

# Epistemological and Pedagogical Concerns of Constructionism: Relating to the Educational Practices

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Today's world may be defined as the world of constructs and all constructs can be categorised into either Mental or Social. Social constructs are creative urge and constructs of Constructionists. Constructionists, focus on knowledge as power, believing that "cultural specifications" exert a real influence on people's lives and takes a stand on the subjugating effect of discourses. In the case of education, perhaps the pivotal concept is that of knowledge itself. Constructionists assert that knowledge is not only constructed by an individual's interaction with his/her own world (or experiences) but also co-created by his/her interaction with other individuals within a specific social community. This implies that both cognitive and social processes are involved in knowledge construction and expansion through the process of reflecting on and sharing their own experiences and others' experiences or ideas as well. Constructionism is also a theory about the pedagogical value of active learning, in a practice that includes a teaching model of mediation as opposed to instruction. Given the socio-historical nature of knowledge, social constructionist curricular practices therefore centre on the collective construction and transmission of meaning, learning and knowledge in recognition that they are shaped by the historic conventions of culture and language. The primary educational challenge of the present century is to replace the traditional focus on the individual student with concerted investments in relational process. It emphasizes on from isolated to relational rationality and from dead curricula to cultural curricula where there is no walls of the classroom as an artificial barrier between educational and cultural processes. This paper studied the Constructionism theory and attempted to interrogate and develop the theoretical and practical propositions of how the epistemological and pedagogical concerns of Constructionism relate to the concepts and practices of education in contemporary world and more specifically how the implementation of Constructionist perspective will bring about desirable changes.

*Keywords:* Constructionism; Constructionist Epistemology; Constructionist Pedagogy; Relational Curriculum

## Introduction

Today's world may be defined as the world of constructs and all constructs can be categorized into either Mental or Social. Social constructs are creative urge and constructs of Constructionists. Social constructionists support a view which merges the person and their boundaries for one cannot be easily separated from the boundaries of the other. All aspects of a person, consciousness, mind and the self are seen as social through and through. Therefore, it makes no sense for one to ask the question what is determined from the inside and what is determined from the outside. What we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach to it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part (Gergen, 2008). Social constructionists do not say, "There is nothing", or "There is no reality". The important point is that whenever people define reality they are speaking from a particular standpoint. To be sure, something happens, but in describing it you will inevitably rely on some tradition of sense making (Gergen, 2008). For the constructionist, it is not that, "There is nothing", but "Nothing for us". In other words, it is from our relationships with others that the world becomes filled

with what we take to be real.

To be sure, one may trace the intellectual roots of constructionism to Vico, Nietzsche, Dewey and Wittgenstein among others (Gergen, 2011). But, the term Constructionism was popularized by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) through a book called "The Social Construction of Reality". Undoubtedly, in today's times, Kenneth J. Gergen is one of the leading exponents of social constructionism.

Constructionists view and suggest that every phenomenon, including the "natural" world, as well as the social world, is given meaning through human conversation and cultural process, or is "constructed". Phenomena are not "discovered" and then described, as positivists would suggest. Established communities of practice operate to legitimate and disseminate constructions, or to offer formal resistance to dominant constructions. Gergen challenges especially individualist cognitive constructivists who suggest that the world acquires meaning as it is filtered through internal, personal cognitive schemata, which are open to developmental process. Rather, the "schemata", or constructions, giving meaning to acts, are "developed" and held socially (historically and culturally) in texts, traditions and

practices, and one of these constructions is the “personal”.

### Constructionist Epistemology

The work on sociological theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and the discussion on the sociology of science (Knorr-Cetina, Latour, & Woolgar, 1989) have been influential in shaping the constructionist epistemology. Constructionists, focus on knowledge as power, believing that “cultural specifications” exert a real influence on people’s lives and takes a stand on the subjugating effect of discourses. In the case of education, perhaps the pivotal concept is that of knowledge itself. And thus the question of epistemology comes into the picture automatically. Constructionists assert that knowledge is not only constructed by an individual’s interaction with his/her own world (or experiences) but also co-created by his/her interaction with other individuals within a specific social community. This implies that both cognitive and social processes are involved in knowledge construction and expansion through the process of reflecting on and sharing their own experiences and others’ experiences or ideas as well.

