SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: IMPLICATIONS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this paper was to look at social constructivism as a learning theory and its implications on teaching methods, students' learning motivation and the entire teaching/learning process. Social constructivism is a collaborative form of learning based on interaction, discussion and knowledge sharing among students. The teacher's role is to employ teaching methods that that are learner centred and collaborative in nature. The underlying factor is that learners work together in groups sharing ideas, finding answers to problems or just creating something new to add to existing knowledge. This learning theory deemphasizes teacher-monotony in the classroom, but encourages active interaction among learners, the teacher and other components of the teaching learning process. It also concretizes learning and knowledge by making students retain the facts that they discover and construct by themselves than those they are told by the teacher among other benefits.*

KEY WORDS: social, constructivism, implications, teaching, learning

INTRODUCTION

Learning takes place in different ways at different levels. This forms the basis for different learning theories. Learning theories describe how students process, absorb and retain knowledge in the teaching/learning process. The three broad learning theories that have traversed the ages are: behavioural, cognitive and constructivism. In behavioural learning theory, the learner is largely passive and dependent upon the teacher because the learner is seen as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. This theory thrives in rote learning, repetition and recall. The cognitive theory focuses on the processes of thinking, concept formation, reasoning and problem solving involving the individual student's mental processes. The next level of learning, which is the constructivism theory, holds that learning is significant when learners through active participation construct or create basic knowledge by themselves through enquiry and discovery. While looking briefly at the theory of constructivism our main focus shall be on social constructivism which focuses on interaction, collaboration and group work for effective learning.

This topic shall be discussed under the following subheadings:

i. Theory of constructivism
ii. Social constructivism
iii. Implications of social constructivism on teaching methods
iv. Implications on students' learning and motivation
v. Importance of social constructivism to the teaching/learning process

Theory of constructivism

Constructivism theory was propounded by Jerome Bruner in 1966 (Olorode and Jimoh, 2016). The theory states that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and by reflecting on those experiences. This theory is based upon the principles of cognitive theory, hence sometimes referred to as cognitive constructivism. Wnet (2004), explain that when we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, perhaps by changing what we believe, or by discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge. To do this, we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know. This explains that learning is an active process which is based on the assumption that knowledge is constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense out of their experiences. This point of view maintains that people actively construct new knowledge as they interact with their environment (Adesanya, 2009). In the classroom, the constructivist view of learning can be used to encourage students to use practical approaches to create more knowledge, reflect on and talk about what they are doing. The theory deemphasizes memorizing the conceptions and definitions of others but insists that learners create their own definition, meaning and understanding based on discovery. For instance, instead of asking students to memorize the age long definition of a phrase, students can construct their own simple definition after exploring the position of a phrase in a sentence. Sometimes they achieve this when they work together with their colleagues. This leads us to the social aspect of constructivism

Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a learning theory propounded by Lev Vygotsky in 1968. The theory states that language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate, and understand reality. According to Vygotsky, language and culture play essential roles both in human intellectual development and in how humans perceive the world. This is to say that learning concepts are transmitted by means of language, interpreted and understood by experience and interactions within a cultural setting. Since it takes a group of people to have language and culture to construct cognitive structures, knowledge therefore is not only socially constructed but co-constructed. The link here is that while the constructivist sees knowledge as what students construct by themselves based on the experiences they gather from their environment, the social constructivist sees knowledge as what students do in collaboration with other students, teachers and peers. Social constructivism is a variety of cognitive constructivism that emphasizes the collaborative nature of learning under the guidance of a facilitator or in collaboration with other students.

In social constructivism children's understanding is shaped not only through adaptive encounters with the physical world but through interactions between people in relation to the world that is not merely physical and apprehended by the senses, but cultural, meaningful and significant, and made so primarily by language. Hein (1991) puts it in his own way that the level of potential development (academic achievement) is the level of development that the learner is capable of reaching under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers. He sees learning as a social activity associated with other human beings like the peers, family members as well as casual acquaintances, including the people that existed before. Social Constructivism recognizes the social aspect of learning and the use of conversation, interaction with others, and the application of knowledge as an essential aspect of learning and a means to achieving learning objectives.

Vygotsky believed that life long process of development is dependent on social interaction and that social learning actually leads to cognitive development. In other words, all learning tasks (irrespective of the level of difficulty), can be performed by learners under adult guidance or with peer collaboration. This theory helps to give a backup to the establishment of opportunities for students to collaborate with the teacher and peers in constructing knowledge and understanding. Kapur (2018), observed that social construction of knowledge takes place in various ways and at different locations. It could be achieved through group discussion, teamwork or any instructional interaction in an educational or training institution, social media forum, religious and market places. As students interact with people, the material and immaterial environment, they gain understanding and gather experience which is needed to live successful and functional lives.

