Definition: **constructivism** from *Dictionary of Psychological Testing, Assessment and Treatment*

The argument that learning is not objective and factual but is inevitably shaped and even biased by the learner’s prior experience, the context in which the learning takes place, etc.

Summary Article: **Constructivism**

from *Green Education: An A-to-Z Guide*

Constructivism puts the individual at the center of learning, forming meaning through experience. The definition of constructivism is multifaceted, depending on the context in which it is being applied, as a field or a practice in progressive education. The theoretical roots can be found most notably in the work of philosophers and psychologists. Among them were 18th-century philosopher Giambattista Vico, and his philosophy of learning belief that people can only understand what they have themselves constructed, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky—to name a few. Today, the relevancy of constructivism in green education is debatable. Controversial issues call into question whether advocacy of constructivism as an educational model can legitimately aid care of the natural world.

For green education, constructivism is both a blessing and a curse. The curse is that today's learners spend notably less time outside and are discovering degraded environments as their norm. Perceptions, values, and beliefs are being constructed within these experienced realities. Misconceptions can become deep seated in the mind of the learner. The construction of meaning is thus in danger of perpetuating erroneous beliefs and a narrow perspective of the world. The blessing is that educators have an opportunity to explicitly offer the individual experiences in which meaningful relationships and care of the natural world can be explored. Educators have an urgent and critical role in altering misconceptions and challenging the learners’ existing framework of knowing about the natural world.

Traditional education has been dominated by lessons led by educators who impart knowledge, facts, and figures that are to be memorized with the expectation of fostering understanding. Yet common sense dictates that knowing about the world is embedded, in part, on individual experience. This is the basic premise of constructivism. Individual experience provides context and the basis for constructing a way of knowing about and making sense of the world. Concepts evolve over time as individuals reframe their understanding based on experiencing emerging conditions or disequilibrium. Understanding progresses as the learner confronts opposing ideas and reconstructs new ways of knowing.

For a term largely concerned with individual processes for making meaning, it is ironic that an agreed-upon definition for constructivism is difficult to pin down. The above, overly simplified explanation is not enough to elucidate the meaning of nuanced constructivism. Constructivism is referenced in relationship to philosophy, developmental psychology, education theory, and instructional methodology. While associations to constructivism are complicated, the individual's acquisition of new knowledge through experience is distinguishable by the shared aims of philosophers and psychologists John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. A deeper look at the work of each clarifies a few of the distinctions related to the various ways in which the term constructivism may be applied.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constructivism_education
John Dewey advocated for education reform that ensured integrating individual experience in education. He saw experience that led to knowing about the world as increasing the individual's ability to function in society and an integral part of developing social responsibility.

The psychologist Jean Piaget believed individual learners have distinct developmental stages and mental patterns that guide behavior based on interpreted experiences regardless of culture. He also claimed that the learner would make accommodations when mental patterns were in what he called “disequilibrium.” Disequilibrium is the point at which the learner is confronted with new information and existing knowledge no longer fits with experience. This allows the learner the flexibility to reconstruct the concept.

Lev Vygotsky recognized that individual meaning making can be deterred by the limits of one’s own experience. He realized that educator-led instruction was important to provide scaffolding. In other words, he encouraged educators to understand the learner’s existing knowledge and developmental stage, then to build upon this by adding new experiences. This could lead to the altering of understanding and contribute to new knowledge. Vygotsky maintained that learning was bound by linear developmental stages that he called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD started with the basic naming of experience that ultimately led to more abstract thoughts, reaching higher meta-cognitive processing. Piaget claimed that thoughts develop language, whereas Vygotsky asserted that language develops thoughts and affects cognitive processing.

In the review of current constructivism literature, several controversial issues stand out. One issue argues that constructivism contributes to individuals’ long-held misconceptions. Another concern suggests that constructivism disregards the value of cultural knowledge conveyed across multiple generations. And another infers that constructivism contributes to a capitalist paradigm focused on individualistic progress that is detrimental to the environment. While each of these concerns is legitimate, each is missing the important role of the educator in aiding adaptability and reframing the context of experiences based on the learner’s preexisting references. Misconceptions can be corrected at the appropriate developmental stage in time. And social-cultural, as well as environmental, relevancy can be incorporated into learning experiences.

Constructivism provides meaningful context to the world and reality of the learner that cannot be found in facts alone. Neither radical constructivism nor an overemphasis of rote learning is productive. The interdependent balance of constructivism, alongside the accumulation of contextual facts, is essential to green education in the 21st century.

**See Also:**
Environmental Education Debate, Experiential Education, Place-Based Education

**Further Readings**


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