



# Constructivist Theory of Learning

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## ABSTRACT

The latest catchword in educational circles is “constructivism, “applied both to learning theory and to epistemology – both to how people learn, and to the nature of knowledge. If we believe that knowledge consists of learning about the real world out there, then we endeavor first and foremost to understand that world, organize it in the most rational way possible, and, as teachers, present it to the learner. This view may still engage us in providing the learner with activities, with hands-on learning, with opportunities to experiment and manipulate the objects of the world, but the intention is always to make clear to the learner the structure of the world independent of the learner. We help the learner understand the world. But we don’t ask him to construct his or her own world.

**Keywords:** Constructivism, learner, manipulate, knowledge

## Principles of learning

What are some guiding principles of constructivist thinking that we must keep in mind when we consider our role as educators? I will outline a few ideas, all predicated on the belief that learning consists of individuals’ constructed meanings and then indicate how they influence museum education.

1. Learning is an active process in which the learner uses sensory input and constructs meaning out of it. The more traditional formulation of this idea involves the terminology of the active learner (Dewey’s term) stressing that the learner needs to do something;

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that learning is not the passive acceptance of knowledge which exists “out there” but that learning involves the learner’s engaging with the world.

2. People learn to learn as they learn: learning consists both of constructing meaning and constructing systems of meaning. For example, if we learn the chronology of dates of a series of historical events, we are simultaneously learning the meaning of a chronology. Each meaning we construct makes us better able to give meaning to other sensations which can fit a similar pattern.
3. The crucial action of constructing meaning is mental: it happens in the mind. Physical actions, hands-on experience may be necessary for learning, especially for children, but it is not sufficient; we need to provide activities which engage the mind as well as the hands.
4. Learning involves language: the language we use influences learning. On the empirical level, researchers have noted that people talk to themselves as they learn. On a more general level. There is a collection of arguments, presented most forcefully by Vigotsky, that language and learning are inextricably intertwined. This point was clearly emphasized in Elaine Gurain’s reference to the need to honor native language. The desire to have material and programs in their own language was an important request by many members of various Native American communities.
5. Learning is a social activity: our learning is intimately associated with our connection with other human beings, our teachers, our peers, our family as well as casual acquaintances, including the people before us or next to us at the exhibit. We are more likely to be successful in our efforts to educate if we recognize this principle rather than try to avoid it. Much of traditional education, as Dewey pointed out, is directed towards isolating the learner from all social interaction, and towards seeing education as a one-on-one relationship between the learner and the objective material to be learned. In contrast, progressive education (to continue to use Dewey’s formulation) recognizes the social aspect of learning and uses conversation, interaction with others, and the application of knowledge as an integral aspect of learning.
6. Learning is contextual: we do not learn isolated facts and theories in some abstract ethereal land of the mind separate from the rest of our lives: we learn in relationship to what else we know, what we believe, our prejudices and our fears. On reflection, it becomes clear that this point is actually a corollary of the idea that learning is active and social. We cannot divorce our learning from our lives.
7. One needs knowledge to learn: it is not possible to assimilate new knowledge without having some structure developed from previous knowledge to build on. The more we know, the more we can learn. Therefore any effort to teach must be connected to the

state of the learner, must provide a path into the subject for the learner based on that learner's previous knowledge.

8. It takes time to learn: learning is not instantaneous. For significant learning we need to revisit ideas, ponder them try them out, play with them and use them. This cannot happen in the 5-10 minutes usually spent in a gallery (and certainly not in the few seconds usually spent contemplating a single museum object). If you reflect on anything you have learned, you soon realize that it is the product of repeated exposure and thought. Even, or especially, moments of profound insight, can be traced back to longer periods of preparation.
9. Motivation is a key component in learning. Not only is it the case that motivation helps learning, it is essential for learning. This ideas of motivation as described here is broadly conceived to include an understanding of ways in which the knowledge can be used. Unless we know "the reasons why", we may not be very involved in using the knowledge that may be instilled in us, even by the most severe and direct teaching.

Educators have accepted the idea that learners need to be active, that in order to participate in learning we need to engage the learner in doing something, in hands-on involvement, in participatory exhibits and programs. Physical involvement is a necessary condition for learning for children, and highly desirable for adults in many situations, but it is not sufficient. All hands-on activities must also pass the test of being minds-on---they must provide something to think about as well as something to touch. Finally there is the issue of time to learn, time to reflect and time to revisit an idea.

## CONCLUSION

The principles of constructivism, increasingly influential in the organization of classrooms and curricula in schools, can be applied to learning in museums. The principles appeal to our modern views of learning and knowledge but conflict with traditional museum practices. We need to reflect on our practice in order to apply these ideas to our work.

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