Introduction

This discussion examines the constructivist theory. It examines its benefits and limitations and summarizes how the writer applies constructivism in her own learning environment.

Discussion

Constructivism is a learning philosophy that espouses that each learner constructs their own understanding based on personal experiences, both current and past.

Constructivism can be traced at least to the eighteenth century and the work of the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, who held that humans can only clearly understand what they have themselves constructed.

The underpinnings of constructivism can be found in Piaget’s theory of cognitive development which states that a child’s cognitive development is influenced by both heredity and experiences in their environment. "To understand is to discover, or reconstruct by rediscovery, and such conditions must be complied with if in the future individuals are to be formed who are capable of production and creativity and not simply repetition" (Piaget, 1973).

Dewey (1896) criticized contemporary psychology for treating organisms as detached from their environment. Ernst Von Glaserfeld’s ‘radical constructivism’ says that ‘authentic’ learning depends on seeing a problem as ‘one’s own problem’, as an obstacle that obstructs one’s progress toward a goal.

Bruner, like Dewey and Piaget asserts that learning is an active process in which students construct new ideas or concepts based on their current knowledge.

Teachers have found that discovery learning is most successful when students have prerequisite knowledge and undergo some structured experiences. (Roblyer, Edwards, and Havriluk, 1997).

Constructivism can also be reviewed from two other positions: the teacher and the environment.
Constructivists believe that instruction should be learner-centered. That the teacher should act as a facilitator instead of the expert. Instructional goals and objectives should be negotiated and not imposed (Murphy, 1997). Teachers are not “sage on the stage” who only transmits knowledge. They are “guides on the side” who provide opportunities for learners to test their present understandings of the world (Tucker, 2000). Teachers should also act as a coordinator, facilitator, resource advisors, tutors or coaches (Murphy, 1997).

Chung (1991) described a constructivist learning environment is characterized by (1) shared knowledge among teachers and students; (2) shared authority and responsibility among teachers and students; (3) the teacher’s new role as a guide in instruction; and (4) heterogeneous and small groupings of students.

Technology can help towards this end. Tam (2000) discussed the construction of technology-supported learning environments. “…On one side, one can see even more individual learning in a student sitting in front of his or her computer. But on the other hand, the technology allows for much more diversified and socially rich learning contexts; peer tutoring via computer; computer networks, e-mail, telecommunications.

With all its benefits, constructivism has its criticisms and limitations. A constructivist approach to school reform would involve a shift in the entire focus of education. (Liao and Miller, 1999-2000). Schools would have to evolve from teacher-centered to learner-controlled.

Constructivism requires a paradigm shift for teachers and learners who have been conditioned in traditional settings. Those who “require” to give and receive absolutes: “rights”, “wrongs” and certifications may flounder in their roles unless the teachers are taught how to lead instead of “tell”; create a more open environment. Students will have to take initiative and not assume the subordinate position when problem-solving. They will need to be able to communicate their own ideas, rather than “regurgitating” information.

Assessment is difficult in that in a constructivist environment, it would no longer be standardized. Each student would have to demonstrate their knowledge in their own way because their individual learning took place in different manners.

Constructivism also has its place in the corporate learning environment.

Specifically, in the case of training associates to assist hospital patients in finding alternate methods of payment for their healthcare, their instructional designers and trainers use the student’s “gut reaction” and resourcefulness with traditional training methods when designing curriculum and assessments, and instructing.
Employees are asked to use their own experiences to make up role-plays, activities and case studies in practicing empathy, customer service, and “bedside manners” when dealing with caseworkers and patients.

While constructivism is of great value, rote learning and memorization still has its place in this environment. There are many regulations, programs and medical codes associates must be certified to be able to work. Government necessitates that they meet certain requirements. They are tested for these things as in a traditional environment.