Social constructionism can be described as part of the on-going movement against realism in that it attempts to “replace the objectivist ideal with a broad tradition of ongoing criticism in which all predictions of the human mind are concerned” (Hoffman, 1990). It is the claim and viewpoint that the content of our consciousness, and the mode of relating we have to other, is taught by our culture and society, all the metaphysical quantities we take for granted are learned from others around us (Owen, 1992). Hoffman (1991) states that all knowledge evolves in the space between people, in the realm of the “common world” or the “common dance”. Only through the on-going conversation with intimates does the individual develop a sense of identity on an inner voice. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) have stated that from the social constructionist perspective there are no “real” external entities that can be accurately mapped or apprehended knowledge and systems are inherently dependent upon communities of shared intelligibility and vice versa. They are therefore, governed to a large degree by normative rules that historically and culturally situated. Gergen (1999) claims that in numerous instances, the criteria, which are invoked to identify “behaviours”, “events” or “entities” are largely circumscribed by culture, history and social context. Therefore, a social constructionist perspective, as opposed to a constructivist perspective, locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are developed over time within a social and community context. Constructionists have asserted that knowledge is not only constructed by an individual’s interaction with his/her own world (or experiences) but also co-created by his/her interaction with other individuals within a specific social community. This implies that both cognitive and social processes are involved in individuals’ knowledge expansion through the process of reflecting on and sharing their own experiences and others’ experiences or ideas.

### Key Features of Constructionist Epistemology

*Knowledge and truth are created not discovered by mind* (Schwandt, 2003). From the perspective of constructivism, knowledge is the product of cognitive processes which result from an individual’s interaction with his/her world. For instance, Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory is one of the

examples of such cognitive constructivism. Accordingly, there exist multiple realities since the same social phenomenon is interpreted (or understood) by individuals differently from one another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nevertheless, it is further pointed out that the constructivist perspective focuses exclusively on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind but has a lack of consideration to the collective generation of meaning as shaped by the conventions of language and other social processes (Schwandt, 2003). Those social processes include communication, negotiation, conflict and rhetoric where individuals express their perspectives and views members of specific with communities (Garfinkel, 2003; Gergen, 1985; 2003). That is to say, knowledge can be transmitted through individuals’ interaction with each other in a social context. Accordingly, knowledge, viewed by social constructionists, is the product of not only individual cognitive processes but also social processes. Therefore, knowledge is intersubjective within a variety of particular communities. The notion of intersubjectivity denotes the importance of shared language and understanding throughout knowledge transmission within the specific social contexts.

*Centrality of Meaning:* The constructionist stand, according to Spink (2004), was structured around the following basic principles: 1) no object can exist independent from the process of producing meaning; therefore, subject and object are social constructions that include human forms of objectification and subjectification; 2) the deference of this stance means accepting that an oscillatory movement occurs that shifts the origin of knowledge to the external world one minute and to the internal the next. In other words, there is a disparity between the internal-subjective-mind and external-objective-world; 3) on this point, discursive formation cannot be approached as an entity that is separate from the social and the practical; language is not limited to the denotative function of objects, situations or states; on the contrary, it has a performance function in discursive formation that must be considered, within this perspective, as a social practice in itself, with its own characteristics and practical consequences; 4) constructionism cannot necessarily be considered a synonym of relativism, but rather an invitation to examine and understand conventions and rules as something that is socially situated and subject to reconstruction. This approach seeks to contribute towards demystifying scientific practice, becoming a more political perspective for deconstructing the differences and forms of oppression (physical or symbolic) that permeate social and organizational life; 5) by considering knowledge of reality as something socially constructed, it is a natural assumption that the methods produce, before anything else, versions of the world which, depending on the context of their production, their socio-historical moment, may have greater or less persuasive power; 6) finally, by understanding knowledge to be a social construction that is structured in the interface of short-term, mid-term and long-term socio-historical contexts, social constructionism seeks to understand the meanings attributed to experiences that are derived from contexts marked by different temporalities.

To gain access to the meanings produced and the constructed significances, the notion of discursive practices of the subjects is resorted to. According to Gergen (1985), this is language in action. A dynamic and plural language marked by different voices, speech genres and interpretative content or repertoires, which are defined as reference structures employed by people in the construction of the meanings of reality (Spink, 2004).

