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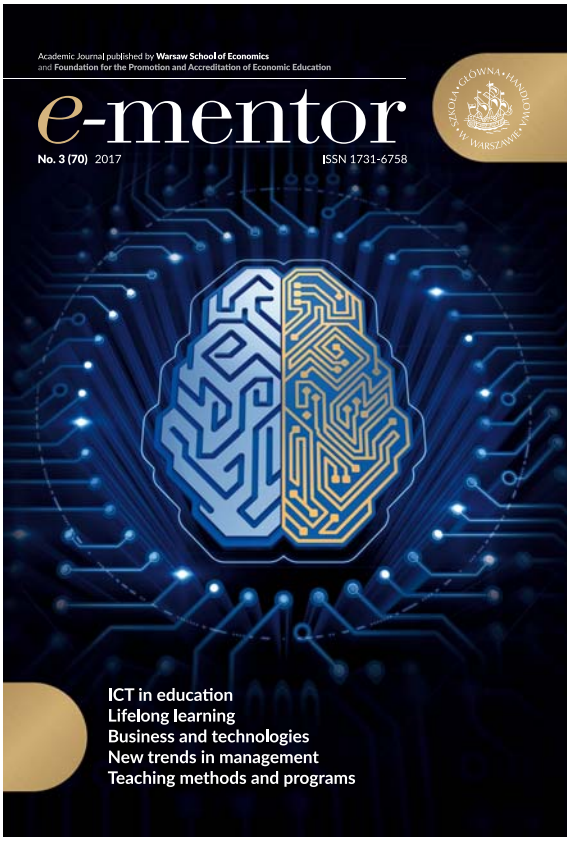

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Social Constructivism in Online Learning: Andragogical Influence and the Effectual Educator

Scott Secore

Today's educational landscape is changing swiftly. Technology is steadily improving, and the demands of the modern workforce weigh heavily on both businesses and the individuals within; and so, it is imperative that higher education keeps pace accordingly. As adult learners return to school in record numbers, online (distance) learning has become a prevalent staple of academia. As a result, the learning models and teaching methods applied in online courses have arisen as a contentious source of debate. Research and expert opinion often point to constructivism – more specifically, social constructivism – as the preferred delivery mode for online learning and adult education (andragogy). However, latent ideologies and assumptions of both constructivism and andragogy, coupled with technology's overwhelming influence on contemporary education, leave the door open for continued argument regarding its impact on both the student and the teacher. Consequently, this raises several critical questions. First, what exactly are constructivism and social constructivism? Second, how does social constructivism work? Third, what roles do students, teachers, and technology play in the learning process? Lastly, how do the distinctions of andragogy affect social constructivism in online teaching?

What are Constructivism and Social Constructivism?

Constructivism, as a learning theory, implies that learners conceive understanding and form meaning via a blend of their own existing knowledge base, their actions, and their individual experiences. Simply put, newly acquired information builds upon previously obtained knowledge to "construct" broader cognizance. As such, knowledge acquired by the learner is not pre-specified, and evaluation of learning is more subjective, since it does not rely on explicit quantitative criteria (Duke, Harper, & Johnston, 2013, pp. 4–13).

The genesis of modern constructivism is arguably derivative of both late 19th century-early 20th century existentialist philosophy (e.g. Kierkegaard & Nietzsche) and functional psychology (e.g. James & Dewey), as both disciplines intrinsically explore the relationship(s) between one's personal environment and experiences, and their effects on cognition, behavior, and choice. In contemporary academia, however, the germination of constructivist ideologies resides in Piaget's theory of cognitive development, wherein Piaget (1936, 1952) hypothesizes that intellectual growth is a process occurring in incremental stages as one adapts to their environment. Adaptation transpires through assimilation and accommodation, where the individual progressively incorporates new experiences into old experiences, thus altering how they think and perceive the world around them. In essence, the individual learns through discovery, as personal development precedes learning. Accordingly, constructivism is learner-centered, meaning that the theoretical focus on learning resides with the student, not the teacher. However, as the instructor serves to advance the process and ensure scholarship, the role of the instructor is crucial. At its root, in true constructivist learning, the following four epistemological maxims exist and/or occur:

- Knowledge conception is a result of active cognition;
- Learning is adaptive and more steadfast given the proper environment;
- Subjective thinking – organization and sensible comprehension of the learner's experiences – is applied; and
- Learning involves social, cultural, and language-based processes (Doolittle & Camp, 1999; Gergen, 1995, pp. 17–40; von Glasersfeld, 1984, pp. 17–40; Vygotsky, 1978).

