
at the same time he accommodates these structures (by differentiating them) to the unforeseen aspects of the reality which he encounters.

The process of coming to know things is not, in Piaget's words, 'having a static mental copy of the object'. We become knowledgeable by 'effecting transformations' on what we are trying to understand and, by so doing, 'reaching some understanding of the mechanisms of these transformations'.

What have we learnt about learning?

Consider this story of a young child learning about snakes and lizards.



Stop and think

1. Think about how Piaget would explain this child's learning.
2. Make some notes for yourself, and then compare your notes with the comment:

Comment

We think Piaget would explain the child's thinking process in the following way:

- As the child sees the snake she focuses on what is familiar, and *assimilates* her perception of the snake into her 'schema' of a lizard (pictures 1 and 2).
- But then she notices the differences between what she knows about lizards and the actual snake in the picture. By noticing the differences, she begins to feel unsure and experiences a state of *disequilibrium* (picture 3).
- With the help of feedback from the environment – maybe a teacher, but based initially on her action of looking at the snake and noticing the absence of legs – she develops a new understanding (a new schema) of what a snake is (picture 4).
- This enables her to *accommodate* the differences.

Without assimilating (using her previous knowledge to make sense of what she sees), the child would be unable to understand the world. However, without accommodating the new and different information that she encounters, her knowledge would remain static and unchanging. Both aspects of her thinking enable her to achieve new and more complex states of mental equilibrium.

Piaget's theory offers a formal explanation of an answer to the question, "How does the unknown become known?" We do so through a process of equilibration. This involves:

- Connecting new information to what we already know (assimilation);
- Noticing, through our action (which includes thinking about what we are doing or looking at), that our understanding doesn't quite explain things (disequilibrium/conflict);
- Filling in missing gaps in our knowledge by identifying other facts that will help us interpret new information; and
- Recognising novel and contradictory aspects of new knowledge that our previous understandings cannot account for, and accommodating these into our new and more advanced understanding.

References

Piaget, J. 1968. A theory of development. In *The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. New York, McMillan.