Thus, language should be approached as a social practice that produces references for the interpretation and attribution of meanings for everyday life. With this reasoning, it may be opined that the construction of meaning is a temporal perspective, in which the historical dimension establishes a dialogue between new people and old meanings. To understand how they occur in society, it becomes necessary to investigate the interface between remaining and rupture by looking at time in three ways: *long time*, characterized by cultural contents that form discourse for a determined period; *lived time*, which may be understood as the assigning of new meanings to historical content due to experienced socialization; and *short time*, which is the time of a happening or the moment that enables people to understand the production of meanings. This means breaking away from the habitual in order to allow for the construction of meanings attributed to the events of a given reality. Thus, in the interconnection of these three times there is the concomitant presence of the old and the new, remaining and rupture, delimiting how the production of meanings is processed and how meanings circulate within the institution.

In this analytical process, people are seen as the builders of social relationships, i.e., there is a recurrence of social relationship games, symbolic exchanges, psychosocial constructions that promote the production of meanings that can be understood through discourse analysis. According to Corrêa and Carrieri (2004), discourse is a way in which people express their view of the world, their subjectivity, comprising a set of assumptions that mark their conceptions and guide their actions. Therefore, discourse should be viewed and analyzed as part of a network of social relationships. It is a discursive production which includes not only systems of values, reasoning, justifications, explanations, desirable and undesirable behaviour, but also the interpretations, meanings constructed around the myths, stories and other constructive elements of institutional reality and culture. According to Spink (2004), the understanding of meanings, from a constructionist viewpoint, requires language to be taken as a social practice and therefore as the product and producer of people's actions.

*Reality is socially constructed:* The basic contention of the constructionist argument is that reality is socially constructed by and between the persons who experience it (Gergen, 1999). It is a consequence of the context in which the action occurs and is shaped by the cultural, historical, political, and social norms that operate within that context and time and that reality can be different for each of us based on our unique understandings of the world and our experience of it. Reality in this case is completely subjective and need not be something that can be shared by anyone else but at the same time it is independent of the person living it. Social constructionism provides a different perspective with which to view the world that allows the unique differences of individuals to come into focus while at the same time permitting the essential sameness that unites human beings to be identified (Ashworth, 2003). This means that it is not necessary for any of us to share the views of others but at the same time none of us can change or alter our reality simply because we might wish to. In this manner each individual reality is true for the person because he or she experiences it but it is independent of that person due to his or her inability to alter it (Gergen, 1999).

*Rejection of Exogenic and Endogenic Traditions of Knowledge:* We may distinguish between views of knowledge that are primarily exogenic (or world centered) in character as opposed

to those which are endogenic (or mind centered). The exogenic tradition in educational thought can be traced to empiricist philosophies of knowledge (from Locke to logical positivism), while the endogenic tradition largely owes its intelligibility to the rationalist tradition (from Descartes and Kant through Fodor and the AI movement) (Gergen, 2001). Both orientations embrace a mind/world dualism in which the existence of an external world (typically a material reality) is set against the existence of a psychological world (cognitive, subjective, and symbolic). From the exogenic standpoint, however, knowledge is achieved when the inner states of the individual reflect or accurately represent (or serve as a mirror of) the existing states of the external world. Exogenic thinkers often place a strong emphasis on keen observation in the acquisition of knowledge, and tend to view emotion and personal values as potential hazards to the neutral or "evenly hovering attention" required for accurate recording of the world as it is. The endogenic tradition is similar to the exogenic in its dualist foundations, and its emphasis on value neutrality. Yet, whereas the endogenic tradition treats careful observation of the world as the key to acquiring knowledge, the endogenecist places the chief emphasis on the powers of individual reason. In this sense the exogenic theorist is likely to view the external or material world as a given, and conjecture about how nature becomes accurately represented in the mind, while the endogenic thinker is likely to view the mental world as self-evident, and raise questions concerning the way in which the mind operates so as to function adequately in nature. Gergen (2001) has emphatically asserted that from within these two perspectives, philosophers have never been able to solve the fundamental question of epistemology—*how the mind comes into knowledge of a world external to it*. Unable to resolve such problems, philosophers in the present century have largely abandoned dualist metaphysics in favour of the logical analysis of propositions. If we commence with a distinction between what is *outside* and *inside* the mind of the individual, we create an inherently intractable problem in determining how the former is accurately represented in the latter.

Such debates have thus rendered both exogenic and endogenic conceptions of knowledge vulnerable to the recent developments in the field of epistemology. In the light of this newly developed epistemology, knowledge is viewed as a by-product not of individual minds but of communal relationships. Or more generally we might say that *all meaningful propositions about the real and the good have their origins in relationships*.

