CONSTRUCTIVISM: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

The problem surrounding traditional approach to teaching is of concern to experts in the area of teacher education. It is observed that this approach appears to reduce learners to passive receiver of hard wire knowledge prepared by someone who is more matured. The teacher is perceived as a fearful person who is believed to be the repository of knowledge and that has been commissioned to give instruction without allowing learners to participate during the teaching and learning activities. Traditional approach to teaching can be said to pave ways for brainstorming, indoctrination, conditioning and initiation which all denied the learners the ability to exercise their freedom to ask questions and as well appeared to be mechanical. One attempts to argue that Learner learns by himself when something new is taught. The learner has prior knowledge and experiences, which often determined by learner's social and cultural environment. Knowledge is not mechanically acquired but actively constructed within the constraints and offerings of the learning environment. The mechanistic positivist accounts of learners as recipients of hard-wired knowledge were supplemented by accounts of learners as active knowledge constructor. This study examines why constructivism is important, it dwells also on a constructivist classroom and student centred activities. Finally, the paper justifies Socrates and Plato as proponents of constructivism. Based on this, one will argue in line with Van Delen and Brittle cited by Adeleye (2013) that teaching is the guidance of pupil through planned activities so that he may acquire the richest possible from his experience. That learning is not achieved by cajoling, hypnotizing and forcing the learner to learn but a voluntary activity of the learner by constructing knowledge and meaning from his experience. This is a qualitative research carried out through the method of philosophical analysis.

Keywords: *Constructivism, Experience, Freedom, Subjectivism, Teaching and Learning.*

Introduction

Constructivism is an approach to learning which holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by experiences of the learners (Elliott, Kratochwill, Littlefield, and Travers 2000) Constructivism believes in personal construction of meaning by learner through experience and that meaning is influenced by the interaction of prior knowledge and new events. Constructivists argued against innate knowledge as postulated by the idealist. To them, human learning is constructed. Learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning. This prior knowledge influences modified knowledge an individual will construct from new learning experiences (Philips, 1995). Constructivist posits that learners learn by experimentation and not by being told what will happen but are left to make their own inferences and discovery.

This core has root that extends back through many years and many philosophers, including Dewey (1938) among other philosophers. Philosophically, this essence relies on an epistemology that stresses subjectivism and relativism, concept that while reality may exist separate from experience, it can only be known through experience, resulting in a personally unique reality. Constructivism acknowledges the learner's active role in the personal creation of knowledge, the importance of experience (both Social and individual) in this knowledge creation process, and the realization that the knowledge created will vary in its degree of validity as an accurate representation of reality. Plato explains further that learning is a social activity; it is something we do together, in interaction with each other, rather than an abstract concept. Thus, all teaching and learning is a matter of sharing and negotiating socially constituted knowledge.

It is important to note that constructivism is not a particular pedagogy. In fact, constructivism is a theory describing how learning happens, regardless of whether learners are using their experiences to understand a lecture or following the instructions for building a model airplane. In both cases, the theory of constructivism suggests that learners construct knowledge out of their experiences. However, constructivism is often associated with pedagogical approaches that promote active learning or learning by doing as an instructional strategy. One can say that student who learned through constructivist methods showed better retention of knowledge than those who learned through traditional methods.

Why Is Constructivism Important?

Educational curricula and teaching methods are changing in the changing environment to reflect the societal needs. One component of the current redevelopment of all subject area curricula is the change in focus of instruction from the transmission curriculum to a transactional curriculum. In a traditional curriculum, a teacher transmits information to students who passively listen and acquire facts. This kind of education treats the immature experience of the youngster as something to be quickly grown up as an adult. In the traditional school, the child is to be equipped with the skills of an adult, he is given a set of promissory notes as Dewey graphically described it, which he is to redeem when he reaches maturity but which unfortunately, he may not live long enough to redeem. The child learns more from the fear of the teacher who talks down to the students rather than with the students. In the traditional education, the teacher towers so much above the students and exercises so great authority, the students have no option but to sit quietly, listen passively and absorb the facts as a sponge absorbs water.

Constructivist teaching fosters critical thinking, an ability to engage in independent thinking. Critical thinking promotes creativity in students. To come up with a creative solution entails not just having new ideas, it must also be the case that the new ideas being generated are useful and relevant to the task at hand. Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (2012) tell us that learning in all subject areas involve inventing and constructing new ideas. They suggest that constructivist theory be incorporated into the curriculum and advocate that teachers create environments in which children can construct their own understandings.