These four dictums form the basis of – and provide the building blocks for – the constructivist learning theory. Doolittle and Camp (1999, p. 5) neatly surmise that:

> *Constructivism acknowledges the learner's active role in the personal creation of knowledge, the importance of experience (both individual and social) in this knowledge creation process, and the realization that the knowledge created will vary in its degree of validity as an accurate representation of reality*.

Nonetheless, the seemingly malleable nature of these four precepts often leads to interpretive deviation. Consequently, varied casts (e.g. cognitive, radical, and social) of constructivism are common. However,

only one truly accentuates and applies all four of these epistemological tenets: Social Constructivism.

The origins of social constructivism lie at the heart of Vygotsky's social development theory (1978), in which he stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development (McLeod, 2014). In contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning and development do not materialize in predetermined stages, nor does the individual need to adapt to and/or approach the process alone [discovery]. Rather, learning is a collaborative activity wherein the environment influences the individual, and learning propels development. Ozer (2004) offers a précis:

> *For Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development – the distance between the actual development of a child as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more peers – suggests that cognitive development is limited to a certain range at a particular age. However, with the help of social interaction, such as assistance from a mentor, students can comprehend concepts and schemes that they cannot know on their own* (para. 11).

Therefore, such strong emphasis on the aforementioned tenets of constructivist learning provides recognition to the social disposition of constructivism, signifying an outcome of attained knowledge through social interaction, and thus implying it is a shared experience and not an individual experience (Doolittle & Camp, 1999; Prawatt & Floden, 1994, pp. 37–48).

Embedded within the framework of social constructivism one will find two approaches, or models, for which learning outcomes take place: Cooperative/Collaborative and Sociocultural. In many respects, social constructivism is a meld of these two approaches, as it essentially applies the underlying principles that shape each approach.

Social Constructivist Learning Models

Cooperative/Collaborative

The first approach to social constructivist learning is the cooperative/collaborative model. While there is discussion as to whether this is an actual form of constructivist learning, or rather an offspring closely related to the constructivist model, the heart of the cooperative/collaborative model nevertheless underscores the impactful role of social intercourse in the learning process (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995; Schell & Janicki, 2013).

According to Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995), learning occurs when an individual interacts with other individuals; specifically, *as individuals exercise, verify, solidify and improve their mental models through discussions and information sharing* (p. 268). In educational settings, the cooperative model stresses and encourages communication among peers to both aid and strengthen the learning experience (Schell & Janicki, 2013). Advocates of cooperative learning believe that increased levels of interaction ultimately result in boosted creativity, critical thinking, and knowledge construction (Schell & Janicki, 2013). Additionally, collaboration also elicits participation, and contributes to improving communication and listening skills (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995). Simply put, learners must interact with one another to attain meaningful knowledge acquisition (Chametzky, 2014, pp. 813–821).

Sociocultural

The second learning approach is the sociocultural model. According to Carswell (as cited in Carwile, 2007, p. 1), the sociocultural model asserts that *learning best occurs when the learning event is meaningful, more deeply or elaborately processed, situated in context, and rooted in the learner's cultural background and personal knowledge*. Put another way, learning has roots in both social and cultural contexts, wherein the individual's total environment influences their ability to acquire knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and form meaningful connections.

Notwithstanding, debate exists in relation to sociocultural learning, as some aspects of the model seem to oppose the cooperative/collaborative model – chiefly its individualistic tendencies. These leanings go hand-in-hand with the cooperative/collaborative model, although, as Doolittle and Camp (1999, p. 8) opine, *social interaction always occurs within a sociocultural context, resulting in knowledge that is bound to a specific time and place*. Similarly, Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995, p. 270) posit that instruction within the sociocultural model is always *culturally value laden and embedded in a person's everyday cultural/social context* (p. 270). Further still, a main goal of constructivism is to create an information object-rich and socially meaningful (i.e. communication and collaboration filled) learning environment (Gold, 2001). As such, individualization of cooperative learning in a sociocultural context occurs when the student "interprets and assimilates the new knowledge, embedding it within his or her individual experience" (Carwile, 2007, p. 2). Thus, despite debate, assertions concerning the aims of sociocultural learning hold true.

