Constructivist Theory in Distance Education

This paper will discuss how eLearning theory has influenced recent distance education practice. Knowledge is usually defined as a set of objective facts, however, in constructivist learning theory, people create their own knowledge based on their own understanding of the world and their own past experiences (Harasim, 2012, p. 60). Educational researchers have rejected the idea that humans can be programmed like robots (Harasim, 2012, p. 60). In Constructivism, the student combines new ideas and perspectives with previous knowledge. Constructivist learning theory is defined as the role of the learners when they create knowledge from their own experiences. Constructivist learning has improved recent distance education teaching and learning practices in four different ways: active learning, learning-by-doing, scaffolding learning and collaborative learning.

Active Learning

There are several ways that active learning in constructivism affects distance education practices. Active learning is defined as when the instructor gives the students an authentic task that is completed within a meaningful context, instead of making the students memorize abstract information (Livesey, 2013). The traditional way of teaching encourages students to be passive learners, for example, when an instructor gives a lecture to students. In contrast, active learning is when students are encouraged to participate during the learning process. In active learning, the instructor helps the students to create their own knowledge about the subject, such as when the instructor will give the students activities, such as problem solving. These activities will test the students’ understanding of ideas which the instructor has taught them (Harasim, 2012, p. 69). The students are encouraged to create their own knowledge or theories in order to explain the
physical world around them (Cohen & Dennick, 2009, p. 120). Active learning is also similar to learning-by-doing in the constructivist learning theory.

Learning by Doing

Another aspect of constructivism that influences distance education practices is called learning-by-doing which is when the instructor gives the students questions that have more than one correct answer. The theorist, Papert, influenced learning-by-doing because his philosophy taught children to do something (Harasim, 2012, p. 70). The various examples of learning-by-doing in distance education include problem-based learning, distributed problem-based learning, case-based learning and role-play simulation. Problem-based learning (PBL) is when the instructor gives the students a scenario to solve which was based on a realistic problem (Harasim, 2012, p. 70). Distributed problem-based learning was when the students work together to solve a problem (Harasim, 2012, p. 70). Case-based learning is when students discuss a specific, real-world situation that can have multiple right answers (Harasim, 2012, p. 71). Along with learning-by-doing in constructivism, distance education was also influenced by scaffolding learning.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding learning in constructivism has also influenced distance education practices. The theorist, Vygotsky created the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is also known as scaffolding (Harasim, 2012, p. 71). Scaffolding can be described as the teaching strategies that are designed by the instructor to support the students’ learning when they are introduced to a new subject (Harasim, 2012). Scaffolding was used in distance education to
provide students with a context, motivation and a foundation which makes it easier for students to understand the new information. The instructor slowly removes each scaffolding technique when the students began to make progress during the subject (Harasim, 2012, p. 71).

Scaffolding is when a teacher or another knowledgeable person uses teaching techniques to help the students achieve their potential (Harasim, 2012).

Collaboration

Collaboration in constructivist learning theory has an effect on distance education practices. In constructivist learning, knowledge is defined as something can change and be negotiated, not as a set of objective facts (Harasim, 2012, p. 72). In collaborative learning, each group member participates throughout the learning process to make a finished product (Harasim, 2012). Collaborative learning is different from cooperative learning when each person contributes an independent piece to the whole project (Harasim, 2012, p. 72). Constructivist collaboration emphasizes the idea that students share their viewpoints with each other and develop their own opinions (Harasim, 2012, p. 72). Collaboration is important because constructivism assumes that meanings and values are different for each individual. Constructivism also assumes that students will understand new knowledge by building on what they know already from their previous life experiences (Hunter & Krantz, 2010, p. 208).

In Conclusion, constructivist learning theory affects distance education teaching and learning in following ways: active learning, learning-by-doing, scaffolding learning and collaboration. Active learning is when the student was an active part of the learning process. Learning-by-doing is when an instructor gives the students problems or questions that applies the knowledge which was taught. Scaffolding learning is when the instructor uses teaching
techniques to give the students a context or motivation which makes learning new knowledge easier for students. Collaboration is when students work together by using a dialogue to complete a project. Constructivist learning theory challenged the idea that knowledge is an objective set of facts. Constructivist learning theory changed recent distance education practices by making the student more independent and making the instructor more like a guide.
References


