Analysis of Constructivist Learning Methods

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In the constructivist approach "learners construct their own knowledge from their experiences… emphasized as both an individual mental activity and a social interactive interchange. Aspects of constructivism can be found in self-directed learning, transformational learning, experiential learning, … and reflective practice" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 297). The objectives of this paper are to consider experiential learning (specifically Kolb's model), transformational learning and its connection with humanism and reflective practice, communities of practice, and the application of constructivism in instructional design.

With regards to experiential learning, "Kolb (1984) states, 'Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Knowledge is continuously derived and tested out in the experiences of the learner'" (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 161). Regarding Kolb's four-stage model, McLeod (2017) states, "Effective learning is seen when a person progresses through … (1) having a concrete experience followed by (2) observation of and reflection on that experience which leads to (3) the formation of abstract concepts (analysis) and generalizations (conclusions) which are then (4) used to test hypothesis in future situations, resulting in new experiences." A personal example was earning my open water certification for scuba diving which involved learning new skills, demonstrating proficiency, and then applying those skills while diving. Subsequently, I am using those learning experiences in my current quest to earn my advanced open water certification.

Transformational learning is about "dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live … The mental construction of experience, inner meaning, and reflection are common components of this approach" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 130). Mezirow (2000) describes transformative learning as making our frames of references

"more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action… we are freed from uncritical acceptance of others' purposes, values, and beliefs" (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 133).   Similarly, "humanism… emphasizes the freedom and responsibility to become what one is capable of becoming" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 282). In transformative learning, reflection is a key component. York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, and Montie (2001) write, "'Reflective practice is a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes'" (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 172).

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) describe communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Wenger (2006) states, "… they learn from one another, involve themselves in relationship building through assisting one another with information, and engage in a shared practice through their experiences, stories and tools. From this, a knowledge base is built" (as cited in Grover, Kacirek, & Miller, 2013). Inherent to Wenger's description, the learners are self-directed; and because of their connection to the subject matter and collaboration within a community of practice, the learning is on-going.

Regarding a constructivist learning method in instructional design, Smith (2009) states, "One such activity is the discussion forum, in which students and teachers discuss with each other, over a set period of time, a specific question or topic relevant to the course content." In this class, we are given the opportunity to share our perspectives and experiences with our peers in weekly devotions and discussion posts. Reading my peers' posts has helped me understand and apply the concepts better (experiential learning) and has given me new perspectives to consider (transformational learning).

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