Social Constructivist Online Teaching

Doolittle and Camp (1999, p. 9) propose that the following eight factors are essential to constructivist pedagogies:

- Learning should involve social negotiation and mediation;
- Content and skills should be relevant to the learner;
- Teachers serve primarily as guides and facilitators of learning, not instructors;
- Learning should take place in authentic and real-world environments;
- Teachers should provide for and encourage multiple perspectives and representations of content;

- Content and skills should be construed within the framework of the learner's prior knowledge;
- Students should be measured formatively, serving to inform future learning experiences; and
- Students should be encouraged to become self-regulatory, self-mediated, and self-aware.

In formulating how an online social constructivist approach to pedagogy may work, one might consider these eight factors. And by nature, online education mostly encapsulates all of them. However, the last three factors proposed by Doolittle and Camp (1999) are not consistently, or easily, gauged. For instance, acknowledgment of – and provision for – a pupil's pre-existing, current, and future knowledge is sometimes difficult to measure in an online setting – particularly in asynchronous environments. Without presumption on the part of the instructor, or an existing relationship between the instructor and the student, asynchronous environments often require a healthy dose of direct and/or indirect assessment. Likewise, most students jump into online learning unprepared, due to their naivety about the differences from traditional learning (Bowman, 2012). For that reason, it would appear that self-regulation, self-mediation, and self-awareness are really prerequisites for online learning, as they are vital to the learning process, yet are not effortlessly acquired skills.

As mentioned before, social constructivism employs a mixture of both the cooperative/collaborative and sociocultural models of learning. Therefore, the learner gains knowledge through meaningful social interaction with others, and applies that information to a context in which they are familiar and to which they can relate. Based on Doolittle and Camp's (1999) pedagogical factors – and despite social constructivism being identified as learner-centered – successful learning achievement within a social constructivist framework places a great deal of the onus on the teacher. This is especially true in an online setting.

As suggested earlier, a constructivist teacher is more a catalyst for learning than a traditional instructor; wherein the primary focus of the teacher is the learning process itself and the outcomes it produces (Carwile, 2007). As defined by Schell and Janicki (2013, p. 29), *The role of the instructor in this setting is to act as a guide in the learning process. The instructor poses questions for the students to think about and then the instructor helps students navigate toward answers*. In other words, the instructor is more than a facilitator of learning, but also a mentor, a consultant, and a coach (Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007, pp. 309–328). Gold (2001, pp. 35–57) elaborates on this premise further, proposing that teachers of online courses fill three fundamental roles: organizational, social, and intellectual.

The teacher's *organizational* role is to lay the groundwork for discussion, meaning that they must establish and present objectives, rules, and timetables for the course (Carwile, 2007, pp. 68–73; Gold, 2001, pp. 35–57). The teacher's *social* role is creating a safe, positive, friendly, and motivating environment that fosters an open and meaningful learning experience (Carwile, 2007, pp. 68–73; Gold, 2001, pp. 35–57; Huang, 2002, pp. 27–37). This is achievable as *Good moderators often send out welcome messages, use a personal tone, and seed their feedback with specific examples and references* (Gold, 2001, p. 43). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the teacher's *intellectual* role is to serve as a facilitator of understanding. By emphasizing crucial discussion points and primary ideas embedded within facts, as well as asking questions, soliciting responses, provoking critical thinking, and developing themes that relate to assignments, teachers can better ensure knowledge acquisition (Gold, 2001, pp. 35–57; Mayer, 1996). Mayer (1996) explains constructivist teaching, and teachers, as follows:

> *Constructivist teachers frame instruction, so their students can understand the relevance of new knowledge. Relevance need not preexist in students; when it doesn't, constructivist teachers nudge students to gradually realize the relevance of their emerging knowledge by encouraging them to explore new materials and solve problems* (para. 11).

In this setting, students are not only learning the course material, they are also discovering their own abilities to contemplate and research a topic (Schell & Janicki, 2013). However, as online learning does not offer the same methodologies used in traditional learning environments – such as face-to-face communication, libraries, and resource rooms – student approaches to learning, discernment, and critical thinking have seen alteration. As such, existing learning principles and methodologies are progressively becoming reflections of their social environments (Siemens, 2005, pp. 1–8). In this way, Mayer's description of constructivist learning and teaching extends beyond convention.

