

**Educational Practices and Elements of Motivation in B. F. Skinner's
*Walden Two***

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Abstract: Throughout time, literary works have introduced new perspectives and enabled people to learn important lessons about the world around them. What could serve this purpose better than utopia genre? One of the most recognized utopias is B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. Influenced by behaviorism, Skinner did not only produce a literary work in an attempt to formulate a happy society but he also affected educational theories and practices of his time. Beyond a doubt, education system that is depicted in *Walden Two* has a number of peculiar aspects including absence of formal schooling and grades, students' being able to study any subject that is intriguing for them, and learners' being eager and energetic towards learning all the time. However, in the real life, teachers witness that their students either start courses amotivated or they gradually lose their motivation. There has been quite a lot of significant research on motivation revealing beneficial findings which could guide teachers to promote motivation. It is primarily intended in this study to analyze the education and motivation of learners in *Walden Two* and compare the findings with what motivates learners in the current EFL classes. The other aim of this study is to find out if and how behavioristic theories are reflected in *Walden Two*. Therefore, the novel *Walden Two* and relevant studies on *Walden Two*, behaviorism and motivation have been referred to in this study. It has been found out that students in *Walden Two* are intrinsically motivated towards learning due to the fact that they study a subject for the sake of learning it and fun involved in it, they are also depicted as autonomous learners, which are key aspects of intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, making a generalization on whether learners in current classes are intrinsically motivated or not would be irrational because it is possible to come across varied results. While students in *Walden Two* resemble to the current students who are intrinsically motivated, they differ from those who are, for instance, extrinsically motivated. It has also been argued that features of behaviorism are reflected in the novel.

Key Words: Education, motivation, behaviorism

1.Introduction

Walden Two was written by B. F. Skinner in 1948. It was a short time after the Second World War, and people experienced certain problems. Skinner was not content with this situation and he intended to suggest solutions via use of behavioral engineering. As a matter of fact, Skinner admitted that he wrote *Walden Two* out of personal reasons in the preface of the second edition of the novel. "The dissatisfactions which led me write *Walden Two* were personal" (Skinner, 1976b, p. v). He also asserted that "the major problems facing the world today can be solved only if we improve our understanding of human behavior" (Skinner, 1976a, p. 8).

In 1994 Smith pointed out the little interest in the novel. However, *Walden Two* started selling more and caused controversy over the next years. While some

critics found the novel immoral due to the application of behavioral engineering, some others argued that “Skinner clearly attempted to depict an achievable good life” (Altus & Morris, 2004, p. 269). Hence, it is possible to suggest that in *Walden Two* the end justifies the means.

Walden Two arose interest among a number of researchers who analyzed the novel and who focused on different features of it. The main aim of this study is to analyze the education system that was depicted in *Walden Two* and motivation that learners have both in *Walden Two* and in current classes. Moreover, the findings are compared in order to conclude whether these learners are different or not. Another goal of this study is to research what behaviorism is, what Skinner’s stance on behaviorism was, and if behaviorism was reflected in *Walden Two*. Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

1. The education system in *Walden Two* encourages learner cooperation and autonomy, so learners are intrinsically motivated.
2. The education system in *Walden Two* mirrors behavioristic theories of especially Skinner in education.
3. Students in current EFL classrooms are different from the students in *Walden Two* because
 - a. they are mostly extrinsically motivated,
 - b. they are mostly competitive.

The scope of this study is limited to the education system and motivation factor described in *Walden Two*. In terms of motivation, the studies that have already been conducted are used as source of information.

2.Literature Review

Education forms an important part of life in *Walden Two*. As there is no formal schooling, education is integrated into the lives of members. Children gradually and smoothly move from nurseries to ‘schools’. Skinner (1976b, p. 107) explained this procedure as “the children passed smoothly from one age group to another, following a natural process of growth and avoiding the abrupt changes of the home-and-school system.”

