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Response to Objectivism and Education

by David Elkind

Abstract

This paper continues the dialogue between David Elkind (2004) and Jamin Carson (2005) on constructivism. The opinions of both writers on this educational theory have been published in recent issues of The Educational Forum.

I would like to thank Jamin Carson for his careful reading and critique of my paper "The Problem with Constructivism" (Elkind 2004). Responsible criticism is always welcome and can lead to useful, meaningful dialogue. That is the spirit in which I respond to Carson's (2005) "Objectivism and Education: A Rebuttal to David Elkind's 'The Problem with Constructivism'."

The Meaning of Constructivism

The major issue raised by Carson is the meaning of constructivism. I indeed was remiss in not making clear the relation of constructivism to the real world. I don't know of any constructivist who denies that a physical world exists outside of our sensory experiences. One of Piaget's (1954) most important discoveries was to demonstrate how a child progressively constructs the idea of permanent objects that continue to exist outside of his or her experience. That construction depends upon the properties of the object *and* the mental activities of the infant. It is not that an external reality does not exist, only that we have to reconstruct it to know it. As Kant (2002) made clear, we can never know the "ding am selbst"(the thing in and of itself), because we have to understand it within our innate categories of knowing. This is in no way a denial that a real world exists outside of our experience. Perhaps *reconstruction* would help clear up some of these misunderstandings.

What constructivists argue is that the basis for accepting what is real and independent of our cognitions is dependent upon social consensus. Some social

consensus is guaranteed by our species' characteristics. The adaptive range of hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting, and smelling is common to all humans. A hard-of-hearing American would be hard of hearing if he or she lived in another country and spoke a different language. A short-sighted person needs the same glasses in any society. There is agreement across cultures on what are good and bad wines. At another level, we can all agree that Shakespeare was a great writer and Mozart a great composer even though no metrics exist for measuring these things. As humans, we share interpretive as well as sensory adaptive ranges. Carson was incorrect, therefore, when he stated that, for a constructivist, reality is dependent upon the perceiver and that all knowledge is relative. There is a real world independent of our experience. Otherwise, we would not have the shared commonalities of experience just described.

The Meaning of Objectivism

Let us look at the definition of objectivism that Carson (2005, 232) cited: "Objectivism holds that one reality exists independent of anyone perceiving it, humankind is capable of knowing this reality only by the faculty of reason, and objective knowledge and truth is possible" (Peikoff 1993). This definition states that we know reality by virtue of reason, rather than through our senses. Yet, as I argued previously, it is because humans share a common sensory apparatus that we can agree upon an external reality existing outside our experience. Certainly, our senses can be mistaken and have to be corrected by reason—the perception of the earth being flat and the sun revolving around the earth are good examples. But, reason is highly fallible as well. One can reason correctly from false premises. For example:

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> Major Premise: All flies are bigger than elephants.
> Minor Premise: All elephants are bigger than dogs.
> Conclusion: Therefore, all flies are bigger than all dogs.

The reasoning is correct, but the conclusion is not in keeping with what we know about the real world. Disagreements in science and politics come from faulty premises as often as they come from faulty reasoning. True knowledge, therefore, cannot come from the faculty of reason alone, but only from social consensus as to the truth of the reasoning process. Objectivism, as defined here, presupposes social consensus—the basis of the constructivist position.

Critique of Teacher Readiness

In critiquing my three readiness propositions, Carson argued that I imply a causal relationship between readiness and the implementation of a constructivist educational system. However, he implied a causal relation when he (2005, 233) argued that "a teacher

must accept the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of a constructivist position before he can implement it." That is exactly the point I was making.

