Social Constructivism: How We Build Our Reality Together

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Social constructivism is a sociological theory of knowledge that applies the general philosophical constructionism into social settings, wherein groups construct knowledge for one another, collaboratively creating a small culture of shared artifacts with shared meanings. When one is immersed within a culture of this sort, one is learning all the time about how to be a part of that culture on many levels. Its origins are largely attributed to Lev Vygotsky.

Social Constructivism and Social Constructionism

Social constructivism is closely related to social constructionism in the sense that people are working together to construct artefacts. However, there is an important difference: social constructionism focuses on the artefacts that are created through the social interactions of a group, while social constructivism focuses on an individual's learning that takes place because of their interactions in a group .

A very simple example is an object like a cup. The object can be used for many things, but its shape does suggest some 'knowledge' about carrying liquids (see also Affordance). A more complex example is an online course - not only do the 'shapes' of the software tools indicate certain things about the way online courses should work, but the activities and texts produced within the group as a whole will help shape how each person behaves within that group.

For a philosophical account of one possible social constructionist ontology, see the 'Criticism' section of Representative realism.

Social Constructivism and Education

Social constructivism has been studied by many educational psychologists, who are concerned with its implications for teaching and learning. Constructivism forms one of the major theories (behaviourism, social learning, constructivism and social constructivism) of child development, arising from the work of Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Piaget's stage theory (describing four successive stages of development) also became known as constructivism, because he believed children needed to construct an understanding of the world for themselves. Social constructivism extends constructivism by incorporating the role of other actors and culture in development. In this sense it can also be contrasted with social learning theory by stressing interaction over observation.

Vygotsky's contributions reside in Mind in Society (1930, 1978) and Thought and Language (1934, 1986). Vygotsky independently came to the same conclusions as Piaget regarding the constructive nature of development. For more on the psychological dimensions of social constructivism, see the work of A. Sullivan Palincsar.

An instructional strategy grounded in social constructivism that is an area of active research is computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). This strategy gives students opportunities to practice 21st-century skills in communication, knowledge sharing, critical thinking and use of relevant technologies found in the workplace.

Additionally, studies on increasing the use of student discussion in the classroom both support and are grounded in theories of social constructivism. There are a full range of advantages that result from the implementation of discussion in the classroom. Participation in group discussion allows students to generalize and transfer their knowledge of classroom learning and builds a strong foundation for communicating ideas orally (Reznitskaya, Anderson & Kuo, 2007). Many studies argue that discussion plays a vital role in increasing student ability to test their ideas, synthesize the ideas of others, and build deeper understanding of what they are learning (Corden, 2001; Nystrand, 1996; Reznitskaya, Anderson & Kuo, 2007; Weber, Maher, Powell & Lee, 2008). Large and small group discussion also affords students opportunities to exercise self-regulation, self-determination, and a desire to persevere with tasks (Corden, 2001; Matsumara, Slater & Crosson, 2008). Additionally, discussion increases student motivation, collaborative skills, and the ability to problem solve (Dyson, 2004; Matsumara, Slater & Crosson, 2008; Nystrand, 1996). Increasing students' opportunity to talk with one another and discuss their ideas increases their ability to support their thinking, develop reasoning skills, and to argue their opinions persuasively and respectfully (Reznitskaya, Anderson & Kuo, 2007). Furthermore, the feeling of community and collaboration in classrooms increases through offering more chances for students to talk together (Barab, Dodge, Thomas, Jackson, & Tuzun, 2007; Hale & City, 2002; Weber, Maher, Powell & Lee, 2008).

Given the advantages that result from discussion, it is surprising that it is not used more often. Studies have found that students are not regularly accustomed to participating in academic discourse (Corden, 2001; Nystrand, 1996). Nystrand (1996) argues that teachers rarely choose classroom discussion as an instructional format. The results of Nystrand's (1996) three year study focusing on 2400 students in 60 different classrooms indicate that the typical classroom teacher spends under three minutes an hour allowing students to talk about ideas with one another and the teacher (Nystrand, 1996). Even within those three minutes of discussion, most talk is not true discussion because it depends upon teacher directed questions with predetermined answers (Corden, 2001; Nystrand, 1996). Multiple observations indicate that students in low socioeconomic schools and lower track classrooms are allowed even fewer opportunities for discussion (Corden, 2001; Nystrand, 1996; Weber, Maher, Powell & Lee, 2008). Teachers who teach as if they value what their students think create learners. Discussion and interactive discourse promote learning because they afford students the opportunity to use language as a demonstration of their independent thoughts. Discussion elicits sustained responses from students that encourage meaning making through negotiating with the ideas of others. This type of learning "promotes retention and in-depth processing associated with the cognitive manipulation of information"

(Nystrand, pg. 28).