What is Choice Theory?

Choice Theory is a psychological model that explains why people behave as they do and how we can build positive relationships with the people who are important to us. As such, it is of great value to educators and others who seek to engage young people in meaningful work.

Choice Theory and the related counseling technique known as “Reality Therapy” represent the life’s work of the late psychiatrist and author William Glasser.

Choice Theory rests on the belief that all human behavior is “chosen” and that we choose our behaviors in an effort to satisfy five “basic needs” that are common to all humanity:

- Safety & Survival
- Love & Belonging
- Power
- Freedom
- Fun

Glasser teaches that “the only person whose behavior I can control is me”. While one person may attempt to compel another do something through force or threat, all they can actually do is provide the other person with “information”. It is always up to the other person to decide how to respond. Thus Choice Theory is an “internal control” psychology, in contrast to “external control” models that hold that human behavior is determined by outside forces.

All psychological problems, says Glasser, are problems related to a current relationship. These problems result from our attempts to control one another’s behavior through what he calls the “Seven Deadly Habits”: 
• Criticizing
• Blaming
• Complaining
• Nagging
• Threatening
• Punishing
• Bribing (rewarding to control)

If we want to build positive relationships with the people who are important to us, we need to stop trying to force them to do what we want them to do and instead practice the “Seven Caring Habits”:

• Supporting
• Encouraging
• Listening
• Accepting
• Trusting
• Respecting
• Negotiating Differences

By doing so, we encourage the other person to include us in what Glasser calls their “Quality World” — a collection of the people, places, things and beliefs that people associate with the satisfaction of their basic needs. This is the basis for a strong personal relationship and the positive influence that comes with it.

Choice Theory is used in a counseling setting through an approach known as Reality Therapy. This approach centers on four fundamental questions:
• What do you want?
• What are you doing to get what you want?
• How is it working?
• If you’d like to be happier and more successful, are you prepared to change your behavior in order to get what you want?

Reality Therapy is a non-coercive approach to counseling or mentoring that encourages the individuals to define their own goals and then to accept responsibility for pursuing them. The focus is on the present and what can be done now – rather than on past problems.

Dr. Glasser explains Choice Theory and its application to a variety of human circumstances in several books, including:

• Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom
• The Quality School: Managing Students without Coercion
• For Parents & Teenagers: Dissolving the Barrier Between You and Your Teen
• Getting Together and Staying Together: Solving the Mystery of Marriage
• Counseling with Choice Theory: The New Reality Therapy
• Every Student Can Succeed: How to Reach and Teach Every Student in Your School
• Warning: Psychiatry Can Be Hazardous to your Mental Health
• Positive Addiction
• Take Charge of Your Life: How to Get What You Need With Choice Theory

For more information on Choice Theory, its implications for school improvement and the work of the William Glasser Institute, see www.wglasser.com or contact Stephen Tracy at stephentracy7@gmail.com.