Social constructivism is also called collaborative learning because it is based on interaction, discussion and sharing among students. This teaching strategy allows for a range of groupings and interactive methods. These may include total class discussions, small group discussions or students working in pairs on given projects or assignments. The underlying factor to the theory is that learners work in groups sharing ideas, brainstorming trying to discover cause and effect, answers to problems or just creating something new to add to existing knowledge.

Implications of social constructivism on teaching methods

Teaching methods can also be said to be the fundamental art and science guiding the management and strategies used for lesson delivery in the classroom. Dorgu (2015) defines teaching method as the strategy by which a teacher delivers his/her subject matter to the learner based on predetermined instructional objectives in order to promote learning in the students. Westwood (2008) sees teaching method as comprising the principles and methods used by teachers to enable student learning. These definitions reveal that teaching has principles and methods meant to maximize students' learning. These principles and methods are founded on theories of learning like social constructivism.

Social constructivism upholds that knowledge develops as a result of social interaction and is not an individual possession but a shared experience. Kelly (2012) suggests that social constructivism could be applied in the classroom using such instructional

methods as case studies, research projects, problem based learning, brainstorming, collaborative learning / group work, guide discovery learning, simulations among others. The teacher could sometimes divide the class into groups or pair the students and then guide by prompting, questioning and directing the groups or pairs to discover concepts or gather learning experiences according to the intended objectives.

Social constructivism teaching methods can be grouped into two major groups, namely: discussion and activity/ group work. These methods are discussed briefly below:

Discussion teaching method: Omwirhiren (2015) defines discussion method as a method that utilizes guided interaction to highlight a particular subject matter with the aim of facilitating the students. Jegede (2010) says though the method is time consuming, it enhances learning by giving students room to develop their communicating skills, mental skills such as critical thinking , reflective thinking and evaluating diverse opinion. The role of the teacher in this method is that of a facilitator. The teacher guides the students through informed discussion to discover things for themselves. This is a method of teaching in which students and teachers exchange ideas about a chosen topic. This can be done in the form of small group discussion or whole class discussion. The teacher guides the discussion while all students are allowed to air their views on a given topic or problem. Rules are established from the beginning to avoid rowdiness. This method boost students' interest, aids retention, stimulates exchange of ideas and make learners active participant in the lesson. It promotes democratic thinking among students as the freely share their ideas and challenge each other to arrive at a consensus. By so doing they develop reflective thinking skills which help them to deeply analyze and understand issues. This helps to improve their communication skills, develop tolerance as they learn to tolerate and respect other people's view even when it is not pleasant to them. Discussion method can take the form of debate, think-pair-share, role play, brain-storming, field trip and other socially interactive forms of teaching/learning. They encourage critical thinking, research, development of speaking and listening skills and ability to evaluate other people's opinion.

Activity/Group work: This teaching method involves small groups of learners working together to achieve and instructional objective. Each student takes on a role within the group that may be formal or informal and the role often alternates. It is focused on the learners reflection and reasoning to construct their own learning. Simply put, it is identifying what they already know, what they need to know, the how and where to access new information that may lead to the resolution of the problem. The role of the teacher is to facilitate learning by supporting, guiding, and monitoring the learning process. The teacher aims to build learners' confidence when addressing problems, while also expanding their understanding. This method of teaching/learning represents a paradigm shift from traditional teaching and learning method which is more often lecture-based. An example of group work is the problem based teaching/learning method.

In talking about Project-Based teaching/Learning, Bell (2010) sees it as an innovative approach to learning that teaches a multitude of strategies critical for success in the twenty-first century. With this teaching method, learners learn inquiry, as well as work

collaboratively to research and create projects that reflect their knowledge. Blumenfeld, Soloway, Ronald, Krajcik, Guzdial and Palincsar (2011) also affirm that project-based learning is a comprehensive approach to classroom teaching and learning that is designed to engage students in investigation of authentic problems. Another form of group/activity teaching method is the jigsaw.

Jigsaw: Jigsaw is a form of guided discovery teaching method that utilizes collaborative/cooperative learning technique. According to Igwe (2018), jigsaw instructional strategy adopts cooperative learning method and its principles. In this method of teaching, students are organized in groups and the teacher creates situations that encourage students' cooperation with each other in the teaching learning process. Ike (2016) says what makes jigsaw an effective teaching method is that each student's success is needed for the success of the group. This makes the group to work as a team to achieve success.