*The Social Construction of Knowledge:* The social construction of knowledge states that knowledge is a byproduct not of individual minds but of communal relationships. Or more generally we might say that all meaningful propositions about the real and the good have their origins in relationships. This is to bring into sharp focus the site of knowledge generation: the ongoing process of coordinating action among persons. Knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in human relationships. What we take to be true as opposed to false, objective as opposed to subjective, scientific as opposed to mythological, rational as opposed to irrational, moral as opposed to immoral is brought into being through historically and culturally situated social processes. Within the constructionist dialogues we find that it is not the individual mind in which knowledge, reason, emotion and morality reside, but in relationships.

*The Centrality of Language:* From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting

people. People exist in language. Consequently the focus is not on the individual person but rather on the social interaction, in which language is generated, sustained and abandoned (Gergen, 1991). Berger and Luckman (1991), state that people socially construct reality by their use of agreed and shared meaning communicated through language. Thus, our beliefs about the world are social inventions. Vygotsky argued that when children internalize dialogues experienced within particular social practices, the words carry with them the social and cultural trappings of the contexts within which they have been experienced. The cultural meanings shape the ways language contribute to cognitive processes, and how children use it as a tool to help them solve tasks on other occasions.

*Contextualization of Knowledge:* On a relational account, knowledge and action are woven into the contexts in which they are generated and used. This means that knowledge and action are bound up in relations—relations with others, with one's own and others' socially-derived and embodied dispositions and with culturally organized aspects of settings, including artefacts and normative ways of using them. Shifting from an individualist to a relational view of education focuses educators on facilitating individuals' participation in systems that include both people and artefacts. Instead of simply augmenting the individual's knowledge and reasoning, we facilitate successful participation with others in various activities. This means that individuals develop relational habits and learn to participate in shared practices, relating with others around an issue and jointly combining resources to address it. A relational account of education also recognizes that people and resources move across contexts, as people learn to deploy resources (including tools, dispositions and ways of relating with others) to solve problems in new contexts. This differs from the traditional view of "learning transfer", in which individuals learn when they use allegedly stable sets of decontextualized knowledge and skills in new contexts (Lave, 1988).

## Constructionist Pedagogy

### Epistemological Bases for Constructionist Pedagogy

In opposition to constructivists, who, while acknowledging the social dimension of knowledge, ultimately turn inwards, to "epistemological considerations that focus exclusively on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind" (Crotty, 1998), social constructionists unequivocally turn their attention outward "to the world of intersubjectively shared, social constructions of meaning and knowledge" (Schwandt, 1998). Social constructionism holds that all knowledge, and all meaningful reality, "is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998). From this epistemological perspective, humans are born into "discourse" communities in which historically specific cultural and linguistic "systems of intelligibility" prevail. It through such a specific discursive positionings that humans engage with their world (Gee, 1996). Therefore, in social constructionism, one's vocabulary of meanings, knowledges, and interpretations is not viewed as the expression of an individual's internal cognitive processes, nor as purporting to be a representation of an external reality, but as a tool "for coordinating our behaviour with those of others". Moreover, unlike constructivism, social constructionism fosters a critical

spirit.

### Constructionist Pedagogy

Gergen's (2001) chapter "Social Construction and Pedagogical Practice", written with Stanton Wortham, offers a social constructionist alternative to contemporary pedagogy that challenges both "endogenic", or mind-centered, and "exogenic", or world-centered views. Advocates of mind-centered views stress the importance of nature over nurture, where advocates of world-centered views stress the importance of the environment over what is inborn. However, as Gergen points out, both espouse the same dualist epistemology, of subject-object opposition. Knowledge is neither "in" the person, nor "in" nature to be experienced, but is produced or constructed through social relations, dialogue and social practices, themselves embedded in changing (unstable) historical and cultural traditions. Further, they are problematic in that both positions are blatantly ideological. He points out that if education is a preparation for participation in democracy, then discipline-driven learning confounds such preparation.

Social constructionism recognises that "all claims to knowledge grow from culturally and historically situated traditions". Values informing practices are contingent: "circumscribed and negotiable". Disciplines should not be monologues to be mastered, but resources for particular conditions of living. By situating knowledge, a shift from monologue to dialogue (from hierarchy to heterarchy) is invited, as is deliberation, or reflexive consideration, of the subject matter. Disciplines invite the expression of one voice and form of life possibly at the expense of others, negating democracy. Gergen calls rather for a "polyvocality". In crossing discipline boundaries, he suggests a postmodern research technique: students would be "free to roam across whatever domains are necessary in terms of their goals—ransacking, borrowing, extricating, annexing, combining, reformulating and amalgamating in any way necessary for the most effective outcome". This is usually referred to, drawing from artistic tradition, as a method of *bricolage*, where the researcher is the *bricoleur*.

