



# **Constructivist Learning Theory and the Teaching of Social Studies in Nigeria**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to look into the theory of constructivism and how the theory relates to the teaching and learning of Social Studies in Nigerian context. The relevance of (a) actualization of Social Studies objectives, (b) create a context for learning, (c) make learning an active process, (d) sequencing of the Social Studies content. Teachers must encourage and accept student's autonomy and initiative. It is therefore, recommended that Social Studies teachers and experts should make use of principles and elements in the theory (constructivism) to advance knowledge and to enrich methodology in the teaching/learning of Social, Studies.

**Keywords:** constructivism, Social Studies, social environment, learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social Studies is the study of man in relation of his physical and social environment. It is also the study of science and technology as they affect man. One of the distinct nature of Social Studies when compared to other school subjects/disciplines is that, the entire external world is its laboratory. This perhaps account for its contents, philosophy objectives and methodology with the view to having a better comprehension of human being, his physical and social environment in order to promote a society free of problem through the production of responsible citizens. Social Studies geared towards developing and internalizing the ability of problem-solving, positive values and ideas, belief, attitudes, artisanship, critical and reflective thinking.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Constructivist theory provides a framework through which the emergent ideas about teaching, learning, learning and assessment can be unified. The difficulty and challenge confronting classroom professionals is that the reform strategies in curriculum, instruction and assessment organized around the theory of "Constructivism" are informed by different assumptions and beliefs about the nature of knowledge and about the human capacity to learn than are traditional classroom practices (Bolaji, 2010).

### **Concepts**

For the purpose of this paper, certain concepts were defined for better understanding. The concepts are theory, teaching, learning, and Social Studies.

### **Theory**

Theory, according to Thomas, Martins, Paul and Jonnah (2006) mean an idea or set of idea that is intended to explain something about life or the word. A theory is a hypothesis that has been scrutinized, investigated, challenged and eventually found to be true and acceptable. However, a validated and widely accepted theory graduates into law. Theory is a set of interrelated idea

proposed in order to explain the dynamics of a given phenomenon. Theory is used to explain events which have already occurred and to predict probable future trends so as to plan effective control; techniques or strategies beforehand.

**Characteristics of a theory**

**Accuracy:** A theory should be able to explain as clearly as possible the variable involve in its substance, for instance, in a stimulus and response theory, the variables are food and bell.

**Generality:** This refers to the rate or spread of social phenomenon to which the theory applies.

**Parsimony:** This attribute of theory emphasizes the need for caution in drawing inferences from a given theory.

**Causality:** This is what brings about the theory.

**Teaching**

Teaching is an exercise that requires two different participants to be implemented, the teacher and the learner. The teacher organizes the learner's experiences, while the students or pupils receive knowledge. Adepoju, Okemakinde and Ojo (2008) pointed out that teaching is a complex process whereby the learner is made to pay attention, make observation, associate ideas, remember previous experiences and reason. Balogun, Ayomide, Akintunde and Ojekunle (2017) was of the opinion that teaching is a Polymorphous concept that is, having different forms which cover many and different forms of activities. The main focus of teaching forms the above assertion is to assist learners to live fully at their present stage and in the future.

Teaching according Famola (2015) can be linked to communication process which involves the transmission of information, ideas and messages from the teacher (sender) to the students (receiver). However, the main objective of teaching is to assist learners to realize themselves, and their environment, through meaningful learning materials given by the teachers to effect learning and responsible individual.

**Learning**

Learning has been regarded as a single factor which has proved indispensable for the progress of human civilization Akintunde (2014) stressed that learning consists of relatively persistent changes in possible behaviour in so far as they device from experience. From Sudden (2010) point of view any relatively permanent change in behaviours which occurs as a result of experience or practice is learning.

**Meaning of Social Studies**

There is no universally accepted definition of Social Studies due to the changing nature of man, his culture, needs the environment in which he lives little wonder why Akinlaye, Ajiboye and Mansaray (1996), asserts that Social Studies varies in objectives from time to time and from place to place depending on the needs aspirations and desires of a people.

Famakinde, Adedokun and Bayowa (2016) defined Social Studies as the study of how man influences and in turn influenced by his physical, social, political, religious, economic, psychological, cultural, scientific and technological environment. They went further to refer to Social Studies as a way of life. Ajiboye (1999), described Social Studies as a subject that provides us with ways of looking at the society in order to understand its structure and its problems then look for ways of solving the problems of the society. He stressed further that a variety of subjects can provide the knowledge required for this purpose, for instance, knowledge from psychology. Learning theory provides methods, principle and ideas for achieving the objectives of the discipline. However, Social Studies seek to integrate knowledge from various traditional disciplines.

### **The Scope of Social Studies**

As a subject that attempts to study the totality of man's existence the scope is very wide, such that virtually everything relating to man becomes a potential area of Social Studies, that is responsible for the evolution of an integrated curriculum.

