Chapter II

Beyond Constriction and Control: Constructivism in Online Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Constructivism has become the comfortable face of educational theory in recent years, due in no small part to the mainstreaming of learning technologies since the 1990s. Many of these technologies embed constructivism in their aspirations and actual design. But, generally speaking, the uncritical acceptance of constructivism as beneficial to education has been widespread – not surprising, perhaps, given that teaching as a profession has tended to be inspired by practice rather than being theory-led. In this chapter, the authors attempt to explore the uncomfortable tranche between theory and practice which constructivism currently occupies. Education has historically been about hierarchy and the control of knowledge and knowledge-flows, rather than about the construction of knowledge by the “amateur” individual or group. Constructivism conspires to foster active learning and the organic creation of knowledge, a radical departure from the accepted authority of the curriculum, leaning towards learning situated in the context of the learner, which is ultimately non-objective in the traditional manner. Is a bridge between theory and practice possible? In considering this question the chapter draws on the authors’ experiences in designing and running an on-line graduate degree program according to constructivist principles. In doing so, it also attempts to describe and evaluate the impact which constructivism as a theory could have on the reality of teaching and learning practice in the early 21st Century.
INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, higher-education institutions (HEIs) have embraced learning technologies in a manner that is, at one level, quite astonishing. Despite a reputed aversion to change, the Academy appears to have rushed wholeheartedly into the information age, at least in its adoption of learning management systems. The reasons for such widespread adoption are manifold, but in many cases, the initial impetus at institutional level was an urge towards financial reward. However, the high-profile failures of many early ventures, coupled with unrealistic expectations surrounding the transformative natures of the technologies themselves, quickly shattered any dreams of a quick route to riches in the online education market. What did become clear fairly quickly was that, despite the optimism of many, technology of itself lacked the power to change what happens in the lecture hall: the culture of learning, teaching and academic practice in essence continues to remain largely unchanged, and the main impact of technology has been to provide an efficient way to distribute content (Zemsky & Massey, 2004).

But despite some early failures it appears that technology is beginning to demonstrate some beneficial effects on student learning (JISC, 2008; Harvard University, 2008). New approaches to the educational process itself might help to change the situation. Traditional theories of learning treat it as a concealed and inferred process, something that “takes place inside the learner and only inside the learner” (Simon, 2001, p. 210). The theory behind learning technologies is broadly labeled constructivism which, according to Thorpe (2002), is probably the most widely recognized social position within eLearning research, having come to dominate the field over the last decades. Precisely what is understood by constructivism, however, can vary widely across disciplines, across campuses and across borders. The unpredicted emergence of blended learning as the dominant model on campus can be read, in many ways, as a result of the underlying confusion between theory and practice. Nonetheless, it may well be that we are now witnessing the beginning of a transition to a newer, more expanded educational space as a result of the impact of learning technologies, and with it the opportunity to revisit educational theories and pedagogical practices. Attempts continue at various levels within the Academy to realign educational practice to constructivist theory, highlighting the desire to change higher education from mere knowledge transfer to a place where academic staff and students work together to create knowledge. And while there is general agreement among educational theorists that a shift to a constructivist model of practice will ultimately be good for students, there appears to have been – at least in the European context – a lack of informed critical debate around the reasons for adopting the constructivist model, as well as the issues concerning the wider impact which technology may have on the educational process itself. Moving effectively to a constructivist environment will necessitate a major shift in thinking about the purpose and practice of higher education, not in itself an unwelcome aspiration.

In many ways, constructivism could have a radical impact on learning and teaching practices, but its impact is not necessarily consistent with answering the perceived needs of the knowledge economy, which at its most basic level favors knowledge transfer and a culture of compliance (Jamieson & Naidoo, 2004). Additionally, while support among theorists for constructivism as promoting active learning continues, those of a philosophic bent often stand back in horror at the ultimate relativism that constructivism embodies (Boghossian, 2006). One way or another, enthusiasm for constructivism is widespread among educators, and an opportunity to put theory into practice was presented to the present authors in 2006 in a European-funded project to develop ab initio an international, inter-institutional Master’s degree program in early childhood education and
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