Constructionism is also a theory about the pedagogical value of active learning, in a practice that includes a teaching model of mediation as opposed to instruction. Also, the practice of active learning helps criticability among the students and consequently knowledge sharing and expansion take place. In addition, the practice of action learning inspires new ways of thinking and behaving and also brings about an active attitude and confidence since it is defined *the process [of action learning] helps us to take an active stance towards life and helps to overcome the tendency (merely) to think, feel and be passive towards the pressures of live* (McGill & Beaty, 1995).

Gergen has asserted time and again that there are no policies or pedagogies that cannot be understood through the lens of social constructionism. He has suggested us at least five domain of particular relevance for the constructionist pedagogy. The five domains are:

**1) From Hierarchy to Heterarchy:** Gergen (2001) says that consistent with traditional views of knowledge as cumulative (exogenic) and universal (endogenic), educational institutions are built around a "nutritionist" model (Gergen, 2001). The model is essentially hierarchical (Experts-who design the curriculum; Administrators-who select among these units and The Teacher-as instruments to dispense the knowledge) with the

ultimate authority residing in the communities of knowledge-production itself. Students are expected merely to consume the knowledge. Theoretically, all the stake holders widely criticise it but practically they engage with it willingly or unwillingly and the model is thriving well till date in almost all parts of the world. The constructionist finds the hierarchical model wanting in its tendency to suppress the contextual and pragmatic conditions that give authoritative language its significance. From the constructionist standpoint, “knowledgeable propositions” gain their meaning within particular contexts of usage, and function as means of coordinating action within these contexts (Gergen, 2001). Educators extract bodies of discourse (and a limited number of instantiations) from the professional disciplines, and pass these extractions on to those beneath them in the hierarchy. The pragmatic function of these discourses within the communities themselves is lost. The discourses lose their significance, and students are often left with a promissory note that *somehow* their studies are useful and important.

Further, because the authoritative discourses are treated as sacrosanct—the products of “our best minds”—they tend to travel the hierarchy in monologic fashion. That is, they do not move from communities of administrators, to teachers, to students as invitations to conversational supplementation. The recipients may clarify, order, and package, but the authoritative discourses remain, insofar as possible, intact. The recipient of a monologue—as in the case of authoritative knowledge—is denied a voice of his/her own. The endpoint to be achieved by monologic education is a student who has fully absorbed that which has been presented—or in effect, becomes a simulacra of the authority. Whatever talents, insights, or specialized education the individual possesses is denied entry into the conversation. And with the denial of voice comes an obliteration of identity and an invitation to lethargy. It is in this vein it has been described how academics and governments impose curricula and methods on schools that largely silence the teacher.

The hierarchical model “deskills” the student and discourages creativity and innovation among students. Gergen has raised a question, “Given the inherent problems of authority based knowledge, what alternatives are suggested from a constructionist standpoint?” and has argued that the present analysis first calls for a desacralizing of professional knowledge. Rather than presuming that the traditional knowledge makers provide “the best” or “last” word, let us realize that all claims to knowledge grow from culturally and historically situated traditions. Thus, rather than monologues to be mastered, we might think of the disciplines as offering resources that may or may not be valuable depending on a particular condition of life. For present purposes, Gergen reiterates, however, situating knowledge in this way invites a shift from monologue to dialogue and from hierarchy to heterarchy.

**2) Beyond Disciplines of Knowledge:** In recent time, there has been a concerted attempt to delineate fields of knowledge—physics, chemistry, mathematics, civics and the like. Curricula of study are typically arranged so that students are exposed at least minimally to a variety of the separate fields, and ultimately acquire in-depth knowledge of at least one of them. However, from the constructionist standpoint, delineations in knowledge are useful primarily for those within a particular domain of study. They enable communities of knowledge makers to generate achievements in the terms of their traditions. Gergen (2001) has pinpointed by saying that while education in these traditions has much to be said for it, educational processes

