



The Learning Theory Podcast

Episode 2

Constructivism

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Introduction

Welcome to episode 2 of the Learning Theory Podcast. I'm your host, Dan Campbell, and today I will be discussing Constructivism. Recall in the previous episode, I put forth the argument that Constructivism can be considered a liberal approach to education. In this episode I will attempt to explain my reasoning for this position.

What is Constructivism?

Terry Simpson (2002) argues that constructivism is not a theory, but instead an epistemology or philosophical viewpoint as to the nature of learning. In a popular college text book, *Learning Theory - An Educational Perspective*, Dale Schunk (2004) supports Simpson's argument by pointing out that a theory is a scientifically valid explanation which allows for the generation and testing of a hypothesis. Constructivism according to Schunk does not claim that learning principles that can be discovered and tested exists but instead holds that learning is created by the learner. Schunk goes on to argue that if we still want to view constructivism as a theory we must understand that it is not a unified theory, but three different perspectives: Exogenous, Endogenous, and Dialectical.

- The exogenous perspective holds that the environment influences beliefs through experiences, exposure to models, and teaching; thus learning is a reconstruct of the environment and what is learned is only accurate to the extent it reflects the environment.
- The endogenous perspective holds that learning rises from previous learning and not directly from environmental stimulation. Thus learning is not merely a reconstruct of the environment but a cognitive abstraction of all that was previous learned.
- The dialectical perspective holds that learning is social and occurs from interactions

between people in the environment. This is very similar to the exogenous perspective except that adding the social variable allows for some of the abstraction found in the endogenous perspective.

If you ask me, any theory that has to be explained with three words that your mother wouldn't understand, and would probably wash your mouth out for using, is too complicated to move from theory to application. So let's pretend we have a math problem and simplify this beast. The more generally recognized and written about flavors of constructivism are cognitive constructivism and social constructivism.

Cognitive Constructivism

Cognitive constructivism, put forth by Jerome Bruner in 1960, considers learning to be an active process in which learners build upon current and past knowledge to construct new ideas or concepts. This theory holds that the learner relies on his or her cognitive structure to transform information, develop hypotheses, and make decisions. The learner's cognitive structure provides meaning and organization to learning experiences that goes beyond just the information that was taught (Kearsley, 1994-2008). Instruction under this theory would follow three basic principles set forth by Bruner:

1. Instruction must be concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the learner willing and able to learn. This principle addresses the learner's readiness to learn.
2. Instruction must be structured so that it can be easily grasped by the learner. This principle was referred to by Bruner as spiral organization.
3. And instruction should be designed to facilitate extrapolation and/or filling in the gaps, or as Bruner put it "going beyond the information given" (See Kearsley, ¶ 4)

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism considers the social aspects of learning. Based largely on the ideas proposed by Lev Vygotsky in the early 1900s, social constructivism makes fundamental assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. In social constructivism, reality is a construct of human activity and the properties of the environment are invented by human interaction. Under this assumption, the individual cannot discover reality because reality does not exist until it is invented by the society; hence knowledge is also a social and cultural construct (Kim, 2001). If reality and knowledge are social constructs, then learning must also be a social process (Kim). Learning under this theory then becomes a collaborative or team process, so I hope you are listening to this podcast with a friend.

One of the fascinating aspects of both cognitive and social constructivism is that both Bruner and Vygotsky developed these theories while studying learning and cognition in children. Bruner's theory is based largely on the childhood cognitive development research of Piaget (Kearsley, 1994-2008). Vygotsky on the other hand, rejected assumptions on cognition and instead focused on the social aspects of childhood learning. Yet as I pointed out in the previous episode, in contemporary thinking constructivism, regardless of flavor, has become closely associated with andragogy, the teaching of adults.

Bringing the Two Together

As you have probably deduced by now, there really is no simple definition of constructivism. Perhaps Sharon Merriam and Rosemary Caffarella (2001) did the best job of defining constructivism in one sentence when they stated: "Constructivism, representing an array of perspectives, posits that learners construct their own knowledge from their experiences. The

cognitive process of meaning making is emphasized as both an individual mental activity and a social interactive interchange” (p.75). This definition appears to capture the essence of the conflicting views surrounding the theory, and brings them together into not so much of a unified theory, but instead a well articulated teaching philosophy. Merriam and Cafferalla go on to say that various aspects of the array of perspectives are applied in “self-directed learning, transformational learning, experiential learning, situated cognition, and reflective practice” (p.75). Does Merriam and Cafferalla’s definition, along with the areas of application, sound like a liberal teaching philosophy to you? I feel that it does. But it is not liberalism without limits. Schunk (2004) points out that “learning in a constructivist setting is not allowing students to do whatever they want. Rather, constructivist environments should create rich experiences that encourage students to learn” (p. 316).

Wrap up

Join me next time when we look and a theory that on the surface seems remarkably similar to constructivism, but is very different in application - Feminist Pedagogy. If you would like to provide feedback on this episode, please visit me at www.dancampbell.us, where you can find transcripts of this and future episodes, links to learning theory resources on the web, and of course a link to my email address. Thank you for listening! I will be back in two weeks with a new episode. Until then, go out and learn something new everyday.

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