

Educational Theory

This essay explores constructivism as an educational theory and also looks at its application to teaching. The chosen journal explores the misuse and successful application of constructivism in teaching. The article interests me and is chosen because I believe that *one* of the reasons that constructivism is not largely applied to teaching is its potential for misuse and misinterpretation. Other considerations which are not discussed here are structural considerations, which see traditional institutions favouring behaviourist approaches, often due to resource issues. Although the chosen article is contextually situated in the USA, the issues explored are generic. It is not within the scope of this assignment to explore fully the diverse perspectives on Constructivism.

Gordon, M, (2009) 'The misuses and effective uses of constructivist teaching,' *Journal of Teachers and Teaching*

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Constructivism: A Theory of Learning

The main features of constructivism suggest that knowledge is actively constructed, and its application has an emphasis on process, collaborated learning, and teaching for understanding. Olsen (2000) suggests that there are '*two main branches of constructivism*', one based on philosophical theories of learning and one based on psychological theories. The diverse perspectives of constructivism are informed by many writers which include: Dewey (1938) who writes about a pragmatic approach, and Vygotsky (1934) and Bruner (1960) who inform social constructivism. In addition Von Glaserfeld (1989) looks at radical constructivism and Habermas explores critical constructivism.

Grennan, Brooks and Brooks (1993 cited in Brooks & Brooks 1999, p4) suggest that there are five core beliefs of constructivism:

- Students' opinion is sought and valued
- Assumptions and suppositions are challenged
- The learning experience must be close to the life experience and relevant to students' lives
- The constructivist teacher gives a broad understanding of a subject rather than focusing on small bits of information
- Constructivist teachers assess the whole learning experience of students rather than assessing only what that can be measured by *'paper and pencil assessments'*.

It could be argued that by soliciting the views of students in a learning situation, a more engaging and empowering learning environment is facilitated. An underlying assumption is made, that the student is capable of making a valid contribution to discussion. Constructivists' discussions share a *'questioning, dialogical form'* where students are active in the construction of knowledge (Golding 2009, p.469). By keeping the learning close to the life experience of the learner and relevant to the student an active part is played in the construction of knowledge.

According to Freire's critique on the banking system of education, behaviourism serves to domesticate rather than liberate people. Freire's (1970) beliefs are close to Dewey's cognitive constructivism which suggests:

Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked (Dewey 1956).

Vygotsky puts emphasis on the cultural and social interactions that help to construct knowledge. He developed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which looks at how learners or children act first with what they can do on their own, and later progress their learning with the *'...assistance from the teacher'* or mother (Powell & Kalina, p.244). Scaffolding was developed to support ZPD.

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Social interactions of students with each other and teachers in a learning environment combined with '*a personal critical thinking process*', suggests cognitive and social constructivism can be integrated (Powell and Kalina 2009, p.243).

Gillen suggests that Vygotsky's work is somewhat diluted to fit the dominant discourse in the USA, perhaps influenced by McCarthyism, translators were selective in their interpretations (2000, p.188). Gillen argues that early translators of Vygotsky's work cut out references to Marxism (187-188). Also indicated is that Kozulin (1990) '*cut out references to Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov...*' however he '*...preserved references to literary figures*' when translating (2000, p.187-188). These insights are in relation to Vygotsky's work '*Thought and Language*' which Gillen insists the correct translation is '*Thinking and Speech*' (2000, p.187). Von der Veer and Yasnitsky (2011, p.475) also suggest in relation to all Vygotsky's work that '*existing translations are marred by mistakes and outright falsifications*'. However because of initial bad Russian translations, they advocate starting again with the source documents. Gillen (2000) suggests that if Vygotsky's work was correctly translated it would have revealed an even more dynamic character.

Gordon's Article on Constructivism

Gordon's (2009) article cites Kincheloe's (2000) and Thayer-Beacon's (1999) articles on a perception of knowledge as '*constructed by human beings in their interaction with the world*'. His claims throughout the article are justified with reference to respected writers in the field. Constructivism suggests that there is *not* only one truth waiting independently of the learner to be discovered. He sees constructivism as '*...a powerful model for explaining how knowledge is produced...*' and he also sees constructivism as a way of explaining '*how students learn*'. The article is contextually set in the USA and discusses how constructivist teaching is becoming more '*prevalent in teacher education*'. However the main aim of the article is to explore how constructivism is sometimes misconstrued and constructivist teaching is misused. By deconstructing two effective constructive learning situations, he clearly demonstrates what constitutes a successful constructivist learning environment. Gordon looks at how theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Freire have offered alternative explanations of how knowledge is understood. Nevertheless he recognises through the writing of Van Huizen *et al* (2005) among others that '*the impact of constructivism has remained limited*'.