circumscribed by disciplinarity are deeply problematic. If education is about enhancing the quality and efficacy of public deliberation and action, there is much to be said for curricula released from the demands of disciplinarity. From a constructionist perspective, disciplinary forms of life may be invited on holiday. Issues of practical public (or private) concern may set the agendas for education; the disciplines may supply relevant resources. As students confront major issues of the times, they would not be constrained by the few tools of a constricted subject matter. Rather, they would be free to roam across whatever domains are necessary in terms of their goals in any way necessary for the most effective outcome. The aim should be to shift emphasis away from mere regurgitation of accumulated facts (favoured by the “mind as slate orientation”), and to gear assessment to the means by which students utilize and combine multiple skills in newly challenging contexts, and communicate their conclusions to others. Thus, students may work individually or in groups to solve complex, multi-step problems, collect data, analyze, integrate, interpret, and report their results to real audiences. As the educators see it, such tasks allow students to “construct meaning and structure investigations” for particular audiences. The teaching emphasis thus shifts from preparing students for mere repetition of the regimented and standardized discourses, to developing skills for confronting complex and ever-changing circumstances outside the educational sphere (Gergen, 2001).

**3) Toward Meaning in Practice:** It is commonly agreed agenda that the education functions to produce learned or knowledgeable individuals, who either by dint of what they know and/or their rational abilities, are equipped for effective action in whatever situations life has to offer. It is also for the masterly and storage of knowledge which may be used in subsequent life. For the constructionist pedagogues, the challenge for the educational process, is not that of storing facts, theories and rational heuristics in individual minds. Rather, it is to aid in generating contexts in which the value and meaning of the constituent dialogues may be most fully realized, conditions under which dialogues may be linked to the ongoing practical pursuits of persons, communities, or nations (Gergen, 2001). In effect, the constructionist would favour a substantial reduction in the canonized curriculum in which students are required to take courses either because they are prerequisites for other courses, or necessary preparations for life. Rather, the constructionist would favour practices in which students work together with teachers and others to decide on issues of importance, and the kinds of activities that might best allow significant engagement.

**4) Toward Reflexive Deliberation:** Gergen (2001) has underlined a need, consistent with the preceding emphasis, on moving from authoritative monologue to dialogue in the educational setting where means are required for opening the authoritative languages to reflexive deliberation. That is, the authoritative discourses must be opened to evaluation from alternative standpoints, including both authoritative and informal. By exposing any professional discourse to the concerns of its peers—for example, by considering biological texts in terms of its dominant metaphors (literature), or literary texts in terms of implicit political ideals—we gain perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the work in question, and add dimension to subsequent dialogues.

For most of those concerned with curriculum effects, a strong emphasis has been placed on pedagogy of critique. Through the means of pedagogy of critique marginalized groups acquire

confidence in their own positions. From the relational standpoint, critique must be supplemented by modes of appreciative inquiry. The point of reflexive deliberation is not to widen the chasm between cultural enclaves, but to enrich the forms of cultural life through processes of inter-interpolation. The development of new forms of relatedness is urgently required. In addition to pedagogies of appreciation and critique, then, it is essential to develop modes of creative interchange, practices that will enable creative amalgams to replace conflict and hostility.

**5) Toward Generative Relationships:** Traditional views of knowledge as “within individual minds” favours a distinct division between the teacher and student. The teacher “knows”, and students are thrust into the position of objects to be operated on and minds to be filled with contents or rationalities. From the constructionist standpoint, the individual is not the possessor of contents or rationalities, but rather, participates in them. Knowledgeable and rational statements are not external expressions of the internal mind, but are relational achievements. What stands as reason, memory, motivation, intention and the like are the result of coordinated action and negotiation within a community (Myerson, 1994). For the constructionist educator, the primary challenge is that of contributing to generative relationships - relationships from which the student emerges with expanded potentials for effective relating. The student’s role shifts from that of object to be operated on to a subject within relationships. Most important, however, is the question of how the focus on relationship may enrich pedagogical process. Rather than a subject matter or child centered classroom, how would educational processes be constituted if relationships were primary?

As we shift from the individual to the relationship as the centre of focus, we can again appreciate the work of social constructivists on processes of teacher assisted learning, semiotic apprenticeship, and relations in the zone of proximal development are salutary. All locate the site of learning within the relational matrix. However, perhaps the most visible outcome of constructionist thinking thus far is the emergence of collaborative or cooperative learning. As Brufee (1993) puts it, collaborative learning is a process in which the ongoing exchange among students serves as the primary educational function. One learns through engaging, incorporating, and critically exploring with others. Ideally, through social interchange skills in articulation and responding are developed, and new possibilities of world construction are opened. Learning becomes a “shift in our language-constituted relations with others”. *Collaborative inquiry* may be viewed as but a beginning of exploration into the enormous potential of relationship centered education.

