Social Constructivism

From Emerging Perspectives on Learning, Teaching and Technology

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Review of Social Constructivism

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Click Here to Play Lecture (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmUO8RBlYJQ) to play a narrated PowerPoint presentation that summarizes the content in this page. If you would like to see a transcript of the audio, click here to download script as a word document. (http://www.coe.uga.edu/epltt/impaticas/social_constructivism_script.doc) This summary was created by Buffalo Shuford, Sheri Howard and Daniele Facundo (2006).

Social Constructivism Vignette

Vignette By Roy Jackson, Jessica Karp, Ellen Patrick, Amanda Thrower (2006)

Mrs. Smith is a high school English teacher who has struggled for years when it came to teaching Shakespeare to her students. In the past, students became bored immediately with reading any of the plays aloud in class and consistently complained that the language was too difficult to understand. Desperate for any degree of engagement, Mrs. Smith decided to take a social constructivist approach to Shakespeare's Hamlet with her students.

Instead of reading the play aloud in class, allowing the students to remain passive and uninvolved with the text, Mrs. Smith divided the class into five cooperative groups and assigned each group one act of the play. She then explained that each group was to turn their assigned act into a modern-day puppet show. The groups were to read, interpret, and translate their act into modern language (they were even encouraged to use common slang when appropriate.) They were also required to create puppets to represent the characters and ultimately perform their act for the rest of the class. Each group worked together with Mrs. Smith's guidance to create a shared understanding of their assigned act and use that shared understanding as a basis for their construction of the modern-day puppet show. In the end, they produced a product that was created through a social learning process.

The class was divided into groups of four. Because each group was comprised of various learners with diverse interests and backgrounds, each member had something unique to offer in their group's construction of the puppet show. One particular group was assigned Act I of Hamlet. They included Henry, who moved from Louisiana last year after Hurricane Katrina, Suzanne who loves hip-hop music, Nia, who loves to write, and Juan who enjoys comic books and likes to draw. All four were excited about different aspects of the project but would have been very uncomfortable trying to understand their assigned act of the play and turn it in to a modern puppet show on their own.

At the first meeting, the group decided it was best to start by reading and discussing Act I together; Nia offered her writing skills to the task of making notes about the progression of the plot and the characters' actions as the group interacted and constructed meaning out of what they read. Once they felt as though they had a firm understanding of Act I, they shared their findings and notes with Mrs. Smith who, in turn, provided feedback.

At the next meeting, they moved on to the more creative aspects of the project, where everyone was able to contribute their own personal skills and talents. The group decided to present their act in a Cajun dialect. Growing up in New Orleans, Henry was very familiar with the Cajun dialect and culture, so he and Nia joined forces in writing a script for the puppet show. For background music, they decided hip-hop would fit well with the Cajun influence; Suzanne agreed to work on finding hip-hop selections that would work well with the story. Juan gladly volunteered to take on the creation of the puppets. He wanted to use what he had learned about the characters through the group's previous interactions and create modern interpretations with a comic book influence.

By the time the product was constructed, each group member's mark was on the final outcome, so each had a sense of ownership. The intersubjectivity the students experienced through this group project allowed them to extend their understanding of Shakespeare's Hamlet. In addition to completing the part each agreed to do, the students had to communicate, share and negotiate to create the final product. The students brought their diverse interests and collaborated to create their finished product. Mrs. Smith's use of the social constructivist approach to this lesson proved successful as the students came to a clear and engaged understanding of Hamlet, her ultimate goal.

What is Social Constructivism?

Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). This perspective is closely associated with many contemporary theories, most notably the developmental theories of Vygotsky and Bruner, and Bandura's social cognitive theory (Shunk, 2000).

Assumptions of Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. To understand and apply models of instruction that are rooted in the perspectives of social constructivists, it is important to know the premises that underlie them.

Reality: Social constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000). For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: it does not exist prior to its social invention.

Knowledge: To social constructivists, knowledge is also a human product, and is socially and culturally constructed (Ernest, 1999; Gredler, 1997; Prat & Floden, 1994). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

Learning: Social constructivists view learning as a social process. It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces (McMahon, 1997). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

Intersubjectivity of Social Meanings

Intersubjectivity is a shared understanding among individuals whose interaction is based on common interests and assumptions that form the ground for their communication (Rogoff, 1990). Communications and interactions entail socially agreed-upon ideas of the world and the social patterns and rules of language use (Ernest, 1999). Construction of social meanings, therefore, involves intersubjectivity among individuals. Social meanings and knowledge are shaped and evolve through negotiation within the communicating groups (Gredler, 1997; Prawat & Floden, 1994). Any personal meanings shaped through these experiences are affected by the intersubjectivity of the community to which the people belong.

Intersubjectivity not only provides the grounds for communication but also supports people to extend their understanding of new information and activities among the group members (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1987). Knowledge is derived from interactions between people and their environments and resides within cultures (Shunk, 2000; McMahon, 1997). The construction of knowledge is also influenced by the intersubjectivity formed by cultural and historical factors of the community (Gredler, 1997; Prawat & Floden, 1994). When the members of the community are aware of their intersubjective meanings, it is easier for them to understand new information and activities that arise in the community.

