

Praise & Punish Your Peers: Operant Conditioning Activity

NCSS Thematic Strand: Individual development & identity

Class periods: 1-50 minute period

Grades 9-12

Background

The following is an activity designed as part of a psychology unit on learning. This activity specifically deals with B.F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning. Instructors may choose to use this activity as a review of the principles of operant conditioning after it has been taught according to their own style, or as an introduction to B.F. Skinner's work on operant conditioning. An entire class period may be dedicated to this activity alone, or the activity may serve as a smaller part of an operant conditioning lesson. Described below is the activity, including materials, objectives, procedures, assessment of outcomes, and additional considerations instructors may find useful. The nature of the activity is flexible to changes based on class size, makeup, instructor preferences, or teaching styles.

Objectives

Students will:

- ❖ Actively engage in a memorable activity
- ❖ Use existing knowledge of operant conditioning to inform their behavior in the activity, or apply their experience from the activity to their future learning
- ❖ Discuss theoretical ideas behind the effects of reinforcement and punishment
- ❖ Create and discuss examples of how the principles of operant conditioning might apply to the real world

Procedures

Procedure 1

Select two student volunteers and instruct them to exit the classroom.

Procedure 2

Describe the activity to the class and inform them of their role. While the volunteers are in the hallway, the instructor and students will decide on a task for the volunteers to complete, such as picking up a particular object. Volunteers will enter the room one at a time and the instructor and students will work together to encourage the volunteer to complete the agreed upon task. In order to do this, they will use operant conditioning, specifically non-verbal rewards and punishments that present as applause or booing.

Procedure 3

Invite the first volunteer to enter the room. When they do, the class will use positive reinforcement in order to get them to perform the chosen task. Do not give the volunteer any instruction. Without speaking, the class will reinforce desired behavior with applause. Every time the volunteer gets closer to performing the desired task, the class will clap. If they move closer to the location of the task, the class will clap again. If they move away from performing the task or remain in one place too long, the entire class will cease to applaud and sit in silence.

Procedure 4

Once the volunteer has performed the agreed upon task, explain to them the nature of the activity. Then, Take a moment to explain to the class the different approach you will use when the second volunteer enters the room. For this volunteer, the class will use positive punishment to encourage them to perform the desired task. Any time the volunteer does something other than move closer to the desired task, the class will boo. Again, no verbal feedback will be given.

Procedure 5

Invite the second volunteer to enter the classroom. As with the first volunteer, give them no verbal instructions. Use positive punishment in the form of booing to encourage the desired behavior.

Procedure 6

Engage the class in a discussion of the activity. Which form of reinforcement was the most effective? What were some of the reactions the volunteers had? Ask the volunteers how this activity made them feel. Attempt to create a conversation about the activity and about the nature of operant conditioning. How do individuals in the real world employ operant conditioning? How could instructors and students use operant conditioning in the classroom? This discussion may be flexible and is intended to promote further thinking for students.

Procedure 7

Conclude the lesson by asking students to spend the evening thinking about an example of operant conditioning in their home. Do they train their pets? Have their parents trained them in some way, through allowances or grounding? Have they, in return, trained their parents? Instructors may choose to assign students to bring a written response to class the following day.

Assessment of Outcomes

Students will demonstrate knowledge of operant conditioning through continuing exposure throughout the unit, including formative and summative assessment.

Students will demonstrate what they learned during the activity through discussion.

Additional considerations

- ❖ When choosing student volunteers, be sure to select a student you feel would not be too uncomfortable with pressure from the class.

- ❖ As there will be two volunteers who will participate in the activity at one time and may spend a significant time in the hallway, the instructor may want to advise volunteers to bring reading or homework into the hall.
- ❖ When choosing a task, try to pick something that will require them to interact with a classroom object that is not near where they sit.
- ❖ The timeframe for this activity may vary widely. The behavior of the student volunteers may be unpredictable.