### **The Emergence of the Teaching of Social Studies in Nigeria**

The emergence of teaching and learning Social Studies in Nigeria came as a result of the concern about the lack of relationship between the school work and the needs and aspiration of the people. The type of education provided by the British in Nigeria was the type that alienates Nigerian from their environment that is. pupils were been taught outside their environment. This idea culminated into establishment of several seminars, workshops and conferences both within and outside Nigeria. The Mombassa conference of 1968; the 1969 curriculum conference in Nigeria, the conference of principals in the then Western Region in 1965 and the Aiyetoro experience which was sponsored by USAID and the Ford Foundation to launch the integrated Social Studies. Some other organization took active parts in the development of Social Studies curriculum in Nigeria. The organization includes the former Comparative Education Study and Adaptation Centre (CESAC), the former Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), and the Social Studies Association of Nigeria (SOSAN). However, it was the 1969 curriculum conference that finally adopted Social Studies as one of the core subjects that could lead to the inculcation of the right types of values in individual for the greatness of Nigeria and beyond.

### **Constructivism Theory**

Constructivism is a psychological theory of knowledge which argues that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experience. Constructivism is a set of beliefs about knowledge that begins with the assumption that reality exists but cannot be known as a set of truth (Sudden 2010). Constructivism is not accepting what you are told but your prior knowledge about what you are taught and your perceptions about it (Dobson, 2015). Theory of cognitive development proposes that humans cannot be 'given' information which they immediately understand and use. Instead humans must construct their own knowledge. They build their knowledge through experiences. Experiences enable them to create schemas-mental models in their heads.

Moreover, students must be given opportunities to construct knowledge through their own experiences. They cannot be 'told' by the teacher. There is less emphasis on directly teaching specific skills and more emphasis on learning in a meaningful context. The theory acknowledges that each student does not learn in the same way. This means that if the teacher chooses just one style of teaching (direct instruction, collaborative learning, inquiry learning, etc.) the students will not be maximizing their learning potential. Put students in situations that might challenge their previous conceptions and that will create contradictions that will encourage discussion.

It is important to note that constructivism is not a particular pedagogy. In fact, constructivism is a theory describing how learning happens, regardless of whether learners are using their experiences to understand a lecture or following the instructions for building a model airplane in both cases, the theory of constructivism suggest that learners construct knowledge and of their experiences. However, the theory is often associated with pedagogic approaches that promote active learning or learning by doing.

### **Some Concepts that Aids Meaningful Learning (Constructivist)**

- **The Nature of the Learner:** The learner as a unique individual, social constructivism views each learners as a unique individual with unique needs and background. The learners are also seen as complex and multidimensional. Social constructivism not only acknowledges the uniqueness and complexity of the learners, but actually encourages, utilizes and rewards it as an integral part of the learning process (Johnson 2017).

- **The importance of the background and culture of the learner:** Social constructivism encourages the learner to arrive at his or her version of the truth, influenced by his or her background, culture or embedded worldview. Historical developments and symbols systems, such as language, logic, and mathematical system, are inherited by the learner as a member of a particular culture and these are learned throughout the learner's life (Peter, 2016). This also stresses the importance of the nature of the learner's social interaction with knowledgeable people, it is impossible to acquire social meaning of important symbol systems and learn how to utilize them. Young children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with other children, adults and the physical world (Thomas, 2016). From the social constructivist viewpoint, it is thus important to take into account the background and culture of the learner throughout the learning process, as this background also helps to shape the knowledge and truth that the learner creates, discovers and attains in the learning process (Martins, 2013).
- **The Responsibility for Learning:** It is argued that the responsibility of learning should reside increasingly with the learner. Social constructivism thus emphasizes the importance of the learner being actively involved in the learning process, unlike previous educational viewpoints where the responsibility rested with the instructor to teach and where the learner played a passive, receptive role. Meyer (2009) emphasized that learner's construct their own understanding and that they do not simply mirror and re-lect what they read. Learners look for meaning and will try to find regularity and order in the events of the world even in the absences of full or completer information.

Social constructivism scholars view learning as an active process where learners should learn to discover principles, concepts and facts for themselves, hence the importance of encouraging guesswork and intuitive thinking in learners. In fact, for the social constructivism reality is not something that we can discover because it does not pre-exist prior to our social invention of it. Akintunde (2011) argues that reality is constructed by our own activities and that people, together as members of a society, invent the properties of the make meaning through the interactions with each other and with the environment they live in. Knowledge is thus a product of humans and is socially and culturally constructed.

Famola (2009), agrees that earning is a social process. He further states that learning is not a process that only takes place inside our minds, nor is it a passive development of our behaviours that is shaped by external forces and that meaningful leaning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

### **Some Principles to be considered in the Use of Constructivism Theory**

There are some guiding principles of constructivism thinking that we must keep in mind when we consider our roles as educators.