Carson also challenged my argument (2004, 308) that "teaching will become a true profession when it is based upon science of education" by contending that this statement is analogous to saying "teaching will only be a profession when it becomes an art" (Carson 2005, 234). That statement equates art and science, which are not the same. Science involves established procedures for arriving at new, verifiable knowledge. Observation, classification, and experimentation are the methods of science, not of art. My point is simply that we don't have a scientifically based body of knowledge that we can impart to all teachers which gives them skills and abilities that the untrained do not have. Carson (2005, 233) argued that such a body of knowledge and skills does exist and is embodied in "most certification programs, professional development programs, and seminars. All of these presumably teach the same information and a great deal of it is of the constructionist variety."

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Though that may be true, the information imparted may not be of much value in the classroom. One testament to this lack of science is the fact that deans of education at the major universities in this country decided to eliminate the undergraduate major in education. According to the Holmes Group (1986), "Unhappily, teaching and teacher education have a long history of mutual impairment. Teacher education has long been intellectually weak; this further eroded the prestige of an already poorly esteemed profession." In Massachusetts, as in many other states, one now can get a provisional teaching certificate after attaining a bachelor's degree in *any* field. After a year of supervised teaching, the student can get provisional certification. In no other profession would you be allowed to practice with only an undergraduate degree in any variety of disciplines. Imagine going to a doctor, dentist, or lawyer with that training background.

Carson argued that all teachers learn the same thing, yet he (2005, 234) contended that education draws from a unique "body of knowledge that is not scientific and probably never will be because there is too much disagreement about the definition of education." Certainly education is complex, but that does not gainsay a science of education. For example, most teachers are not taught child development—a substantial body of knowledge that should be part of a science of education. If teachers were trained as child development specialists, they would be better prepared to adapt curricula to children's developing levels of ability. Carson misunderstands constructivism and science too, for that matter; therefore, he (2005, 234) claimed that "science undermines constructivism rather than serves as a prerequisite to it." All science is necessarily constructivist. The theory

of relativity makes it clear that time is dependent upon the position of the observer. Any scientific theory that goes beyond observation is necessarily constructivist, whether it is the germ theory of disease or Freud's unconscious.

Carson claimed that I used a selective group of workers to make my case for a science of education and that their views were not testable or falsifiable and, therefore, should not be considered scientific. That could hardly be true of Piaget or Vygotsky, and I never wrote that either Rousseau or Kant were scientists. A true science of education should include scholars from all disciplines, including physics, chemistry, the social scientists, and the arts. Working together with child development and educational psychologists, these scholars could devise a curriculum that is up-to-date and developmentally appropriate. We lack such a multidisciplinary group; therefore, we have no science of education.

Critique of Curricular Readiness

Carson also challenged my argument for curricular readiness. He contended that to select a curriculum, one has to be an objectivist and accept an objective reality independent of human construction. That is not true. Social consensus as to what should be taught is required. Carson missed this point. An objective standard exists for deciding which curriculum we would like students to acquire—namely, social consensus. When Dewey (1899) introduced progressive education, social consensus held that teaching young people what was functionally useful was more important than formal discipline—the classical education. This decision was made based on public rejection of the classical model. By missing the role of social consensus, Carson (2005, 234) argued that for a constructivist, "any curricular choice should be as valid as any other."

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The current controversy over the teaching of creationism is an excellent refutation of the objectivist argument. Scientists agree (enjoy consensus) that evidence does not support the creationist view. Yet, in some states, social consensus outweighs science. If all knowledge is objective, why do people disagree on such a basic issue as creationism? For that matter, if knowledge is so objective, how can there be disagreement about anything?

Societal Readiness

Carson challenged my argument that true educational reform requires societal readiness—that there must be a social awareness of the need and demand for educational change. He said that there was societal readiness for educational reform in 2000, and that

the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act answered that call for reform. He further contended that this reform essentially established a constructivist educational philosophy. Moreover, he observed that despite its introduction, the educational gap between rich and poor has not been narrowed. He concluded that this curricular reform, based on a constructivist ideology, has failed.

