

## WinkWorld October 2002

Constructivist - Constructionist

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Draft for a segment of the foundations chapter of *Passionate Pedagogy*/

It appears that many understand the construct of building knowledge jointly with another or with others - we come together; we read; inquire; explore and we learn together. Thus, the word, constructivist, has a broad base of mutual understanding. Or did we mean, construcTIONist? At the same time that many educators are coming to understand and even to live a generative approach in the classroom, among some academics there is developing a more complex understanding of both of the words, construcTIVist and construcTIONist. For educators, we need to understand the evolving concepts. In what follows, we will focus directly on construcTIVist and construcTIONist. The capital letters in the two words serve only as mnemonic learning aides. In addition we provide the following cognitive coat hooks, which precede our explanation.

ConstrucTIVist is to Piaget, as construcTIONist is to Vygotsky.

ConstrucTIVist is to cognitive construction, as construcTIONist is to social construction.

ConstruTIVist is to interaction, as construcTIONist is to collaboration.

ConstruTIVist is to facilitation, as construcTIONist is to mediation.

In order to construct our growing understanding, the meaning of social becomes pivotal. The truth is that we must understand two distinct meanings for the word, social. The traditional North American understanding of the word, social, means learning in interaction with another. You read a good book, and you talk with a friend, and you learn together: social learning. This meaning of social has Piagetian roots. Remember it this way:

- When the two of us talk about Piaget, we are interacting and engaged in social learning.
- Or, as Joan and Dawn talk about Piaget's developmental levels, they are socially learning.
- Or, as the graduate students walk through the classroom door, talking about their teaching contexts and the night's assignments, this is social learning.
- Or, when we go out to move the cows, we talk with them (Okay, we yell; they moo). When they finally move to the next pasture, with us cheering wildly, our interaction is social learning. We learn to be more patient; they learn to go where we want.

This first and very accepted meaning of social is linked to the word, construTIVist. Both relate to INTER/between types of relationships and knowledge construction. Semantically and historically, they both spring from cognitivism.

However, there is another deeper and more complex meaning of social, which is not as well known in North American educational circles. However, its use is growing, particularly with Vygotskian scholars in the United States, who have been influenced by a more international

perspective. Remember, Vygotsky was born, lived, and died in Russia.

Let us try to explain it this way: If Dawn is sitting alone on the ranch, reading a book about Vygotsky, it still has the potential to be social learning, ONLY it is, not simply interaction with another person, it can be interaction with the social/cultural/historical context she brings with her and that which is within her environment. For example, as Dawn reads the Vygotsky book all alone, she still is bringing other cultural artifacts to the learning: her computer is in front of her; another Vygotsky book is within reach; an educational foundational text is lying open on the table by her computer. The computer and the two other books are cultural artifacts, which she uses to make meaning. In addition, her language is the cultural tool she is using as she mumbles to herself while searching for a specific file she knows is in her computer. Dawn socially interacts with her social/cultural/historical context, including a cultural tool (language) and cultural artifacts (her computer and two books).

Here is another example. The next time you are in a teachers' lounge, watch people as they interact with the copy machine in an attempt to copy/collate/staple/count. This is what you might see: They begin to use a cultural tool (their language); you can hear the muttering. They might even get a little testy if you interrupt their social interaction, with their own language, and the copier. The cultural artifacts can be almost anything which is handy: the various buttons to push, instructions taped on the top; another colleague's copies lying around; and perhaps, even another person who, unfortunately, happens to pass by-providing it is the right person, preferably an office person who runs the machine daily and brings a wealth of social/cultural and certainly, historical context to the machine.

Yet, another example of this Vygotskian and construcTIONist explanation of social follows. When Joan writes from her home office, she can be all alone, but she is not all alone. The reason for this is that her computer sits quietly in a corner, which is surrounded by Joan's books. She has her cultural tool (her language), and her treasured cultural artifacts, her books, surrounding her. She has the legacy and knowledge of all of her heroes and heroines who have contributed to her understandings. Without ever leaving her chair, she has access to a wealth of social/cultural/historical knowledge, so that she can co-construct her own understandings. This, then, is the second and more esoteric meaning of social.

This second meaning of social, which we imagine is relatively new for most of us, is linked to the word, construcTIONist. Both relate to INTRA/within types of relationships and knowledge co-construction in a social/cultural/historical context, which is, often times, hard to see. Semantically, these words spring from a more critically reflective and socially-grounded approach to teaching and learning.

So armed with real life examples and a couple of summary statements, let's make one last mnemonic learning tool.

ConstruTIVist: think Piaget; think cognitive; think interaction.

ConstrucTIONist: think Vygotsky; think critical reflection; think intra-mental.

It is because of the double meaning of social; and the different meanings of constructivist and constructionist, that in this book, we will use the word, generative, to imply a broad semantic understanding of building knowledge, as opposed to transmitting knowledge.

The entire previous discussion raises another question for us: What does to know mean? For example, in schools we want students to know the curriculum; to know the times tables;

to know the theorems; to know the proper grammatical rule. Some even suggest that there are specific things that all students should know. What does to know mean? Looking back on the discussion of social and social and of construTIVist and construcTIONist, check yourself to see how much you know. Imagine that the first test question is: What does social mean? The second question is: What is construTIVist and construcTIONist? Chose the right answer for you.

Level one: not a clue

Level two: a vague notion, but I cannot explain it.

Level three: I can articulate it, but I will only confuse anyone who listened, but it would help me.

Level four: I can articulate it, and you would "get" it.