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Book Review: Learning: A Very Short Introduction

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Book Title: Learning: A Very Short Introduction
Book authors/editors: Mark Haselgrove
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This is the latest in OUP's extensive *Very Short Introduction* series which now runs to almost 500 volumes. In it, Haselgrove provides a brief review of more than a century's research on learning covering the range of topics that are included in many introductory courses on the subject. Surprisingly, given the book's length, he manages to do so in a way that is genuinely informative. Throughout the book, he uses carefully chosen laboratory experiments, illustrative thought experiments, and simple figures to guide the reader through the intricacies of contemporary associative learning.

In the opening chapter ('What is learning?'), Haselgrove introduces the reader to different forms of learning (habituation, classical conditioning, and instrumental conditioning). He simply and clearly defines some common terminology and key concepts through concise descriptions of classic experiments. The next two chapters ('What is learned during learning?' and 'The surprising thing about learning') deal with a couple of the more persistent debates in associative learning: what sort of associations are formed during learning, and nature of associative learning mechanisms. Some of the problems discussed in these chapters are rather complicated and ones which undergraduate students often find challenging. Haselgrove does a fine job in explaining the logic behind intricate experimental designs and builds up to complex issues one simple step at a time.

Whereas the examples of learning given in the first three chapters are largely limited to situations involving discrete cues, such as the relationship between a tone and food, subsequent chapters examine the application of associative learning theory to other domains. Chapter 4 deals with timing and spatial learning. In chapter 5 some clinical applications of learning theory are explored. Social learning is covered in chapter 6. In the first and third of these chapters, Haselgrove summarizes some of the criticisms of associative learning theory and evaluates alternative learning systems. This theme is explored in more detail in the book's final chapter in which the evidence for dual associative and propositional learning systems is discussed.

If I had to make one criticism of this book, it would be that its focus is somewhat limited. It deals largely with those aspects of learning which are most often linked with associative learning. I would have liked to see some discussion of how these simple principles have permeated other areas of psychology such as cognition, social interaction, and language acquisition. If I was forced to make a second criticism, it would be the lack of proper referencing and a complete reference list. This is certainly a feature of the series style, but it does limit the books usefulness for teaching. We are told who conducted each experiment, but dates are rarely given, and at most only a single reference is provided for each chapter.

The *Very Short Introduction* books are intended to be accessible to a reader with no background knowledge of the subject, while still being informative. This volume meets these criteria and, stretching to only 114 pages, it is small and thin enough to slip into a back pocket and be carried anywhere – always on hand to relieve a moment's boredom. It is not a textbook and has neither the depth not breadth of coverage to allow it to be adopted as the central text in a learning course. It should, however, serve as a useful primer and revision aid to undergraduate students anyone who has not studies learning in great detail. At only £7.99 you can afford to order a copy for yourself and a few for the library.