

CONSTRUCTIVISTIC PEPCTIVE ON AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN CONSTRUCTIVISM

Radical Social Constructivism

Radical social constructivism may be illustrated by the “Strong Program in the sociology of knowledge” (D. C. Phillips, 2000), whose sociologists propose that all knowledge is socially constructed, including all mathematics, and the laws and theories of the physical and biological sciences. That is, what these radical social constructivists are stating is that even the so-called hard sciences are socially constructed and cannot claim objectivity. D. C. Phillips explains this viewpoint by noting “... that the form that knowledge takes in a discipline can be *fully explained*, or *entirely accounted for*, in sociological terms. That is ... what is taken to be knowledge in any field has been determined by sociological forces.” (pp. 8-9)

Naturally, mathematicians and scientists reacted adversely to this viewpoint. As a matter of fact, they became apoplectic. However, a little reflection may develop some perspective on this matter. Scientific and mathematical concepts and laws did not exist before human beings constructed them. We need only point to such concepts as germs, genes, and genocide to make the point that these did not exist before humans created them. D. C. Phillips notes “There was a time when the concepts of ‘energy’ or ‘mass’ or ‘molecule’ or ‘psychosis’ or ‘working class’ did not exist.” (p.88).

Moderate Social Constructivism

Moderate social constructivism contends that the knowledge developed in the social sciences and the *social world* is certainly socially constructed. We need illustrate this only by citing such concepts as liberty, autonomy, and accountability as concepts or constructs developed by humans to deal with our world. Before these constructs were literally created, they could hardly be used to describe, analyze, explain, or predict human phenomena.

To drive home this point, the son of one of the authors came home from 5th or 6th grade one day and stated straight-faced that the Greeks really had nothing to do with the creation of Western Civilization since they only invented democracy, science, tragedy and comedy, philosophy, naturalistic art, among others. Thus, philosopher D. C. Phillips, commissioned by the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) to develop opinions and second opinions on constructivism in education, writes (2000)

“Constructivism” embodies a thesis about the disciplines or bodies of knowledge that have been built up during the course of human history. I have described this thesis as,

roughly, that these disciplines (or public bodies of knowledge) are human constructs, and that the form that knowledge has taken in these fields has been determined by such things as politics, ideologies, values, the exertion of power and the preservation of status, religious beliefs, and economic self-interest. This thesis denies that the disciplines are objective reflections of an “external world.” (p.6)

Radical Psychological Constructivism

Ok, let’s take a look at radical psychological constructivism, which focuses on the *psychological understandings* of individuals. Translated into everyday language, this implies that each individual, each of us, sees the world differently because of our different upbringings, experiences, and personalities. This viewpoint is exemplified best by Ernst von Glasersfeld, whom Phillips calls a giant in his field. Von Glaserfeld (1995) takes psychological constructivism to new heights by saying that in his concept

Radical constructivism...starts from the assumption that knowledge, no matter how it is defined, is in the heads of persons, and that the thinking subject has no alternative but to construct what he or she knows on the basis of his or her own experience. What we can make of experience constitutes the only world we consciously live in... All kinds of experiences are essentially subjective, and though I may find reasons to believe that my experience may not be unlike yours, I have no way of know that it is the same... Taken seriously, this is a profoundly shocking view. (1995, p. 1.)

Let’s illustrate this. Von Glaserfeld is literally saying that your concept of blue and my concept of blue may be impossible to compare since we cannot ever be sure that we are talking about the same thing. Certainly, if his assertion is correct, it is profoundly shocking. But is his statement valid? In this point of view, he misses the key processes that make us human beings, social animals. The vehicle of language in a culture impacts each of us who live in the culture and is the factor that subverts such a viewpoint. Language provides the force that generates a culture’s ability to develop agreement on descriptions, analyses, and explanations of social phenomena and social settings. For example, when one author’s wife sent him to get a can of primary blue paint, he left with considerable trepidation whether he could recognize the color. However, the salesmen could point to the exact color with certainty.

Moderate Psychological Constructivism

As for moderate psychological constructivism, it, like its radical relative, refers to a set of views regarding how people learn, that learners actively construct their own meanings. In this view, knowledge is hardly a copy of the external world, and is developed by the learner interacting with the materials to be learned. In this case, language also serves the same function – to generate agreement across a society and culture regarding social phenomena. However, the focus of this approach is on the individual.