A constructivist teacher and a constructivist classroom exhibit a number of discernable qualities markedly different from a traditional or direct instruction classroom. A constructivist teacher is able to flexibly and creatively incorporate ongoing experiences in the classroom into the negotiation and construction of lessons with small groups and individuals. The environment is democratic, the activities are interactive and student centered, and the students are empowered by a teacher who operates as a facilitator. Constructivist classrooms are structured so that learners are immersed in experiences within which they may engage in meaning making inquiry, action, imagination, invention, interaction, hypothesizing, and personal reflection. The goal is to produce a democratic classroom environment that provides meaningful learning experiences for autonomous learners. Constructivism is an important learning approach that educators use to help their students learn. Constructivism is based on the idea that

people actively make their own knowledge, and that reality is determined by ones experience as a learner. Basically, learners use their previous knowledge as a foundation and build on it with new things that they learn. This justifies John Locke's theory of knowledge that all knowledge comes exclusively through experience. He argues that at birth the mind is tabula rasa, or blank slate, learners fill with ideas as they experience the world through the five senses. The implication of this is that learners build on the existing foundation through the experience they have in their environment.

A Constructivist Classroom and Student-Centered

Student Centered Learning might seem inconsistent with basic educational goals. After all, the purpose of school is to gain knowledge, right? To many teachers, it seems obvious that for knowledge to be useful, lesson must be centered on around the goals of the teacher. The results of this hierarchical approach are visible in classrooms across the country, frustrated teachers, bored students, and parents who must continually fight with their kids to stay on top of schoolwork. Children learn best when they enjoy learning. Learner centered learning makes learning relevant and fun, giving even bored and frustrated students an incentive to keep trying. It is easy for adults to forget how difficult it is to be a kid. Kids spend much of their days being told what to do, often without understanding why. This lack of control over their own lives is frustrating to almost all children but especially to the most vulnerable kids. Let us consider how one would feel if someone forced one in a room all day and learned about something one thought was boring or irrelevant. What of if you were not allowed to take a stretch break, go to the bathroom when you wanted to? Understanding the modern classroom this way makes it clear why so many kids struggle. Allowing children to, with some adult guidance, choose what they want to learn and how they want to learn it gives them more control over their lives, this can eliminate resistance, help frustrated kids become more cooperative, and show all children that learning does not have to be boring. A more student-centered approach prepares students for the many distractions of adulthood. Students gain an understanding of their own learning style. They get more control over how they spend their time. They get collaborate with other students. These are all skills they will need in adulthood when no one is looking over their shoulder, forcing them to learn.

Constructivist student-centered education is a sort of revolt against subject-centered education. Student-centered education seeks to provide natural flow of activity and spontaneous growth of the child. He must be allowed to enjoy

complete freedom of action. This is designed to develop the individual and social qualities of a student rather than provide a generalized information or training by way of prescribed subject matter. Child centered encompasses methods of teaching that shift the focus of instruction from the teacher to the student. Student-centered learning aims to develop learner autonomy and independence (Leo, 2007). This is done by putting responsibility for the learning path in the hands of students, by imparting them with the skills and basis on how to learn a specific subject and schemata required to measure up to the specific performance requirement. The student's readiness for development should be taken into consideration. There is no point saying the child is able to do this or that, if he is psychologically incapable to do so. Education demands exercise of freedom of movement and expression, so that learners can explore their inner world in a spontaneous manner. Student-centered learning theory and practice are based on the constructivist learning theory that emphasizes the learner's critical role in constructing meaning from new information and prior experiences. Student-centered learning puts learners' interest first, acknowledging student voice as central to the learning experience. In a student-centered learning space, students choose what, how and when to learn with the outcome of that learning (Hannafin & Hannafin, 2010)

