Post-Fordism and Constructivism

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Constructivism is the educational theory that believes learning occurs through the formation of meaning drawn from and built upon mentally stored experiences in one’s environment. As an individual learns and grasps a concept, that person learns through building a perception of the concept and associating it with past experiences. Constructivists view learning as subjective and reliant upon the intrinsic mental components of an individual. Learning occurs through internal mental changes, and relies on the formulation of an association between stored experiences and newly acquired information. Without the mental construction and association of information, slices of information would have no connection and learning would not occur.

Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Jerome Bruner are instrumental figures in the development of constructivism. The constructivist theory is learner-centered. Learning is shaped uniquely through the relationship of each building block of information in a person’s life experience. “Each individual colors and shapes the knowledge to fit within their frame of reference” (Buell, Constructivism, ¶ 1).

Behaviorism is contrary to constructivism. Behaviorists such as John Watson and B. F. Skinner considered learning as an environmental adaptation; the learner’s behavior is observed, conditioned and changed through the arrangement of external stimuli. In this case, mental activity is irrelevant to the learning process. As Lau (2000) explains, behaviorists believe that “the learner is an empty vessel waiting to be filled” (p. 13). Just as liquid is poured into an empty glass, information is poured into the learner, a behavior is expected, and reinforcement is applied once that behavior is established. The activity of the mind is less significant; behavior is changed through “instructional cues”, and the ideal behavior is reinforced. Behaviorism is more passive, requires less sensitivity to the individual, and relies on observable and measurable performance
Constructivism requires active mental participation to acquire meaning. Instruction is monitored and adjusted with regard to the learner’s feedback. The learning process is circular and relies on a keen interaction between instructor and learner. The learner is motivated when finding a connection and a meaning between the new information and what already exists in mental storage; the instructor facilitates this connection, and adjusts it based on the learner’s feedback.

Linda Lau (2000) states that “the learner capitalizes on the constructive nature of learning” by means of a series of successive phases. These are exploration, explanation, “Term Invention”, “Concept Application”, and evaluation (pp. 11-12). In the exploration phase, the instructor initiates exposure through conceptual exploration and observation. The learner analyzes and identifies the inherent qualities of the concept. The explanation phase explores and gives significance to the concept. During this phase, inferences and connections are formulated to give the concept meaning. The “Term Invention phase” gives substance and meaning to the concept, and “terminology, explanation and connections […] make up the learning experience” (p. 11). The learner applies this new knowledge in the “Concept Application” phase, and establishes a direct relationship between the concept and stored information. The evaluation phase assesses the success of the construction of knowledge through the learner’s “responses, questions, records and actions” (p. 12). This process ensures a direct mental association between the concept and the learner’s experience.

As Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2003) point out; the Fordist approach to distance education is behaviorist. Fordism relates to “mass production for mass consumption” of automobiles during Henry Ford’s time (Simonson et al., 2003, p. 49). Fordism is considered a
successful strategy in business, and when applied to distance education, some believe it would follow the same expectation. When education is provided en masse for the mass with standardized materials and proper reinforcement, the results will generally follow the measured and expected behavior pattern.

Otto Peters classifies distance education as an industrialized, Fordist form of education. Instruction, materials, application, and assessment are standardized for a magnitude of learners. “Low product innovation, low process variability, and low labor responsibility” are the working variables in the mass production of Fordist distance education (Simonson et al., 2003, p. 49). Peters concludes that effective distance education relies on a rigid “division of labor” with mechanization, planning, organization, control, objectification, formalization, standardization and a centralized administration overseeing the system (p. 42). This automation of education is what Renner likens to a factory structured setting (p. 50).

Lau believes that “Web-based instruction today is based on behaviorism” and that “distance learning educators should acknowledge constructivism as the new paradigm for learning” (p. 13). Simonson et al. (2003) share this attitude with Lau. Constructivist learning is associated with a post-Fordist strategy where “product innovation, process variability, and labor responsibility” play key roles in the success of distance education (p. 50). Simonson et al. argue that the Fordist strategy lacks the flexibility to “adapt to the changing needs in society”, and states that the learner must find an individual meaning to an experience. This subjective connection is not achieved through a “preprogrammed curricula” but instead, through “a process of personal and cooperative experimentation, questioning, and problem solving through which meaning can be constructed” (p. 51). In the post-Fordist scenario, education is decentralized and autonomous.
A constructivist strategy should be applied not only in traditional classroom instruction but also in distance education. The instructor must develop an interactive relationship with the distance learner, acknowledge the unique composition of the individual, recognize the person’s life experiences, and aid in educating through real-life connections. Learning is subjective and learners are unique individuals. Generalizations and classifications given to individuals reject each person’s essence. Only through acknowledging and building upon a person’s perception, can we attempt to transform it. Post-Fordism and constructivism recognize and facilitate this distinctive metamorphosis in learning.
References

http://web.cocc.edu/cbuell/theories/constructivism.htm

http://web.cocc.edu/cbuell/theories/Behaviorism.htm