### **From Dead-Curriculum to Cultural and Relational-Curriculum**

Given the socio-historical nature of knowledge, social constructionist curricular practices therefore centre around the collective construction and transmission of meaning and knowledge in recognition that they are shaped by the historic conventions of culture and language.

In the individualist tradition there was a distinct division between the roles of the teacher and that of the student, the former was to provide the best information and insight available and the latter’s job was to master it. Student failure was typically attributed to the student’s deficient capabilities, atti-

tude, or motivation. In recent decades we have increasingly come to understand that effective student performance is a collaborative achievement. The central fulcrum of collaboration is, of course, between the teacher and the student. Here increasing numbers are drawn to Lev Vygotsky’s view that there is nothing in mind that is not first of all in culture, and to the significance of a close, sensitive and action centred relationship between teacher and student.

In the individualist tradition, student performance is evaluated against the standards of a fixed curriculum or dead curriculum. The logic and content of the curriculum—established prior to the student’s presence—dictates what counts as “mastery”. With increased sensitivity to relational context, we begin to see the limits of a self-contained, disciplinary based curriculum. Increasingly we see the walls of the classroom as an artificial barrier between educational and cultural process. “Active learning” and “Situated learning” have become essential in thinning the artificial barrier and cultural processes. It is in this vein that we may appreciate the innovative efforts of the many teachers who create links between the class and cultural context. For example, “authentic assessment” practices—in which students work together to solve complex problems in the outside environment and communicate their results to audiences other than the teacher—are slowly gaining momentum.

Piaget’s constructivism offers a window into what children are interested in, and able to achieve, at different stages of their development. The theory describes how children’s ways of doing and thinking evolve over time, and under which circumstance children are more likely to let go of—or hold onto—their currently held views. Piaget suggests that children have very good reasons not to abandon their worldviews just because someone else, be it an expert, tells them they’re wrong. Constructionism, in contrast, focuses more on the art of learning, or “learning to learn”, and on the significance of making things in learning. It is interested in how learners engage in a conversation with [their own or other people’s] artefacts, and how these conversations boost self-directed learning, and ultimately facilitate the construction of new knowledge. It stresses the importance of tools, media, and context in human development. Integrating both perspectives illuminates the processes by which individuals come to make sense of their experience, gradually optimizing their interactions with the world. They (Piaget, Papert, Dewey, Freynet, Freire, & others) remind us that learning, especially today, is much less about acquiring information or submitting to other people’s ideas or values, than it is about putting one’s own words to the world, or finding one’s own voice, and exchanging our ideas with others. Curricular practices still tacitly draw on empirical cognitive psychology firmly entrenched in foundationalist assumptions. Curricular practices geared to the equal and collective realisation of self-development and self-determination, especially in the context of the massification and internationalisation of education, need to be open to the cultural milieu, social languages, and literacy practices of all “discourse” communities. This calls for curricular justice, a counter-hegemonic approach that recognises and responds to the relationships between curricular practice, culture, power and politics. A social constructionist curricular paradigm offers a useful way of forward. It promotes the identification of asymmetrical power arrangements in curricular practices, and is epistemologically better placed to support the learning by students who comprise multiple, classed, ethnicised, gendered and geographically located subjectivities, discursively

embedded in complex and contradictory everyday learning environments in powerful institutions (Eijkman, 2003).

In recent years we have seen a shift in curricular practices from a cognitivist to a more “progressive” constructivist paradigm that gives greater recognition to the social context of learning and teaching. Even progressive curriculum modalities, on both the right and left of the socio-political spectrum, such as constructivism and critical pedagogies respectively, are still not sufficiently equipped to enable the equal and collective realisation of self-development and self-determination. Both, to various degrees, ultimately fall back on an intra-individual focus and respond inadequately to issues of power, the former by ignoring it, and the latter by insufficiently responding to the social dimension of power. Whilst progressive practices have certainly made some innovative and constructive contributions to curricular practices, they do not sufficiently consider discursive outsiders, and may in fact exacerbate their educational disengagement.

