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Eeva Kallio

University of Jyväskylä, eeva.k.kallio@jyu.fi

Yvonne Wells

Suffolk University

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Systematic constructivism applied to higher education in Psychology

Eeva Kallio¹ with Yvonne Wells²

A Review of:

Constructing undergraduate psychology curricula: Promoting authentic learning and assessment in the teaching of psychology.

Joseph A. Mayo. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010.

I.

Critical reflection about the teaching of psychology is important for many reasons. Psychology is a discipline with roots in several camps. First, there are many traditions of thought, ranging from humanistic and psychodynamic to experimental-positivistic traditions. There is no lack of models and different perspectives from which to draw. Hunt (2007) notes that psychologists from the turn of the century until today describe it as a “multifarious” jumble of different theoretical and research perspectives, lacking in a stable paradigm. Since psychology hangs in the balance between humanist applications and pure science, the teaching of psychology must take into account a plurality of approaches in order to create holistic frameworks that are continuously relevant to and focused on students. Integration of the field requires an ongoing critical conversation which Mayo (2010) conducts in stellar fashion in his book: *Constructing undergraduate psychology curricula: Promoting authentic learning and assessment in the teaching of psychology*.

Mayo’s (2010) book is divided across four themes pertaining to the teaching of psychology. First, differently from other approaches pertaining to the teaching of psychology, Mayo begins with the history of psychology, then takes up the issue of constructivism as an important philosophical perspective that can guide the field. Constructivism as the key component to the developmental work of Jean Piaget (1947; 2001) pertains to the idea that human beings—even very young infants—come to know about psychological realities because they interact or engage with the context from which they are extracting those realities. This idea of constructivism inspires the teaching of truth, in this case truth about psychology, by valuing what the student brings to the learning process and by emphasizing active mental engagement between teacher and student (Friere, 1990; Piaget, 2001). A third theme is student-centered pedagogical methods that are specifically demonstrated, focusing the reader on the question of how to teach the material rather than focusing on the substance of the material students are to learn. The final, most critical theme of the book focuses on the future of education in psychology, in view of the emerging importance of internet-based technologies that can

¹ Eeva Kallio, Finnish Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, eeva.k.kallio@jyu.fi.

² Yvonne Wells, Department of Psychology, Suffolk University, Boston, MA, 02108.

be embraced by teachers and used to communicate with technologically reared students in today's psychology—and in fact K-12 as well as higher education—classrooms.

The major theoretical background of the constructivist education is timely and clearly described, bringing major models and theories in the field of critical thinking to light. This author's approach tries to promote active learning. Mayo (2010) keeps definitions of constructivism short and concise while touching on historical roots and "dead philosophers" lightly. In this way he tries to whet the appetite of the teacher as learner, perhaps realizing the sense that history and philosophy are dry and not relevant to the practice of psychology that is especially critical in our stressful world of conflicts and economic woes.

Heavy emphasis is placed on Piaget and Vygotsky's theories as these can inform the "how" of critical psychology education. An instructional model based on what Mayo calls *Five E's* (engage, explore, explain, elaborate and evaluate) is used as a guide to higher education, especially in the teaching of psychology. All these *E's* are discussed in the book with care. Socratic teaching, which involves calling on the prepared student to excite participation, is related to *Engagement* in constructivist teaching. *Exploration* entreats students to construct their own ideas and hypotheses and tries to test them as active problem solvers. *Explanation* pertains to critical discussion and evaluation of the material to be learned. In *Elaboration* the students structure their concepts, and also connect them with other concepts. There is thus a striving for transformation and conceptual change that could make the approach of the field of psychology more relevant to the needs of students currently majoring in the field. In the *Evaluation* phase of constructivist teaching, authentic assessment is done to measure what students have learned by asking them to apply knowledge to real-world situations. The hope is that students will transfer knowledge from textbooks to reality more efficiently.

The learning goals of psychology are stated clearly: to have an adequate knowledge base in psychology, to understand research methods, to develop critical thinking skills, and to understand the values that drive the field and to apply knowledge to human life. Mayo (2010) tries to grade different levels of psychology learning in terms of basic, developing, and advanced levels, using Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, which involves describing, analyzing, and evaluation. A cautionary point for Mayo would be that various taxonomy for designing course curricula exist, and even Bloom's design plans can be applied in classrooms that do not have an underlying constructivist respect for what students may bring to their courses in psychology. Teachers of psychology could use taxonomy, or they could engage in Wiggins and McTighe's (2004) "Backward Design" but stop short at pulling the student toward critical thinking and application. To have the ability to evaluate and create new knowledge through dialectic engagement with one's teachers—in short, to transform the field of psychology—requires that students first do a lot of defining and, alas, engage in Friere's (1990) pet peeve: "banking knowledge." The world of psychology today might be one in which teachers and practitioners who know many, many facts about psychology are not at all aware of a need for any deeper level of critique about their field. Striving for critically thinking students might, furthermore, mean encouraging students to be as radical and revolutionary as Friere (1990) might have been viewed by himself as well as by others. It is important to consider the structures of the field of psychology, with which our students and teachers will grapple if they want to obtain jobs, achieve tenures and promotions, and work within already established western institutions.

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Mayo's (2010) concept of 'authenticity' is a bit ambiguous from a dialectical standpoint. He defines authentic knowledge as "real-life like" in contrast to a knowledge derived from the theoretical ethos of University. This definition incites an important question. Do we want to view the University as an inauthentic reality given that teachers of psychology can reside here for their entire lives, dedicated more to talking about psychology than to specifically researching questions or to practicing the arts of healing in psychology? The University may be the best place for the dialectic interaction between student and teacher about psychology to take place.

The book is on the right track, though, with its specific behavioral-outcomes learning goals. In this, it is almost overly detailed, with the same instructions to the teacher repeated throughout the book. In most chapters there are tables in which learning outcomes and goals are listed, routinely in similar ways. This is needed if somebody uses the book as an instructional workbook, but for general reader the same things could have been written in a more condensed way without such painstaking details. Keeping in mind that not all and maybe even very few teachers, researchers, students, and practitioners of psychology care to be immersed in a dialectic about the field, critical theorists have to share their instructions in ways that seem neither dry and abstract nor austere and arrogant.

Mayo's book is, nevertheless a good, practical tool that really helps the teacher understand how constructive learning and teaching is possible in psychology and in academic realms including (and included by) psychology. The book is "down-to-earth" and practical. The author has done immense work in showing how one can systematically create a critical and dialectical psychology curriculum. The book is very informative and useful for novice teachers planning their first psychology courses, and also for senior teachers needing to refresh their courses and bring them up-to-date to meet the demand of evolving psychology students. The author claims that the book "is intended as an advisory instructional resource to provide a general framework from which to approach undergraduate psychology curricula," but it does much more. It contributes to a general field of dialectical, respectful, discursive, and critical teaching, learning, and application in psychology.

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