Social Constructivism, Learning, & Instruction

What is Social Constructivism?
Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). This perspective is closely associated with many contemporary theories, most notably the developmental theories of Vygotsky and Bruner, and Bandura’s social cognitive theory (Shunk, 2000).

Some Assumptions of Social Constructivism:
Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. To understand and apply models of instruction that are rooted in the perspectives of social constructivists, it is important to know the premises that underlie them.

Reality: Social constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000). For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: it does not exist prior to its social invention.

Knowledge: To social constructivists, knowledge is also a human product, and is socially and culturally constructed (Ernest, 1999; Gredler, 1997; Prat & Floden, 1994). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

Learning: Social constructivists view learning as a social process. It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces (McMahon, 1997). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

Social Context for Learning:
Some social constructivists discuss two aspects of social context that largely affect the nature and extent of the learning (Gredler, 1997; Wertch, 1991):
Historical developments inherited by the learner as a member of a particular culture. Symbol systems, such as language, logic, and mathematical systems, are learned throughout the learner's life. These symbol systems dictate how and what is learned.

The nature of the learner's social interaction with knowledgeable members of the society is important. Without the social interaction with more knowledgeable others, it is impossible to acquire social meaning of important symbol systems and learn how to use them. Young children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with adults.

**General Perspectives of Social Constructivism on Learning:**

Social constructivists see as crucial both the context in which learning occurs and the social contexts that learners bring to their learning environment. There are four general perspectives that inform how we could facilitate the learning within a framework of social constructivism (Gredler, 1997):

**Cognitive tools perspective:** Cognitive tools perspective focuses on the learning of cognitive skills and strategies. Students engage in those social learning activities that involve hands-on project-based methods and utilization of discipline-based cognitive tools (Gredler, 1997; Prawat & Folden, 1994). Together they produce a product and, as a group, impose meaning on it through the social learning process.

**Idea-based social constructivism:** Idea-based social constructivism sets education's priority on important concepts in the various disciplines (e.g. part-whole relations in mathematics, photosynthesis in science, and point of view in literature, Gredler, 1997, p.59; Prawat, 1995; Prawat & Folden, 1994). These "big ideas" expand learner vision and become important foundations for learners' thinking and on construction of social meaning (Gredler, 1997).

**Pragmatic or emergent approach:** Social constructivists with this perspective assert that the implementation of social constructivism in class should be emergent as the need arises (Gredler, 1997). Its proponents hold that knowledge, meaning, and understanding of the world can be addressed in the classroom from both the view of individual learner and the collective view of the entire class (Cobb, 1995; Gredler, 1997).

**Transactional or situated cognitive perspectives:** This perspective focuses on the relationship between the people and their environment. Humans are a part of the constructed environment (including social relationships); the environment is in turn one
of the characteristics that constitutes the individual (Bredo, 1994; Gredler, 1997). When a mind operates, its owner is interacting with the environment. Therefore, if the environment and social relationships among group members change, the tasks of each individual also change (Bredo, 1994; Gredler, 1997). Learning thus should not take place in isolation from the environment.

**Social Constructivism and Instruction Models:**

Instructional models based on the social constructivist perspective stress the need for collaboration among learners and with practitioners in the society. Social constructivist instructional approaches can include *reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, webquests, anchored instruction* and other methods that involve *learning with others.*

**References:**

- Cognitive perspectives on peer learning (pp. 197-211). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Additional Resources:

Social Constructivist Theory http://viking.coe.uh.edu/~ichen/ebook/et-it/social.htm