

Constructivist Learning

Constructivist learning allows the trainer to monitor how the learner is progressing. The exercise explained here can be followed for all types of learning scenarios

One of my favourite moments in teaching, training, and or learning is when I move from instructivist to constructivist teaching. We are all familiar with the instructivist mode of teaching, that is, I know something and I tell it to you as a means of helping you learn it. This mode is quite popular still in academic, military and organisational settings. However, it has been under constant challenge from psychologists and other learning professionals who argue that such approaches lead to superficial or surface learning and are less likely to lead to the development and growth of the learner.

Constructivist learning tends to begin with what the learner already knows and works from there in a series of socratic type interventions where the learner gets to construct their own version of the world in a democratic and progressive manner. Arguments about which is better are tedious and both approaches I have found to be useful depending on context. However, the constructivist approach is always more satisfying to me as I can note more clearly that the learner is progressing and will survive, and even thrive after the session is finished. I am a firm believer that when people don't know things, you tell them. But when they begin to have mastered the foothills of the subject it is regressive if the tutor does not loosen the ties and encourage them to build their own constructions under guidance. Crafting these transitions are, for me, a fun part of learning design. Deploying them is a delight.

I usually begin with the lecture. In a train the trainer situation, I am trying to develop competence in handling challenging participants. I usually start by describing the typical kinds and then I impart principles around how to handle those who may be difficult to manage in training sessions.

Following this I attempt to move away from the instructivist mode. I ask the group to work in pairs, brainstorming the worst example they can think of in terms of a challenging participant. This might be someone they have encountered in the past, or in the case of newly appointed trainers, someone they anticipate might cause them some apprehension. It might be a know all or a whisperer or even someone who is hostile to the trainer.

Once having created the brainstormed list it is possible to move more fully into the more participatory approach and to make the session much more exciting and effective. I award votes to each participant in the form of sticky dots and get them to adhere these according to their judgement of how difficult the 'problem person' is. Having decided on the prioritisation I then allocate the top three or more issues to teams of four to solve. I don't usually give them a lot of time but try to keep the energy high by encouraging speed and quick decision making. I debrief the groups on their solutions and add some of my own ideas as well. Usually I have to bring these sessions to a close as they have the tendency to generate great discussion about the topics concerned.

Of course the subject that I have chosen here is purely a personal example picked from a specific type of training course. There are many programmes, both technical and interpersonal in nature where this type of exercise could be used. On a newly appointed managers' course the participants might discuss their greatest fears around their appointment and decide solutions. On a technical programme the participants might work on solutions around problems that technology might throw at them. The list is endless. But the results are usually beneficial, including happier and more independent learners who have constructed their own learning solutions.