1. Learning is an active process in which the learner uses sensory input and constructs meaning out of it. The more rational formulation of this ideal involves the terminology of the active learner (Dewey's term) stressing that the learner needs to do something; that learning is not the passive acceptance of knowledge which exists "out there", but that learning involves the learners engaging with the world.
2. People learn to learn as they learn: learning consists both of constricting meaning and constructing systems of meaning. For example, if we learn the chronology of dates of a series of historical events, we are simultaneously learning the meaning of a chronology. Each meaning we construct makes us better able to give meaning to other sensations which can fit a similar pattern.
3. The crucial action of constructing is mental: it happens in the mind. Physical; actions, hands-on experience may be necessary for learning, especially for children, but it is not sufficient, we need to provide activities which engage the mind as well as the hands (Dewey called this reflective activity).

4. Learning involves language: the language we use influence learning. On the empirical level researchers have noted that people talk to themselves as they learn.
5. Learning is contextual: we do not learn isolated facts and theories in some abstract ethereal land of the mind separate from the rest of our lives: we learn in relationship to what else we know, what we believe, our prejudices and or fears. On reflection, becomes clear that this point is actually a corollary of the idea that learning is active and social. We cannot divorce our learning from our lives.
6. It takes time to learn: learning is not instantaneous. For significant leaning we need to revisit ideas, ponder them, try them out, play with them and use them.

### **Relevance of Constructivism Theory to the Teaching of Social Studies**

#### **- Actualization of social studies objectives.**

The major emphasis of the constructivist theory is learning should be whole, authentic, and real. Piaget helps s to understand that meaning is constructed as children interact in meaningful ways with world around them. Whole activities, as opposed to isolated skill exercises, authentic activities which are inherently interesting and meaningful to the student, and real activities that result in something other than a grade on a test individual's head cognitive Constructivism approaches learning and knowing from the perspective of the individual (Mayowa, 2017). The above explanation could be used to promote the actualization of the first general objectives of Social Studies which says:

*To create an awareness and an understanding of our evolving social and physical environment as a whole in its natural, man-made cultural and spiritual resources together with the rational used and conversation of these resources for national development as a whole in its natural, man-made cultural and spiritual resources together with the rational use and conversation of these resources for national development.*

#### **Create a context for learning**

The students need to become engaged in interesting activities that encourages and facilitates learning. The teacher does not simply stand by, however, and watch children explore and discover. Instead, the teacher may often guide students as they approach problems, may encourage them to work in group to think about issues and questions, and support them with encouragement and advice as they tackled problems, adventures, and challenges that are rooted in real life situations that are both interesting to the students and satisfying in terms of the result of their work (Sudden, 2010). Therefore, Social Studies teachers need to facilitate cognitive growth and learning of the students and other members of the child's community.

#### **Make Learning an Active Process**

Direct experience, making errors, and looking for solutions are vital for the assimilation and accommodation of information. How the information is presented is important. When information is introduced as an aid to problem solving, it functions as a tool rather than an isolated arbitrary fait (Famola, 2009).

Social Studies as a discipline involve experiences which deal with the problem of human relationship in the school and the larger community (Banidele, 2018). Therefore, Social Studies teacher must teach right type of value and attitudes to solve human problem of survival (Titus, 2017).

#### **Sequencing of the Social Studies Content**

Sequencing of curriculum content refers to how the elements of the content are arrange from one stage to the next. The way we sequence our content determines how what is learnt at one stage is built upon at the next higher stage (Bolaji, 2010).

Constructivist theory encourages students to make meaning by breaking wholes into parts. Avoid stating with the parts to build a whole. Also, in Social Studies we start from simple to complex.

#### **Implications of Constructivism Theory to Social Studies**

- Teacher must encourage and accept student's autonomy and initiative.
- Teacher should try to use raw data and primary sources, in addition to manipulate, interactive, and physical materials.
- Encourage communication between teacher and the students and also between the students.
- Teacher should encourage student critical thinking and inquiry by asking them thoughtful, open-ended each other.
- Teacher should always put students in situations that might challenge their previous conceptions and the will create contradictions that will encourage discussion.
- Learning depends on how information is mentally processed, then students cognitive processes should be major concern to Social Studies educators. Teachers must become aware of not openly of what students learn, but also of how they attempt to learn it.
- Students organize the information they learn. Teachers can help students learn by pre-setting organized information and by helping students see how one thing relates to another.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has been able to give insight into constructivist theory in relation to Social Studies teaching. It is obvious that constructivist theory is relevant to every field of knowledge, and since Social Studies curriculum in Nigeria allows for integration of concepts and ideas from other disciplines, efforts should be made to incorporate all the basic relevant elements of the theory into Social Studies curriculum and that, other learning theories should be explored and applied in the teaching/learning of Social Studies. The theory proposes that learning environments should support multiple perspectives or interpretations or reality, knowledge construction, and context-rich, experience based activities to improve the teaching of Social Studies.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

A problem solving discipline like Social Studies cannot but do without meaningful learning on the part of the learner, this among others could assist Social Studies to promote or train individual with basic knowledge that can transform positive change and proffer solutions to societal ills. It is, therefore, recommended that Social Studies teachers and experts, should make use of those principles and elements in the theory (constructivism) to advance knowledge and to enrich methodology in the teaching/learning of Social Studies.

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