Gordon clearly demonstrates how constructivism has '*often been misinterpreted*' and consequently misused. Applefield *et al* (2001, p.45) also explores the '*myths about constructivism*' and uses a similar method of deconstructing lessons to demonstrate effective/defective constructivist teaching.

Gordon cautions against misinterpretation which involves confusion between student-centred approaches and constructivism. He suggests that when constructivism is fully understood and used correctly, effective learning is realised. Powell and Kalina '*...suggest that teachers have the potential to teach constructively, if they understand constructivism*' (2009, p.241). Powell and Kalina (2009) understand that '*social constructivism is a highly effective teaching method...*' (243). However it is important to note that if misinterpretations exist on a macro level (e.g. Vygotsky's translations), then as it filters down to application level the consequences may require (re)examination.

Gordon suggests that in the constructivist classroom the teacher takes an active role (which includes formal teaching) in the learning process as well as the student. So he suggests a balance is called for between teacher input and facilitating students to construct knowledge. From conversations with colleagues who work with behaviourist approaches, it is apparent that many behaviourists believe that constructivist teaching is "wholly lacks structure, a laissez-faire type of approach". When in fact constructivist approaches call for enormous planning and skill as a teacher, as a variety of methods are used with an in-depth body of knowledge (Brookfield, 1990). I agree with Gordon's assertion that input from the teacher is a necessary part of constructing knowledge which can counteract a misuse of constructivism.

Gordon suggests another mistaken belief is that constructivist teachers need not have access to a '*body of knowledge*' in the content area that they teach. He emphasises with reference to Richardson (2003) that it is necessary for a constructivist teacher to have '*deep and strong subject matter knowledge*'. I agree that constructivism in the classroom calls for an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, and I also contend (from experience) that a broad range of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are also necessary. '*Teachers who believed in constructivist learning theory did not use their theory in their practice because they did not know how to use it*' (Chu Chih, L, 2010, p.1). I argue that it is better not to use constructivist approaches, rather than use the approach badly which could undermine the theory.

Gordon gives several clear examples of the misuse of constructivism and indicates that when the theory is misunderstood bad teaching is often the result. He suggests that some teachers leave the class to their own devices; some believe that they do not need any background knowledge, and some even thought that there is no wrong answer. He rightly suggests that effective constructivist teaching actually '*raises the bar*' and demands more from students than traditional teaching. This is justified and demonstrated in the work by the deconstruction of the lessons explored with reference to relevant theorists. Perhaps Gordon could have explored with more depth the demands of constructivist teaching on teachers as well as students. It could be argued that in the traditional or behaviourist classroom teachers can hide behind the course material, and do not have to reveal much of their personality. However in the constructivist classroom, I contend that relationships are important towards creating an equal and respectful learning environment. The importance of personal awareness while using teaching methods which are focused on process is significant. (Brookfield, 2011, 1990)

Brookfield and Holst (2011p.111) suggest that '*students' learned conservatism often means that they will resist determinedly any teaching that appears different*': this could also be true of teachers. The teacher Rosemary Dusting in Gordon's article initially demonstrates internal resistance to teaching constructively, which was due to her conditioning (p.742). Therefore considering the conditioning of behaviourist approaches which students and teachers have encountered often all their learning lives; the constructivist teacher at third level could encounter both internal and external resistance. Brooks and Brooks (1999, p.1) suggest that '*this history constrains our capacity to embrace the control of the learner in his or her own education*'.

Gordon looks at the learning situation from the teachers' and students perspective and shows a clear picture. He examines how Rosemary Dusting evaluates students' learning and consequently changes her approach. Later she evaluates again and adjusts her approach accordingly. The willingness to evaluate adapt and adjust is key towards effective teaching (Brookfield 2011, Biggs 1999, Freire 1970, Vygotsky 1978). Brooks and Brooks agree '*that the people working directly with students are the ones who must adapt and adjust lessons on the basis of evolving needs*' (1999, p.5).

In conclusion Gordon explores two excellent examples of constructivist teaching. The approach used by deconstructing each lesson was very effective towards facilitating a good

understanding of issues discussed. Gordon clearly demonstrates throughout his writing the importance of evaluation and his knowledge of teaching is apparent throughout. As Proust suggests *'the only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes'* (n.d.). Evaluations can help constructivists to have new eyes. The language Gordon uses throughout the document is clear and precise.

The examinations of the learning sessions are mainly balanced with regards to exploring the perspective of students and teachers. He clearly and fully explores the misuses and effective uses of constructivist teaching. *'We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us'* (Proust, n.d.).

Process of undertaking this exercise

To complete this assignment it was necessary to do a considerable amount of research, the difficulty arose from exploring such a vast subject within a small word count. It was like a most enjoyable journey.

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