The Value of Constructivist Over Traditional Education

Bredo (2000) addresses, this pointing to constructivism as having two implications for education. First, he notes “...a concern for students’ having an active role in learning” (rather than a passive one). The second consists of “...their being allowed to redefine or discover new meanings for the objects with which they interact.” (p. 132) Thus, “...constructivist

approaches all view the learner as a potential contributor to the remaking of ‘reality’.” (p. 132)

PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Now that we have dealt with schools of thought in constructivist thinking, we can get on to the relationships among professional autonomy, accountability, and constructivism. To facilitate this, we can ask does the contemporary movement toward accountability pose a threat to or support of professional autonomy within a constructivist philosophy?

Autonomy seems to be valued highly by many cultures, including the Greeks and the Celts, who focused heavily on individual achievement (although the Greeks seemed to have a limit on what they could stand from their outstanding individuals). Autonomy seems to be related to self-governance, independence, which accounts for the breaking up of the former Yugoslavia into its many republics and the United States’ efforts toward independence over two centuries ago. Particularly in the latter country, the expansion west underscored this value in the culture with the glorification of the frontier and the cowboy loner. In actuality, the frontier ended by 1890, but the value on individualism generated by it persists to the present.

Actually, autonomy implies accountability, since being autonomous requires one to account for one’s actions. But accountability as a social force, particularly in education, is still in process of development. Obviously, outside forces are pressing strongly for its establishment as a major force in public education, particularly in the United States and the UK (David Oldroyd, 2003, Spring). Oldroyd’s title, *Educational Leadership for Results or Learning? Contrasting Directions in Times of Transition*, points to two contradictory international trends in educational policy that apply to the present discussion. The trends he cites are:

1. *‘New public management’* or *‘leading for results’* – the drive led by politicians for higher, measurable, visible standards of effectiveness and efficiency and equity to meet the challenges of global competition in a rapidly changing world.
2. *‘Progressive humanistic leadership’* or *‘leading for learning’* – leadership that seeks to empower professional staff and young people based on principles of humanism, democratic citizenship and holistic personal and organizational learning. (pp. 49-50)

Oldham then notes that while these represent highly generalized analyses, the first comprises “the main politically driven direction in most OECD countries led by the United States and the UK” and the second “is more associated with current practices and leadership in the Scandinavian countries although it has advocates among educational professionals in many countries.” The first clearly comprises a managerial Taylorist approach in contrast to the second model.

What does this have to do with the question at the beginning of this section, does the contemporary movement toward accountability (particularly in the US and UK) threaten or support professional autonomy and constructivist philosophy and practices?

The heavy thrust of accountability, one might say the heavy-handed thrust in the US and UK clearly is control-oriented. That is, the rise of the movement toward accountability has been accompanied by state-wide testing with heavy penalties for the unfortunate students, parents, teachers, and administrators who fail to achieve the supposed benchmarks established by the

authorities. These include failure to be promoted to the next grade (in Florida, a third grader can fail twice, making him two years older than his classmates), failure to graduate, teachers being paid less if their classes do not achieve according to benchmarks, school directors/principals and teachers being transferred to other schools and replaced by a new group. Thus, the penalties are harsh, speaking to the conclusion that issues of control have become paramount.

The relationship this exerts on professional autonomy and constructivism can be profound because many teachers tend to learn that they must teach to the test so that their charges will pass the test, making the test the supreme be-all and end-all of the teaching-learning act. Thus, autonomy, highly prized by teachers and administrators becomes replaced by strategies to pass the test. As for constructivism, that, too, becomes victimized by the pressure to pass the tests. Who can worry about reflection and meaning in a race to learn to answer questions? Thus, autonomy's and constructivism's locus of control of learning which properly belong to the level of the teacher, class, and student shifts to the policy-makers, the test-makers, moving control to a highly centralized location.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS

Obviously, the heavy-handed managerialist movement toward accountability in the US and UK certainly threatens professional autonomy as well as constructivist philosophy and instructional practices. One wishes that the considerable educational success of the Scandinavian cultures was better appreciated by our political and economic elites. Exploration of Oldroyd's second trend, 'progressive humanistic leadership' or 'leading for learning', which seeks to empower professional staff and students appears to be a considerably better bet for results than does the accountability-focused approach. And last and oddly, the second approach seems to produce improved accountability over the first.

References

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