

Elaboration Theory (C. Reigeluth)

Overview:

According to elaboration theory, instruction should be organized in increasing order of complexity for optimal learning. For example, when teaching a procedural task, the simplest version of the task is presented first; subsequent lessons present additional versions until the full range of tasks are taught. In each lesson, the learner should be reminded of all versions taught so far (summary/synthesis). A key idea of elaboration theory is that the learner needs to develop a meaningful context into which subsequent ideas and skills can be assimilated.

Elaboration theory proposes seven major strategy components: (1) an elaborative sequence, (2) learning prerequisite sequences, (3) summary, (4) synthesis, (5) analogies, (6) cognitive strategies, and (7) learner control. The first component is the most critical as far as elaboration theory is concerned. The elaborative sequence is defined as a simple to complex sequence in which the first lesson epitomizes (rather than summarize or abstract) the ideas and skills that follow. Epitomizing should be done on the basis of a single type of content (concepts, procedures, principles), although two or more types may be elaborated simultaneously, and should involve the learning of just a few fundamental or representative ideas or skills at the application level.

It is claimed that the elaboration approach results in the formation of more stable cognitive structures and therefore better retention and transfer, increased learner motivation through the creation of meaningful learning contexts, and the provision of information about the content that allows informed learner control. Elaboration theory is an extension of the work of [Ausubel](#) (advance organizers) and [Bruner](#) (spiral curriculum).

Scope/Application:

Elaboration theory applies to the design of instruction for the cognitive domain. The theoretical framework has been applied to a number of settings in higher education and training (English & Reigeluth, 1996; Reigeluth, 1992). Hoffman (1997) considers the relationship between elaboration theory and hypermedia.

Example:

Reigeluth (1983) provides the following summary of a theoretical epitome for an introductory course in economics:

1. Organizing content (principles)- the law of supply and demand
 - a) An increase in price causes an increase in the quantity supplied and a decrease in the quantity demanded.

b) A decrease in price causes a decrease in the quantity supplied and an increase in the quantity demanded.

2. Supporting content - concepts of price, supply, demand, increase, decrease

Practically all principles of economics can be viewed as elaborations of the law of supply and demand including monopoly, regulation, price fixing, planned economies.

Principles:

1. Instruction will be more effective if it follows an elaboration strategy, i.e., the use of epitomes containing motivators, analogies, summaries, and syntheses.

2. There are four types of relationships important in the design of instruction: conceptual, procedural, theoretical and learning pre-requisites.

References:

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