In the jigsaw classroom, the teacher who has 30 students in a class would divide them into 5groups of 5students. These groups are the home groups. The students in each group take their numbers form 1-5 (1 2 3 4 5). All the 1s, 2s, 3s, 4s, and 5s will come out to foam a new group called the expert groups. The teacher will divide the one learning task (example is a lesson on hospital vocabulary) into 5 different aspects and ask each group to discuss in details with notes and emphases on each aspect within a short while. The teacher moves from one group to the other, guiding and monitoring the activities in each expert group. At the end of the allotted time the students are now asked to go back to their home groups to deliver as experts what they learnt, discovered or solved in the expert groups. This way every student has something to teach the other members of the home group.

The teacher's role in the social constructivist classroom

Social constructivism lends credence to instructional pedagogy by defining the teacher's role in the teaching/learning process. This implies that teachers should adopt teaching methods that are:

1. Learner centred: here the focus is on the students rather than the teacher. This means the students are urged to be actively involved in their own process of learning. They are allowed to come up with their own ideas, questions, definitions and make-ups.
2. Collaborative in nature: here emphasis is placed on learning through social interaction. This is done by making students to work in groups to solve problems, investigate and explore topics/situations in order to arrive at conclusions. By so doing they discover or construct knowledge by themselves
3. Teacher guided: In social constructivist classrooms collaborative learning is a process of peer interaction that is mediated and structured by the teacher. Discussion can be prompted by the presentation of specific concepts, problems or scenarios, and is guided by means of effectively directed questions, the introduction and clarification of concepts and information, and references to previously learned material.

Based on these, the teacher is expected to:

i. Provide a social constructivist classroom environment that will boost group interaction.
ii. Discourage competition while encouraging collaboration and sharing of experience among students.
iii. Consider the students opinion or contribution as important whether right or wrong.
iv. Providing the necessary resources and guidance needed to prompt the students into knowledge construction in the desired direction.
v. Ensure that students feel secured to ask/answer questions, interact and contribute to group discussions freely.
vi. Ensure that more and less brilliant students learn from each other.
vii. Provide scaffolding support where necessary, at the right time and the right level.

Implications on students' learning

The implications of social constructivism on student's learning are that:

1. They no longer sit down to be informed or loaded by the teacher but discover lesson contents by themselves as they respond to the teacher's promptings in the form of questions, assignments, project works and such like.
2. Students now learn to work in groups as organised by the teacher for effective collaboration or cooperative learning.
3. They become co-custodian of knowledge as they share and build on their previous experiences to create new knowledge.
4. They take responsibility to learn by actively participating and collaborating in the process.
5. Students should learn to consider the opinion of others by appreciating and investigating new ideas and lessons learnt from their colleagues.
6. They should value every experience, learn from them and be ready to share with their groups in order to improve their cognitive ability continuously.

Importance of social constructivism in the teaching/learning process

Social constructivism lends credence to teaching/learning process in the following ways:

1. Encourages active participation of students.
2. Encourages active participation and interaction among learners, the teacher and other components of the teaching learning process.
3. Encourages the development of skill.
4. Encourages students to develop and use their own initiatives.
5. Discourages rote learning and passivity on the part of students.
6. Stimulates interest and aids retention.
7. Develops critical thinking and problem solving capacity.
8. Promotes individual and cooperative learning in the classroom.
9. Promotes team spirit among students as the work in groups.
10. Triggers curiosity on the part of learners through the use of activity based teaching methods employed by the teacher.

11. Promotes high self esteem on the part of students based on their trust in self-approach to learning. The teacher guides the students to trust, believe in themselves and demonstrate that they can accomplish given task.

12. Facilitates active construction of knowledge where students are encouraged to explore and interact with the resources available.

13. Concretizes learning and knowledge in the sense that students are more likely to retain the facts that they discover and construct by themselves than those they are told or given by the teacher.

14. Helps in developing episodic memory. This refers to the ability to reminisce or recall past event based on particular episodes or encounter that surrounded it. These episodes act as bench marks or memory prompts that facilitate retention and recall which are necessary for effective learning (Kanno, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Social constructivism is a learning theory that views learning as a social process where students collaborate by engaging in group activities for meaningful learning to take place. Teachers employ instructional guidance by using teaching methods that allow knowledge discovery and construction by students as they interact and work together in the learning process. Social constructivism shifts the responsibility of knowledge acquisition from the teacher to the student and also transforms the student from a passive listener to an active participant and a co-constructor of knowledge among co-learners.

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