like [distributed representations](#) and supervised learning³⁾ and should not be confused with associationism.

Thorndike, the most commonly cited connectionist, summed his ideas on learning into three laws of learning, which should have accounted for both human and animal learning:⁴⁾

- **Law of exercise** (also referred to as *law of use* or *law of frequency*), which states that stimulus-response (S-R) associations are strengthened through **repetition** or weakened through lack of repetition.
- **Law of effect** which states that the consequence or **outcome** of a situation-response event **can strengthen or weaken** the **connection** between situation and response. If an event is followed by a positive reinforcing stimulus, the connection will be strengthened and vice versa.
- **Law of readiness** which claims learning is facilitated by learner's readiness (emotional and motivational) to learn. This potential to learn leads to frustration if not satisfied.

This laws have set the basic principles of behaviorist **stimulus-response learning**, which was according to Thorndike the key form of learning.

Thorndike also performed a number of [experiments on animals](#) concluding that learning is **incremental** and **not insightful**. Established S-R connections or knowledge, according to Thorndike also cause and determine intelligence.

Thorndike later changed some of his views admitting that he was wrong and that negative reinforcement (punishment) does not really lead to any kind of learning. This had great influence on educational process helping to end the practice of punishing the students for incorrect answers.

Another point of Thorndike's interest in the first two decades of 20th century was the [transfer of practice](#), later often referred to as *transfer of learning*. Idea of transfer of practice is to generalize the knowledge or skills and apply them for another problem. Thorndike performed experimental studies showing that transfer of learning will not occur unless learned problem and given problem have many common characteristics. This was the opposite of what school systems mostly suggested at the time:

that some school subjects like Latin language and mathematics improve student's mind in general (*doctrine of formal discipline*).

Guided by the principle that “*whatever exists at all exists in some amount*”⁵⁾ Thorndike has introduced a number of tests of knowledge and intelligence. His CAVD (Completion, Arithmetic, Vocabulary and Directions) test set the major principles and standards of modern intelligence tests.

What is the practical meaning of connectivism?

Practical implications of Thorndike's ideas are suggested through his laws of learning:

- rewards promote learning, but punishments do not lead to learning,
- repetition enhances learning, and
- potential to learn needs to be satisfied.

In his book on learning of mathematics⁶⁾, Thorndike suggested problems children are expected to solve and learn from should be realistic. For example learning to multiply by three should be learned in context of converting feet to yards. He also emphasizes importance of **repetition** and insists on repetitive practice of basic arithmetic operations. Some of the principles in this book even seem inconsistent with his views on learning: here he refers to learning as meaningful and insightful. Well-learned basic skills enable learning of higher-order skills.

Thorndike tried to apply this to learning **mathematics**⁷⁾, **spelling and reading**⁸⁾, measurement of **intelligence**⁹⁾ and adult learning¹⁰⁾ mostly through his laws of learning. He was one of the pioneers of **active learning**, proposing children should learn by themselves rather than being thought.

Criticisms

Thorndike tried to prove that all forms of thoughts and behaviors can be explained through S-R relations with use of repetition and reward, without need for introducing any unobservable internal states, yet this is **today** generally **considered incorrect**. This *learning through response* was later in 20th century replaced by *learning as knowledge construction*. Connectionism was in the first decades of 20th century succeeded by [behaviorism](#), but Thorndike's experiments also inspired [gestalt psychology](#).

Keywords and most important names

- **Connectionism, stimulus-response, S-R, networks of simple units, associationism, supervised learning, law of exercise or use or frequency, law of effect, incremental learning, trial and error**
- [Herbert Spencer](#), [William James](#), [Edward Thorndike](#)

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