Caption: Two people, interacting through communication, help to extend each other's understanding of what makes a rainbow. The flash graphic above illustrating the intersubjectivity of social meanings was created by Nina Augustin and Wan-Ting Huang (2002).

Social Context for Learning

Some social constructivists discuss two aspects of social context that largely affect the nature and extent of the learning (Gredler, 1997; Wertch, 1991):

Historical developments inherited by the learner as a member of a particular culture. Symbol systems, such as language, logic, and mathematical systems, are learned throughout the learner's life. These symbol systems dictate how and what is learned.

The nature of the learner's social interaction with knowledgeable members of the society is important. Without the social interaction with more knowledgeable others, it is impossible to acquire social meaning of important symbol systems and learn how to use them. Young children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with adults.

General Perspectives of Social Constructivism on Learning

Social constructivists see as crucial both the context in which learning occurs and the social contexts that learners bring to their learning environment. There are four general perspectives that inform how we could facilitate the learning within a framework of social constructivism (Gredler, 1997):

Cognitive tools perspective: Cognitive tools perspective focuses on the learning of cognitive skills and strategies. Students engage in those social learning activities that involve hands-on project-based methods and utilization of discipline-based cognitive tools (Gredler, 1997; Prawat & Folden, 1994). Together they produce a product and, as a group, impose meaning on it through the social learning process.

Idea-based social constructivism: Idea-based social constructivism sets education's priority on important concepts in the various disciplines (e.g. part-whole relations in mathematics, photosynthesis in science, and point of view in literature, Gredler, 1997, p.59; Prawat, 1995; Prawat & Folden, 1994). These "big ideas"

expand learner vision and become important foundations for learners' thinking and on construction of social meaning (Gredler, 1997).

Pragmatic or emergent approach: Social constructivists with this perspective assert that the implementation of social constructivism in class should be emergent as the need arises (Gredler, 1997). Its proponents hold that knowledge, meaning, and understanding of the world can be addressed in the classroom from both the view of individual learner and the collective view of the entire class (Cobb, 1995; Gredler, 1997).

Transactional or situated cognitive perspectives: This perspective focuses on the relationship between the people and their environment. Humans are a part of the constructed environment (including social relationships); the environment is in turn one of the characteristics that constitutes the individual (Bredo, 1994; Gredler, 1997). When a mind operates, its owner is interacting with the environment. Therefore, if the environment and social relationships among group members change, the tasks of each individual also change (Bredo, 1994; Gredler, 1997). Learning thus should not take place in isolation from the environment.

Social Constructivism and Instructional Models

Instructional models based on the social constructivist perspective stress the need for collaboration among learners and with practitioners in the society (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McMahon, 1997). Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that a society's practical knowledge is situated in relations among practitioners, their practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice. For this reason, learning should involve such knowledge and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gredler, 1997). Social constructivist approaches can include reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, webquests, anchored instruction and other methods that involve learning with others (Shunk, 2000).

Sorting Out Variations on the Terms "Constructionism" and Constructivism"

Table by Beth Clark, Jessie Griffin, and Dana Turner (Fall, 2007)
Introductory comments by Gregory Clinton

Several of the important perspectives about learning discussed in this eBook are really in essence *epistemologies* – that is, sets of beliefs about the nature of knowledge. What we believe about knowledge determines a great deal of what we believe about learning; and thus even the loftiest philosophical perspectives can have practical implications for how we approach teaching and learning.

One difficulty is that often the same or similar terms are used in different ways by different scholars. The table below presents several variants of the terms "constructivism" and "constructionism." Four of these are essentially philosophical perspectives about how we as learners come to know what we know, i.e., epistemologies; and one (Papert's Constructionism) is a theory of learning tied to a particular instructional strategy. However, *all* of the terms presented below relate to the belief that learning is "constructed" by learners (individually or socially) rather than simply being received from an instructor or other source.

Another potential difficulty is that the differences between the perspectives listed below can be very subtle. Social constructionism and social constructivism, for example, appear to be two different ways to talk about the same thing. However, constructivism generally allows the possibility that people can derive meaning from objects in the environment as well as from social interactions; social constructionism denies that deriving meaning directly from objects is possible (Crotty, 1998).

One important point to note is the distinction between *epistemology*, a set of beliefs about knowing, and *ontology*, a set of beliefs about what exists or what is real. While constructionist or constructivist epistemologies generally insist that individuals construct their own realities, and no two persons' realities will be the same, this does not necessarily mean that those who hold these views believe multiple realities *exist*. Belief about the nature of the external world is not the same as belief about knowledge (Crotty, 1998).

Thus being a constructionist or constructivist does not require you to believe that there are multiple versions of the universe all floating around at the same time. It does mean, however, that each of us has a uniquely constructed version of reality that we carry around with us in our day-to-day experience as human beings. Two people looking at something together never actually see the same thing in the same way.