Social constructionism especially when integrated with critical theory, challenges and rejects the depoliticising curricular practices based on individualist and foundationalist assumptions. It seems obvious that in terms of participative equity and curricular practices, social constructionism, with its focus on the contingent and social nature of knowledge is a more useful perspective. Moving to its specific relevance for curricular practice—constructionist pedagogy rejects as deeply flawed the foundational notions of objectivity, the centrality of private experience, and thus the ideology of the self-contained individual (Rorty, 1999a; Gergen, 1999). With meaning-making seen as socially constructed by, for, and between, members of particular culturally and historically bound discourse communities, learning as knowledge formation occurs primarily between participants in social relationship, and constitutes a sociological description of knowledge in which language is not only a precondition for thought, it is also and inherently so, a form of social action (Gee, 1997; Rorty, 1999b; Wenger, 1999). Because knowledge resides in discourse communities, educators therefore need to recognise and validate the “really useful” knowledges of diverse discourse communities, and act as facilitators of acculturation, and not as the gatekeepers to the privileged, sacred, discourse of academia (Bernstein, 1980; Brufee, 1999). From this perspective, learning is a much more symmetrical social activity geared towards a collective and critical acculturation into an academic discourse. Social constructionism invites educators to see diverse others as “people like us” and to expand our sense of “we”. Social constructionist curricular practices are premised on the invitation “to create a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have” (Rorty, 1999b) and respond more concretely to educational disprivileging in our classrooms.

With learning located squarely in historical, socio-cultural, and politically embedded social relations and trajectories, a non-foundationalist epistemology provides a more useful underpinning for discursively inclusive curricular practices. From a constructionist pedagogic perspective, acculturation is no longer seen as an individual but as a collective task, a process that inevitably engages learners collectively in discursive acculturation. Accordingly, social constructionism calls for a fundamental re-orientation of curricular practice in higher education, away from a psychologist focus on individual learning towards a distinctly sociological approach to knowledge and learning. Here, learning, as acculturation into academic and professional

discourses, is a collective process centered on critical immersion in social practices and sustained conversations within and between new, and heterogeneous, discourse communities. This epistemological move privileges the social and thereby the socially-based curricular practices that form a core strategy in realising collective equality in educational engagement. Moreover, its critical approach means that acculturation is inherently political and ideological that goes beyond mere socialisation or functional practice (Lankshear, 2000). The appropriation of a critical non-foundationalist epistemology therefore constitutes a decisive theoretical breakthrough for curricular practices focused on systemic equity in educational engagement.

Social constructionist curricular practices pay particular attention to the ways in which cultural constructions are created and transformed, how belief and value systems are generated, shared and modified, and therefore, how new modes of curriculum, academic expression and disciplinary relations are generated. On these grounds, the individualist, mind-centered and foundationalist rationale that underpins conventional, progressivist, and even many critical literacies curricular practices, is epistemologically unconvincing and educationally problematic. Social constructionism represents a leading edge approach to curricular practice. It permits educators and students alike to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. Social constructionism holds the promise of achieving systemic equity at the level of equal and collective educational engagement.

Characteristics of the Cultural and Relational Curriculum are following:

- Individuals are woven into Context
- Knowledge is produced in Relations
- Knowledge is Contextualized
- Heterogeneity of Knowledge Resources
- From Monologue to Dialogue
- From Isolated to Relational Rationality

Thus, we need to situate entire paradigm of process of teaching, learning and assessment in the paradigm of Constructionist Epistemology and Pedagogy. For this we need to address the issues of education in general and issues of curriculum in particular in the context of “relationality” as proposed by none other than Gergen himself.

## Conclusion

Constructionist Epistemology and Pedagogy have been explained above as an alternative epistemology and pedagogy to all the existing prevalent traditions in the field of education and with the help of this we might generate and execute new vistas in education. As we have seen that the constructionist epistemology and pedagogy unfold before us a new dimension regarding our understanding of knowing and knowledge in cultural and relational context. This strongly supports the locally embedded relational curricula; the defragmentation of rigid disciplinary territories; the myopic and blurred lodgment of discourses within various disciplines; obsolete practices of educational dealings; collective construction of meaning; equal and collective realization of self-development and self-determination; creating a more expansive sense of solidarity which is the need of the our and a shift from individual centered education to relational education. The educational dialogue is not new to many contents and intents as highlighted above but it is sure that the constructionist epistemology and pedagogy would



further generate interest for further dialogue among various stock holders of education for a new dawn.

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