

Seven Basic Principles of Constructivist Education

Teachers must see themselves as playing a crucial role in children's learning and development. To accomplish this as a constructivist teacher, DeVries et al. (2002) identified seven principles of constructivist teaching. They are:

1). Establishment of a cooperative, sociomoral atmosphere

A cooperative, sociomoral atmosphere is one in which mutual respect is continually practiced. Every classroom has a sociomoral atmosphere that may be viewed along a continuum of coercive to cooperative. Cooperation occurs between students and their peers, as well as the students and the adults. Opportunities to work together in groups, share thoughts and feelings, discuss issues, and contribute to the workings of the classroom on an equal footing are some of the characteristics of a cooperative, sociomoral atmosphere. A constructivist teacher must create a community of learners in which autonomy rather than obedience is encouraged. All other principles rest on this first principle.

2). Appeal to children's interests

Curriculum that responds to the interests of children is one that will provide meaningful opportunities for construction of knowledge. A constructivist teacher must be able to recognize, as well as stimulate, children's interests. This can be done in several ways – observe what children do spontaneously, solicit children's ideas about what they want to learn, propose enticing activities, and provide ample opportunities for children to make choices.

3). Teach in terms of the kind of knowledge involved

Piaget's distinction among three kinds of knowledge is helpful to constructivist teachers. These types of knowledge are physical knowledge, logico-mathematical knowledge and conventional, or social, knowledge. Different strategies of teaching are applied for the different types of knowledge. For example, conventional knowledge is arbitrary and children must be told or shown the information usually delivered through direct instruction, which is considered didactic. With physical knowledge, one assists children in finding opportunities to act on objects and find out their reactions. If the knowledge is logico-mathematical, one provides experiences through which children can reorganize their own knowledge.

4). Choose content that challenges children

Constructivist teachers create a culture of inquiry and develop curriculum that

- 1) focuses on “big ideas” that allow in-depth study,
- 2) provide activities and materials appropriate to a wide range of developmental levels, and
- 3) analyze activities in terms of regularities and relationships.

5). Promote children’s reasoning

An important part of the role of a constructivist teacher is to use questions and other interventions that will move children’s thinking forward. Sharing ideas and encouraging children to provide explanations are means for enhancing children’s reasoning.

6). Provide adequate time for children’s investigation and in-depth engagement

“Adequate time” refers to the amount of time during the day that is provided for children’s investigations, as well as time over weeks and even months. Children cannot be expected to construct complex relations when their exploration is limited to fifteen or thirty minutes a day.

7). Link ongoing documentation and assessment with curriculum activities

Assessment should be a part of teaching and not separate from it. In constructivist classrooms assessment has two forms – assessing children’s performance and assessing the curriculum. Constructivist teachers strive to understand children’s thinking by identifying the relationships they are constructing.