

Social Constructivism Factsheet

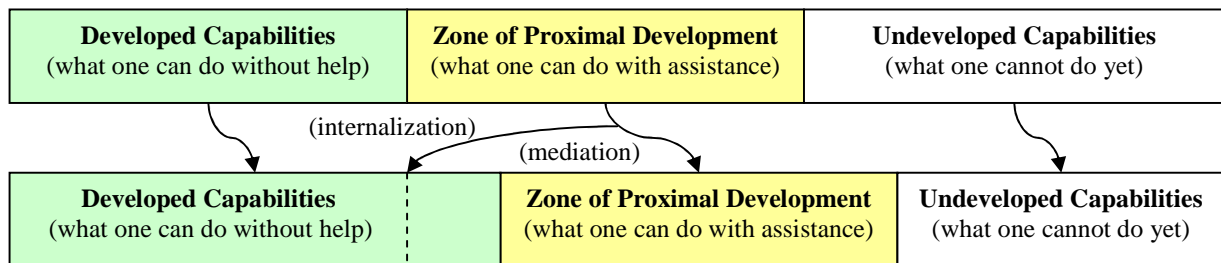
Joe Champion

Basic Assumptions

- Individuals are active learners seeking meaning from interactions within their culture (common to all constructivisms)
- “Any higher mental function necessarily goes through an external stage in its development because it is initially a social function.” (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 162, as cited by Driscoll, 2004)
- Meaning/knowledge exists in the language of a society, which is negotiated among the members of the community
- Collective activity and social interdependence compels a culture’s use of language (related to Marxism).
- Exogenous (world-centered) and endogenous (mind-centered) epistemologies are rejected in favor of an interpretivist stance and dialectical ontology (reality exists in social interactions).
- Individual development follows learning. Development is complex, dynamic, and cumulative (i.e., patterns of thinking do not go away as one develops, but may instead change in their importance to the person).

Mechanisms for Learning

- *Cultural mediation*, the ways in which an individual actively modifies a situation as they respond to it, is seen as the primary mechanism for learning. Mediation takes place when someone uses signs (e.g., words) and tools (e.g., communication) to interact with others.
- Learning happens when students work with a more able peer or instructor in their ZPD (see diagram below). New ways of thinking and communicating move from social to internal constructions through *internalization* processes. Subsequently, one’s development progresses and their ZPD shifts to include additional potential development.



Experiences Forming the Basis for Learning

Patterns of higher-order thinking are the cumulative products of internalized actions practiced in the social institutions of the culture in which the individual lives. Personal and cultural history both heavily influence the ways in which one thinks. Language and speech influence learning by serving as both ways of thinking and products of thought.

Results of the Theory

- Social constructivism changes the unit of analysis in research to *relationships between individuals and society*.
- 3 types of signs are used during mediation—indexical, iconic, and symbolic. (Bruner focused on semiotics even more)
- Individuals with the same development can have different ZPDs. Hence, the ZPD can be a measure of intelligence.
- Students work well in the ZPD if paired with a more able person or source, especially if the more able person understands the learners’ development and cognitive needs.

Teaching Implications

- Students generate meaning through practice and interesting context helps foster communication and learning.
- The ZPD principle suggests that instructional material should be ahead of the students ability, but not too far.
- The goal of education is to enable students to participate in a wide range of conversations, so the passive transmission of information is largely unhelpful. Collaborative learning, scaffolding, reciprocal teaching, peer elaboration, and apprenticeship pedagogies are all grounded in social constructivist principles.
- The student-teacher relationship shifts to one of shared authority and open interchange of ideas. Teacher acts as facilitator, resource advisor, or coordinator as students take responsibility for achieving learning outcomes.

Major Contributors



Lev Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky (1924-1934)	Paul Ernest (1991-1998)	Kenneth J. Gergen (1985-1999)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developmental psychologist • influenced by Marx and Piaget • coined the terms mediation, internalization, ZPD • emphasized the role of language, tools, and signs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • philosopher of Mathematics and Mathematics Education • places social constructivism in the context of weak, radical, and information processing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • philosopher and psychologist • distinguishes between social constructionism and constructivism • dialectical ontology and relativist, fallibilist epistemology