

Chapter 70

Online Social Constructivism: Theory vs. Practice

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ABSTRACT

Renowned Soviet psychologist and father of social constructivist learning theory Lev Vygotsky (1978) stated: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level” (p. 57). In online practice, social constructivism involves students learning from and with each other in computer-mediated collaborative learning communities. In order for students and faculty to succeed in the online social constructivist environment these efforts demand institutional support. This chapter will introduce issues facing students and faculty that relate to the implementation of online social constructivism. Recommendations focusing on online student support and professional development will be offered as well as a discussion of future trends pointing toward a digital divide between the students of institutions who do support these practices and students of institutions in which faculty have to make do.

INTRODUCTION

Renowned Soviet psychologist and father of social constructivist learning theory Lev Vygotsky (1978) stated: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level” (p. 57). One of the cornerstones of Vygotsky’s work is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Focusing on

the potential for learner development in context of social interaction, the ZPD is “the distance between the [learner’s] actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of [the learner’s] potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The socially-based knowledge-building process of ZPD can be initiated, for instance, by group work centered around problems, case studies, simulations or projects as

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well as discussions on personal experiences, readings, resources, and learning products. In short, in online educational practice, social constructivism involves students learning from and with each other throughout the semester in computer-mediated collaborative learning communities. The following unedited quotes come from students who experienced this kind of learning environment in the author's social constructivist online course at an American community college:

I was able to learn more... in an [environment] that was non judgmental of a person but more of the interaction of thoughts and ideas.

It seemed like each person had a different set of examples for each aspect of [the subject], so each [contribution] I read expanded my horizon.

As I read other students' postings I could see how they were thinking, as we all perceive things differently. In essence, we have been teaching one another.

I learned that giving feedback to fellow classmates is also a learning experience for yourself.

At first, I didn't think I needed all that feedback, now I rely on it! ☺

According to Storey and Tebes (2008), 3.48 million higher education students were estimated to have taken at least one online course in the fall of 2006. This high number of online course offerings coincides with the movement toward institutions of higher education becoming increasingly learning-centered. This kind of institution "places learning first, putting it at the heart of everything that the college does" (Cross, 1998, p. 5). The core principle of the learning-centered college involves all of the stakeholders asking, "Are our students learning? How do we know?" For online faculty, the question "What is the best thing I can do to help my students learn online?" is added to this collec-

tion. The current literature on best practices make the choice clear—adhere to social constructivist learning theory. The virtues of this theory have proven themselves as per empirical research (see McKeachie, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000) as well as practical online experience (see Harasim et al., 1995; Roberts, 2004).

Lynch (2001) reports a drop-out rate of 35-50% for online students. Commenting on the academic failures of online students, Tinto (Personal Communication, August 19, 2008) said "access without support does not constitute opportunity." This sentiment also rings true for faculty who have access to social constructivist learning theory but not the institutional support needed to implement it successfully. Online social constructivism is different from traditional educational models. Hence, the practical application of the theory needs to be supported by institutional staff and administrators based on its own premises, including technology and pedagogy-specific student and faculty preparation, course development, course support, student assessment, course evaluation, and faculty evaluation.

According to Nixon and Leftwich (2002), "collaboration and communication among faculty, staff, and administration... is essential in the process of creating and maintaining successful distance learning environments" (p. 23). Accordingly, the primary objective of this chapter is to begin to bridge the gap between faculty experience and administrator comprehension of online social constructivism. For faculty members who have made the leap, this kind of change is all-encompassing and irreversible. It is the basis for their personal integrity as professional educators. Thus, the secondary objective of this chapter is to offer confirmation of some of the struggles social constructivist online faculty face.

The first part of this chapter introduces the fundamental concepts that relate to online social constructivism. The second section discusses issues that pertain to online social constructivist practices, including problems relating to the stu-

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