(As stated in this chapter, some constructionists and constructivists state that they believe reality does NOT exist apart from being socially invented by people. However, usually this may be taken as an epistemological statement, not an ontological statement. Few individuals would deny, for example, that if mankind were to someday succeed in self-annihilation, the planet and the rest of the universe would continue to exist apart from our meaning-making activity. In other words, a radical constructivist might say, "Yes, yes, the earth and the stars and planets exist; but their existence has no intrinsic meaning. Their existence doesn't count for anything apart from the meaning people impose upon them. And therefore true knowledge of them - or of any 'reality' - does NOT exist. Reality is a social construct.")

Sorting Out Variations on the Terms "Constructionism" and Constructivism"

Philosophical Perspective/Theory	Key Points	Practical Implications
Social Constructionism (epistemology) (also called simply Constructionism)	· There is no meaning in the world until we construct it. · We do not find meaning, we make it. · The meaning we make is affected by our social interpretation of the thing. · The meaning we derive for objects arises in and out of the interactive	Even if you bump into a tree, you cannot get meaning directly from the tree because you have ingrained social interpretations of the tree. You will assign meaning to the tree based on your social background and it will be a different meaning from what any other person will have for the tree.

	human community.	
Constructivism (epistemology)	· A branch or variant of social constructionism · People create meaning through their interactions with each other and the objects in the environment.	If you bump into a tree, you can get meaning directly from the tree but that meaning is basically combined with social interpretations of the tree. The meaning you assign to the tree will still be a different meaning from what any other person will have for the tree.
Vygotsky's Constructivism (epistemology with specific application elements)	· Social interaction in development of cognition · Social learning precedes development · MKO (More Knowledgeable Other) · ZPD –distance between the actual development level as determined by the independent problem solving and level of potential development as determined through problem solving under MKO · In ZPD provide scaffolding – masters task remove (fading) · Social interaction leads to increased knowledge	Struggling students in a Math class are assigned a peer tutor. (MKO) The peer tutor helps their partner work through problems by providing hints and instruction. (Scaffolding) Struggling students will stop relying on MKO as they work through ZPD levels. The amount of help from the peer tutor can be gradually reduced until they are no longer needed or relied on. (fading) The struggling students have reached the MKO level and no longer are struggling.
Piaget's Constructivism (epistemology with specific application elements)	· Knowledge is actively constructed · More of a "theory" on how a child's thinking evolves over time · Focuses on the commonality of	At a certain stage of development all children will become aware of "self". A mother places a mark on a child's face without the child's knowledge. She then places the child in front of a mirror. If the child has self awareness, he will reach to his face and touch the mark. However, if he has not developed self awareness, he will reach out to the mirror and try to touch the mark. He is unaware that it is his image in the mirror.

	learning stages · Need for equilibrium · Detached observation	
Social Constructivism (learning theory with strong epistemological elements)	· Reality is constructed through human activity · Members of a society together invent the properties of the world. · People create meaning through their interactions with each other and the objects in the environment. · Learning is a social process. It occurs when people are engaged in social activities. · Associated with the work of Richard Prawat	A group of students are given a difficult WebQuest Math problem to work through. By using the different perspectives they have gained from their different backgrounds, they can help each other solve the problem more effectively that if they had worked alone.
Papert's Constructionism (also called simply Constructionism)	· Not an epistemology but "a theory of learning and a strategy for education" (Kafai & Resnick, 1996, p. 1). · Knowledge is actively constructed · Learning to learn · Focuses on the variance of individual and the environment · Dynamics of change · Engagement – Learning occurs through interaction	In the University of Georgia's Instructional Design & Development master's program, the Design & Development Tools class invites students to choose *any* multimedia development project they personally find meaningful (within reasonable social and professional norms). The project is not required to be instructional in nature. They are then required to reflect on the design process via readings in design literature and writing an online design journal; and structures are put into place to promote interaction about the design process among peers. Finally, finished artifacts are displayed at the end of each semester in a public showcase event.

| | and reflection
· Learners can create meaning by building artifacts | |

Seymour Papert on Constructivism and (Papert's) Constructionism:

"The word with the v expresses the theory that knowledge is built by the learner, not supplied by the teacher. The word with the n expresses the further idea that happens especially felicitously when the learner is engaged in the construction of something external or at least sharable" (Papert, 1991, p.3).

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Bibliography

Additional Resources

Social Constructivist Theory http://viking.coe.uh.edu/~ichen/ebook/et-it/social.htm

Social Constructivism and the World Wide Web - A Paradigm for Learning
http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth97/papers/Mcmahon/Mcmahon.html

Citation

APA Citation: Kim, B. (2001). Social Constructivism.. In M. Orey (Ed.), Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology. Retrieved <insert date>, from http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/

Retrieved from "http://epltt.coe.uga.edu/index.php?title=Social_Constructivism"