According to Siemens' (2005, pp. 1–8) theory of connectivism, in today's technologically reliant world, learning no longer occurs within the individual – as proposed by constructivism. Rather, much like social constructivism, it also occurs outside the individual (i.e. learning that is stored and manipulated by technology). Consequently, social learning has become a complex (non-linear) and globalized system of networks that create connections from which people can quickly draw information outside of their primary knowledge base, and take action accordingly. Simply put, learning is no longer an individualistic activity (Mattar, 2010, pp. 1–16). Duke et al. (2013, pp. 6) summarize:

> *The individual does not have control; rather it is a collaboration of current ideas as seen from a present reality. The core skill is the ability to see connections between information sources and to maintain that connection to facilitate continual learning*.

Given the perpetual evolution of technology, and its subsequent influence on educatory practices, metamorphoses in both learning and instruction

are inevitable. For that reason, prudent and routine consideration to technological, epistemological, and pedagogical transformations concerning instructional design and dissemination is imperative. That is to say, teachers must demonstrate diligence in both course construction and presentation to provide an environment that fully adopts the social constructivist model. Therefore, as technology continues to radically modify the higher education landscape, and reshape how people communicate and learn, Gold's (2001, pp. 35–57) suggested teacher roles remain both relevant and vital for online learning.

The Influence of Andragogy on Social Constructivist Online Teaching

Social constructivism also appropriates philosophies and theories often associated with adult learning, or andragogy. Knowles (1980, 1984) proposed the following six assumptions, or principles, that he felt were applicable to adult learners:

- Self-concept: As people mature, they move from being a dependent personality toward being more self-directed;
- Experience: Over time, adults amass a growing set of experiences that provide a prolific resource for learning;
- Readiness to learn: As people mature, they are more interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their jobs or personal lives;
- Orientation to learning: There is a change in time perspective as people mature. They advance from gathering knowledge for future use to the immediate application of knowledge. Thus, adult learners are more problem-centered than subject-centered;
- Motivation to learn: As a person matures, they become motivated by various internal incentives – such as need for self-esteem, curiosity, desire to achieve, and satisfaction of accomplishment; and
- Relevance: Adults need to know why they need to learn something. Furthermore, because adults manage other aspects of their lives, they are willing and able to direct and participate in the planning and implementation of their own learning (Keesee, 2010; Knowles, 1980, 1984).

Brookfield (1995) also pinpointed four major areas of research that he felt were germane to adult learning. Similarly to Knowles, Brookfield's (1995) conclusions revolved around self-direction, critical thinking, experiential learning, and the ability to "learn how to learn." Additionally, Huang (2002, p. 33) recognizes that in both constructivism and andragogy the learner seeks to assume ownership of their education, stressing:

> *Adult learners want to learn skills related to their real life or work experience. Thus, the belief of educators in teaching should be grounded in adults' experiences, and these experiences represent a valuable resource. The learning environment should provide real-world, case-based environments for meaningful and authentic knowledge*.

All of the inferences made by Knowles, Brookfield, and Huang have a central function in social constructivist learning, regardless of the learner's age. As discussed earlier, the second factor of Doolittle and Camp's (1999) constructivist pedagogy contends the relevancy of both content and skills to the learner. Doolittle and Camp (1999) concisely summarize this, and all Knowles', Brookfield's, and Huang's affirmations, by stating:

> *If knowledge is to enhance one's adaptation and functioning, then the knowledge attained (i.e., content and skills) must be relevant to the individual's current situation, understanding, and goal. This relevancy is likely to lead to an increase in motivation, as the individual comes to understand the need for certain knowledge. Ultimately, experience with relevant tasks will provide the individual with the mental processes, social information, and personal experiences necessary for enhanced functioning within one's practical environment* (p. 9).

This sentiment is significant to online settings as the environment provided by the instructor needs to correspond to something familiar to the student – both pragmatically and conceptually. Additionally, in this setting, diversity among students varies greatly, and every student brings a different set of experiences to the table. As a result, recreating authenticity may prove a formidable task. However, a social constructivist approach, combined with connectivist ideologies, affords the instructor the ability to implement contextualized instructional strategies that precipitate self-direction and motivation, as well as simulate authentic life scenarios.