It is known that a lot of credit is given to experimentation in *Walden Two*, so education is also affected by this. According to McEachern (1997, p. 72), children’s being active in work-life is the result of experiential learning. Likewise, Frazier, one of the main characters and the founder of *Walden Two* community, declares that “a constantly experimental attitude toward everything – that’s all we need” (Skinner, 1976b, p. 25). In such a context, it is quite vital to base the education system on solid grounds, which is also what Skinner defended. Kumar (1987, p. 373) stated that according to Skinner, “education of children and the organization of work should be a matter of conscious design.”

The aspects peculiar to the education system in *Walden Two* include the fact that learners do not have to follow a predetermined syllabus. They are able to choose the subjects that they will study. Besides non-obligatory courses, students are also able to learn the subject at their own pace. Skinner (1973, p. 14). believed that “they

should study because they want to, because they like to, because they are interested in what they are doing.” That is why students in *Walden Two* are depicted as curious and autonomous learners.

Another feature that is worth mentioning is the absence of grades. Learners are not graded for the lessons that they study. Frazier points out “we don’t need grades. Everyone knows that talents and abilities don’t develop at the same rate in different children” (Skinner, 1976b, p. 109). In a study criticizing *Walden Two*, it is postulated that “freed from the requirements to earn grades, or to compete, children are allowed to choose their areas of interest more or less by themselves, and to seek instructions only when they feel the need for it” (Kumar, 1987, p. 360). This quotation also provides clues on the role of teachers, which is to facilitate learning by introducing analytical thinking and methods of learning. Under such circumstances, what motivates learners to study a subject resembles to a newborn’s desire to learn the world around it. In other words, learners are naturally willing to gain knowledge on the subjects they find interesting.

Skinner was also opposed to the use of punishment. In one of his most significant works, *The Technology of Teaching*, Skinner (1968, pp. 15-16) argued that:

The child at his desk, filling in his workbook, is behaving primarily to escape from the threat of a series of minor aversive events – the teacher’s displeasure, the criticism or ridicule of his classmates, an ignominious showing in a competition, low marks, a trip to the office “to be talked to” by the principal, or a word to the parent who may still resort to the birch rod. In this welter of aversive consequences, getting the right answer in itself is an insignificant event.

Behaviorists viewed habits as the result of stimulus, response and reinforcement procedure. People are

... exposed to numerous stimuli in their environment. The response they give to such stimuli will be reinforced if successful, that is, if some desired outcome is obtained. Through repeated reinforcement, a certain stimulus will elicit the same response time and again, which will then become a habit (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 30).

Although traditional behaviorists postulated that stimulus determines the response, according to Skinner, the likelihood of occurrence of a response is controlled by reinforcement. “The term reinforcer is used to describe the consequential event that increases the frequency of a given response” (Lee & Belfiore, 1997, p. 207). Reinforcement is divided into two categories including positive and negative reinforcement. For instance, a teacher’s giving a sticker for the correct response is believed to be a positive reinforcement whereas it is considered as negative reinforcement when a teacher tells the students that they do not have to do their homework because they have given the correct response. Another technique of forming habits is punishment which is used as deterrent in the case of unwanted behavior. The reasons why Skinner objected to the use of punishment were explained by DeBell and Harless (1992, p. 70) as “(a) It did not teach the person how to behave

well, (b) it did not necessarily eliminate the behavior, and (c) the punishment itself may result in behavior worse than that being punished.”

Manipulation of the environment is another important aspect of behaviorism. "The student spends a great part of his day doing things he does not want to do" (Skinner, 1968, p. 96). Hence, it is believed that an appealing environment should be created in order to enhance learning and increase students' motivation to learn.

Motivation has a vital role in learning since it affects learners to initiate and sustain learning. In general, it is

... dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 9).

The multi-dimensional nature of motivation required elaborate and varied categorization of motivation. As a result, a number of scholars have researched motivation focusing on different aspects and formulated new categories. Douglas Brown, Deci, and Ryan, for instance, focused on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Deci, et al. (1991, p. 328) asserted that “intrinsically motivated behaviors are engaged in for their own sake – for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from the performance.” However, if learners perform an action to gain some extrinsic rewards or to avoid punishment, they are extrinsically motivated (Dörnyei, 1994, p. 275). It is believed that learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation are interrelated. In other words, intrinsic motivation promotes autonomy and autonomous learners tend to be intrinsically motivated.