This is in contrast to traditional education (which is somehow seems to be in practice in some parts of Nigeria education system) that treats the immature experience of the youngster as something to be quickly passed over so that learn may quickly grow up as an adult. In the traditional school, education becomes a preparation for a future adult life. The child is to be equipped with the skill of an adult, he is given "a set of promissory note" as Dewey described it, which he is to redeem when he reaches maturity, but which unfortunately he may not live long enough to redeem. He is being educated for the future, being equipped for the life he will live as an adult, while he misses the joy of learning and the skills of coping with his present problems. In this traditional education, the curriculum is traditionally the same for every child. The learners are all massed together and uniformly taught as though they want the same things and are learning at the same rate. What is more, they are all fed on dead information which, being remote from their life experience has to be memorized and absorbed. The dead information is parceled out in little bit of knowledge in the name of disciplines. The relevance of these disciplines and life are not clear to the learners. The result is what Akinkuotu described as little bits of knowledge from which nothing follows (Akinkuotu, 1996). Knowledge is taught to the learners as the finished product of other people's experience and students are not allowed to realize that they too can produce

knowledge from processing their own experience. The student learned due to the fear of the teacher who talks down to the students rather than with the students.

One of the most critical difference between student- centered learning and teacher-centered learning is in assessment. Student-centered learning typically involves more formative assessment and less summative assessment than teacher-centered learning. This means that students are involved in deciding how to demonstrate their learning. Developing assessment that supports learning and motivation is essential to the success of student-centered approach as postulated by constructivist education.

Socrates and Plato's Conceptions of Constructivism

Socrates, an earliest philosopher can be viewed as a constructivist and his approach is child centred and not teacher-centred. Constructivism as an educational theory is the view that learners construct meaning as he or she learns. Constructing meaning is learning and for Socrates there is no other kind. This view has consequences that are of two-fold. (1) We have to focus on the learners in thinking about learning (not on the subject matter). (2) There is no knowledge independent of the meaning attributed to experience constructed by the learners or community of the learners. Thus, Socrates as a constructivist holds that knowledge is not mechanically acquired but actively constructed within the constraints and offerings of the learning environment. The mechanistic positivist accounts of learners as recipients of hard-wired knowledge were supplemented by accounts of learners as situated active knowledge constructors. In this way, Socrates brings back human subjectivity excluded by the Sophists, behaviourist and information processing accounts.

However, Socratic approach has certain radical epistemic implications. All knowledge is viewed as human knowledge and, that there can be no warrant for claiming access to knowledge that either is not, or has not been mediated through subjective or inter- subjective human experience of some kind. By emphasizing individual or social community construction of learning, the conclusion of individual or community idiosyncrasy follows. This, in fact leads to epistemological relativism and it raises the question of how we can know others and what is objectivity. It also has radical ontological implications. The universe is no longer a mind- independent existence of any real objective world. These claims

lead to epistemological relativism where there exists no absolute truth and truth is as good as any other.

Also, as postulated by Plato, the learner is in a process of self-actualisation. Education is a necessary condition for the process. The child or learner is also a social being. He can actualize his 'self' only through the service of other 'selves' by learning in his environment. The child has the potential ('will') either to be good or bad, and depends on the environment and education for its actualization. The teacher and the pupil are equal as both of them are spiritual in nature and have a common goal-'self realization'. The teacher because of his age and experience has to be ahead of the pupil towards the goal. He is just like the member of an advance party in a mountaineering expedition. While teaching any subject, emphasis should be placed upon the dignity of learner, freedom and the goals of living. Plato also believed in self-education of the child, which can be achieved through discovery and experimentation. In Plato's philosophy of education, appreciation of art is as equally a self-activity as creation of art itself. However, the child must always be conscious of his goals either when he takes either to overt or covert activity. In support of the constructivists' approach to teaching, Plato values making use of interests, efforts and most of all, the will power of the learner more than imposing ideas on him by the teacher.

Conclusion

The constructivism learning theory argues that learner produces knowledge and form meaning based on his experience. Education is ultimately an activity of the individual learner. Constructivists recognized this fact when they stressed the need for teacher to guide the learner, though individual learner has the ability to direct his own learning and it is his right to do so but the role of the teacher is also inevitable. He (teacher) as the custodian of the learner's experience must be conscious of the fact that he is unique as an individual, he must also realize that each child under him is a unique individual as well. A constructivist teacher should be a facilitator in the classroom activities and not to impose his own experience of ideas to the learner. The teacher cannot pretend not to understand that each student is an open possibility, capable of realizing his potentialities. The teacher cannot therefore occupy the position of an authority rather he should be a counselor, an adviser, a friend and of course a father in reorganizing he child experiences.

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