Foremost, students need comfort and "safety" in a learning environment, and in regard to the learning experience (Chametzky, 2014, pp. 813–821; Millheim, 2012). As discussed earlier, many students – adult learners in particular – often enter the world of e-learning unprepared. The same holds true for instructors new to the format. Consequently, both may experience uninvited stress and anxiety. Morrison (2014) expounds:

> *Students need a wide range of skills to learn successfully in online settings; they need to be tech savvy, know how to collaborate with peers, conduct online research, navigate proficiently within the learning management platform, manage their time effectively and engage in the learning process by interacting with content, peers and completing course work via the learning platform* (para. 1).

Nonetheless, undue stress and anxiety of this type are avoidable. By supplying a copious array of resources to students, instructors can both streamline the learning process and better align their students with course objectives. Naturally, resource specification and accessibility are tailorable to any given context. Thus, resources addressing the technical, academic,

and study skills of the student will not only help curb apprehension, they will also help to improve efficiency (Morrison, 2014).

Further still, and perhaps more importantly, the socio-constructivist environment more closely mimics the type of environment the student will face, or is presently facing, outside of schooling (Schell & Janicki, 2013). In the "real world," persons with instantaneous answers and validity about a problem are not always available. Correspondingly, the individual must utilize their resources, collect data, arrive at a conclusion, process a judgment, and act accordingly. Sound familiar? As mentioned previously, in a constructivist setting students not only learn course material, they also uncover their ability to explore and research a topic. Schell and Janicki (2013, p. 30) assert that *the student who has learned to discover knowledge for himself/herself is better prepared to come to a conclusion and the supporting process that led to the conclusion*. Apropos this concept, instructors of online courses can promote authenticity by designing course plans and activities that reflect *real-world problems and their practical solutions* (Chametzky, 2014, p. 816). Whether collaborative discu ssion posts, or independent research projects, structured assignments with open-ended themes afford students the opportunity to explore solutions to problems relative to their personal plight. Akin to real life, tangible means and objectives are requisite for rightful ownership of learning, as well as successful learning outcomes. As such, educators employing a social constructivist approach to online teaching bear enormous responsibility toward furnishing students with academically amenable environments armed with the tools required for maximization of the learning experience.

Conclusion

As the workforce and technology continue to evolve, and online educational opportunities become a mainstay in our higher educational system, one can easily perceive the advantages to application of social constructivist learning in an online setting. The model, as defined, checks all the boxes of desired qualities, format, and outcomes the contemporary student needs – be they typical college-aged students or adult learners. While the social constructivist model places the student at the forefront of the learning process, it is clear that the role of the instructor is of equal importance and value to the overall learning experience – even in an asynchronous format. The teacher's ability to create and foster an environment suitable for open, engaging, and meaningful interaction, coupled with their capacity to quickly assess and establish a unifying epistemological foundation and curriculum design authentic to "real-world" application is paramount to student success. Though social constructivism is learner-centered, without an effectual instructor expected learning outcomes may never be fully satisfied.

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Social Constructivism in Online Learning: Andragogical Influence and the Effectual Educator

As adult learners return to school in record numbers, online (distance) learning has become a prevalent staple of academia. Accordingly, how best to facilitate and ensure successful "e-learning" experiences is the focus of much debate. Utilization of constructivist learning models often enables this education process. However, constructivist doctrine and the realities of learning in adulthood present ostensible juxtaposition regarding student-teacher precedence in the "classroom". While students are fundamentally the center of both constructivism and online learning, the onus lies with the teacher to provide students with an environment in which to flourish. This article examines the basic concepts of constructivist and social constructivist learning, highlights their relative andragogical similarities and influences, and underscores the critical role of a teacher in an online social constructivist setting.

Scott Secore, M.F.A., is a freelance consultant, and current Ph.D. candidate in Educational Leadership at the University of the Cumberlands. Scott has nearly 25 years of experience working professionally in both the performing arts and higher education, wherein he has served as a Fine & Performing Arts Programming and Venue Director, an Academic Program Coordinator, and a Professor of Theatre and Communications. Scott's research interests primarily concern the enrichment and promotion of constructive learning strategies for arts-based programs, the need for effectual arts-based academic leadership development, and the employment of effective strategic enrollment management strategies for arts-based higher education programs.