In our competitive world, extrinsic motives seem more common and even schools are reckoned to encourage extrinsic motivation. Douglas Brown was one of the scholars who criticized this situation so he claimed that the significance of intrinsic motivation should be highlighted because they are stronger and more effective in learning and students should learn a language for the sake of exploration and gaining knowledge (Brown, 1994, p. 39).

Although some researchers argued that intrinsic motivation is more effective, the dynamic nature of motivation has made it almost impossible to make generalizations. It is possible to find a lot of research on motivation that is conducted in different parts of the world. While some of the findings coincide, some others contradict severely. For instance, as a result of their research, Gardner and his associates found out that most of their subjects had favorable attitudes towards the community whose language they were learning, so they benefited more from integrative motives. It has also been revealed that “integratively oriented students were more successful at learning than were instrumentally oriented students” (Gardner & Tremblay, 1994, p. 361).

Vallerand and Bissonnette (1992), on the other hand, posited that intrinsic motivation contributes to sustain learning. The participants who were intrinsically motivated continued their courses longer.

In their research which was held in the University of Rochester, Benware and Deci (1984) asked a group of their subjects to study a subject in order to teach it to a peer, the other group was asked to study the same subject to be tested about it. The first group had an active orientation whereas the latter had a passive orientation towards learning. In the end, they found out that the group with the active orientation was more intrinsically motivated. As a consequence, it is obvious that the results of motivation research severely differ depending on the setting and subjects.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Behaviorists emphasized the importance of the environment on forming habits. Skinner, especially, argued that the environment should be manipulated in order to shape individuals' behaviors. In *Walden Two* the environment is manipulated in order to teach not only subjects but emotions, as well. Taking the famous lollipop experiment into account, it can be argued that certain emotions are generated among the members. In this experiment, three or four-year-old children are given lollipops which are covered with powdered sugar, and they are asked not to eat them unless it is time. These children are sometimes distracted by games and sometimes encouraged to find out how they feel about not eating the lollipops. As a result, it is believed that children develop tolerance towards frustration.

Another example of manipulation of the environment is the transition between home and school. Each baby is taken care of in the nurseries. As they grow older, they are paired with other children who are a few years older than they are. Through this procedure, children are able to imitate their elders and adapt themselves to new settings easily. Frazier explains "the children passed smoothly from one age group to another, following a natural process of growth and avoiding the abrupt changes of the home-and-school system" (Skinner, 1976b, p. 107). Furthermore, subjects are learnt in relevant places. Anatomy, for example, is learnt in the slaughterhouse. By controlling the environment where education takes place, it is made certain that learners understand the usefulness of the subject and its relevance to their lives. It can also be suggested that courses are reinforcing themselves due to the controlled environment.

Behavioral engineering is referred to throughout the novel. While forming behavior, Skinner suggested the use of positive reinforcement. It is known that Skinner was opposed to the use of punishment, so it is also reflected in *Walden Two* as the following quotation indicates:

"... we can control his behavior. When he behaves as we want him to behave, we simply create a situation he likes, or remove one he doesn't like. As a result, the probability that he will behave that way again goes up, which is what we want. Technically, it's called 'positive reinforcement'. ... What is emerging at this critical stage in the evolution of society is a behavioral and cultural technology based on positive reinforcement alone. We are gradually discovering – at an untold cost in human suffering – that in the long run punishment doesn't reduce the probability that an act will occur. ... It's *temporarily* effective, that's the worst of it. ... We 'instinctively' punish a person who doesn't behave as

we like – we spank him if he’s a child or strike him if he’s a man. ... But in the long run the man we strike is no less likely to repeat his act” (Skinner, 1976, pp. 244- 245).

