What Is Constructivism and How Does It Benefit Students?

Constructivism is a learning theory based on the idea that new knowledge is “constructed” on top of learners’ existing knowledge. According to the theory, students are not “empty vessels” that need to be “filled.” Rather, students’ existing knowledge serves as an important foundation for new learning. This approach to teaching and learning requires that teachers take the time to get to know students in depth, and to integrate what they learn about students into their instruction. In other words, a constructivist classroom is a student-centered classroom.

A constructivist approach to teaching benefits everyone, but it is particularly valuable when it comes to facilitating the learning of students from diverse backgrounds. This is true for several reasons:

• First, one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching—and especially the rigid use of pre-packaged curriculum—tend to either overlook or demean the unique resources that students from non-mainstream backgrounds bring to school. While it is important for all students to master “official” school knowledge, this should never occur at the expense of students maintaining what they already know. A Constructivist approach encourages teachers to value and build upon all students’ existing knowledge, even if that knowledge seems different from the formal curriculum.

• Second, when students are recognized as possessing important knowledge, they are more likely to feel motivated, connected and confident. This positions them to engage in successful learning.

• Third, a constructivist approach does not assume that there is one “normal” way to learn or that “accommodations” need to be made for students who can’t keep up. Instead, the assumption from the outset is that each student learns in his or her own way. Therefore, instruction must be sufficiently open ended to support all backgrounds and learning styles. Thus, constructivist teachers often use project-based and hands-on approaches, allowing students to work at their own pace, to draw on their prior knowledge and to make meaning on their own terms as they learn.

• Fourth, a constructivist approach supports equitable and fair treatment of all students. Because instruction must build upon what students know, it must also begin with and remain centered on students.

• Finally, constructivism supports collaborative learning—students working with and learning from one another—and the development of a strong learning community.

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