Skinner claimed that learners should study a subject in accordance with their own developmental process. Frazier states “everyone knows that talents and abilities don’t develop at the same rate in different children. ... Here the child advances as rapidly as he likes in any field” (Skinner, 1976b, p. 109). This idea influenced Skinner while developing the teaching machines which provide the tasks that the students are ready for. Teaching machines were also thought to be rather useful in reinforcing behavior. Skinner relied more on machine than human beings in reinforcing behavior since he argued that habit formation is a complicated process and people should receive specific training to be able to reinforce behavior. Likewise, in *Walden Two*, teachers are not totally responsible for students’ forming correct habits or learning the subjects; instead they are facilitators or guides who teach learning and thinking skills to the children. In effect, it can easily be argued that behavioral theories are reflected in the novel, and Skinner’s views were clearly articulated.

In terms of motivation, members of *Walden Two* are depicted as naturally motivated towards learning like babies. “No one asks how to motivate a baby. A baby naturally explores everything it can get at, ... Education should be life itself. We don’t need to create motives” (Skinner, 1976b, p. 114). Similarly, Deci, et al. (1991, p. 325) claimed that “ideal school systems are ones that succeed in promoting in students a sense of volitional involvement in the educational enterprise.” Whether ideal in general or not, it is for sure that learners in *Walden Two* are eager for learning. Students are shown as curious, autonomous, hence successful learners.

Courses are not obligatory in *Walden Two*, nor are learners graded for the subjects they study. Members choose the subjects that are interesting to study for them and they are able to learn these subjects at their own pace. They do not have to follow a preplanned syllabus. In other words, members of *Walden Two* learn subjects for the sake of gaining knowledge as long as they would like. Likewise, intrinsically motivated behaviors were defined as “... engaged in for their own sake – for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from their performance” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 328). Under such circumstances, it can be safely argued that intrinsic reasons contribute to the motivation of students in *Walden Two*.

According to Kumar (1987, p. 360), what motivates learners is the natural curiosity as competition is avoided in *Walden Two*. Self-triumph or competition is strictly avoided in every aspect of life in *Walden Two* and members are encouraged to cooperate. As research revealed, competition is “detrimental to intrinsic motivation” (Dörnyei, 1994, p. 278). In terms of education, whether learners are cooperative is not clear enough. However, it may be assumed that cooperation in education contradicts with some ideas that Skinner proposed. For instance, he believed that students should learn a subject on their own rate. In cooperative classrooms, learners are supposed to study together towards a common end, which means they have to adapt to each other’s pace. Therefore, it can be argued that students in *Walden Two* are not competitive whereas it is not possible to anticipate them as cooperative learners.

4. Conclusion

In the light of aforementioned information and discussion, the first hypothesis of this study has been validated with an exception. Students in *Walden Two* are intrinsically motivated due to the fact that they learn a subject out of natural curiosity and for the pleasure involved, and they are also autonomous learners because they are responsible for what to learn and how fast to advance. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume them as cooperative learners because of the reason discussed above.

The second hypothesis has been proven to be correct since behavioral engineering is used, the environment is controlled to form habits and positive reinforcement, rather than punishment is used. They also rely on imitation to form habits in *Walden Two*.

Last but not the least, the third hypothesis could partly be validated. Students in *Walden Two* and students in current classes differ in that in *Walden Two*, they are able to choose the subjects to study and progress on their own pace, they are not grade-oriented, and competition is never promoted. On the other hand, making a generalization on current students' being mostly extrinsically motivated or competitive would be irrational. The vast scope of motivation research has indicated that the results show dramatic change depending on the context and sample. While some students benefit more from competitive context (Marashi & Padideh, 2013), others find cooperative settings more beneficial (Slavin, 1996). Similarly, it is possible to encounter extrinsically motivated learners (Ozkut, 1991; Senocak, 2009) or intrinsically motivated ones (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). All in all, a lot of motivation researchers (Benware & Deci, 1984; Brown, 1994; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 2001) agree that intrinsic reasons to learn should be facilitated in order to sustain learning and increase the level of success.

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