His reasoning was based on a number of false premises. NCLB was a political, not an educational, initiative. It imposed a business model on education that included evaluation, accountability, and the assumption that individuality could be reduced to test scores. This is not a constructivist model of education by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, by imposing high-stakes testing and uniform standards, NCLB has killed a great deal of the creativity and innovation that goes with true constructivist pedagogy. To say that NCLB led to the implementation of constructivist pedagogy is entirely wrong. Rather, NCLB has been the death of such pedagogy. Because Carson's premises were wrong, so too was his conclusion. The success or failure of NCLB has nothing to do with constructivism.

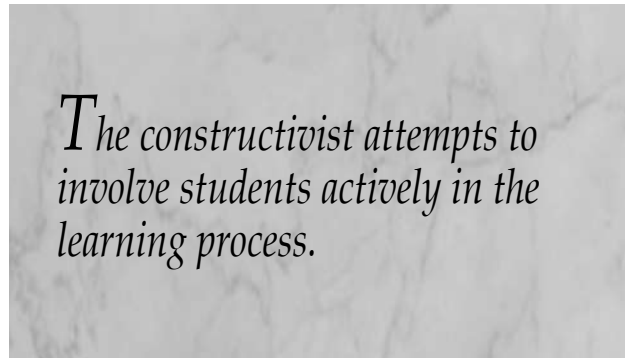
Objectivism vs. Constructivism

At the end of his paper, Carson returned to the comparison between constructivism and objectivism. He portrayed the constructivist as a straw man who does not believe in a reality that exists independently of the self. As pointed out previously, this is an idealistic philosophy far removed from constructivism. For Carson, objectivism holds that reason is the only means of attaining true knowledge, and constructivism argues that there are other means. He failed to acknowledge, however, how reasoning can be fallible. His own reasoning about NCLB illustrated how correct logic, if the premises are wrong, can lead to wrong conclusions. His argument that constructivism accepts ways of knowing other than reason was correct. Social consensus is one of the ways we come to agree upon the nature of reality. We also can learn through observation—the phenomenological approach.

Carson misrepresents constructivism again when he (2005, 236) claimed, "Constructivism posits that objective knowledge or truth is possible." This is another straw man. The constructivist does not deny objective knowledge or universal truth, but looks to social consensus regarding what is real and what is true. Carson further demonstrated his misunderstanding of constructivism when he asked his students to "construct" an English class. The constructivist teacher would not do this.

He also was mistaken when he (2005, 236) claimed that, according to constructivism, "a child's knowledge is equal to that of an adult and that a student is no less an authority on a subject than is a teacher." Perhaps Carson has never read Piaget (1950)—the father of modern constructivism—who described the different levels of reasoning attained by children as they mature. His research and the many replications of his work have demonstrated how children construct different views of the world as they mature. If only an objective reality exists, from where do these ideas come? The constructivist does not deny that a body of socially constructed knowledge exists and needs to be acquired for children to be fully educated. No constructivist expects children to construct algebra,

evolution, or language on their own. That would be silly. The constructivist attempts to involve students actively in the learning process. I would not ask students to design an English course. However, I certainly would have them relate, say, a Shakespearean play to current events. In my own teaching, in my introductory course in child development, I have groups of students find a film, book, or television program that illustrates some of the concepts we have covered in class. I am truly amazed at how innovative they are. For example, some students used the film *Finding Nemo* (Disney 1995) to illustrate father-son relationships.



Young people should not be expected to reconstruct all knowledge. In my class, I choose the textbooks and readings, but I have students apply their own understanding to the material presented and make it their own. Dewey (1938) suggested that learning is the "representation of experience." We only truly know something when we represent it in some way and make it our own. That is constructivist education—helping young people make knowledge their own by representing it in their own way.

Though Carson rejected constructivism in favor of objectivism, his description of objectivism could well be a definition of the view he criticized at such length. Humankind possesses prior knowledge that informs new knowledge, and that prior knowledge makes the new knowledge meaningful"—Piaget's (1950) assimilation of new schemata to existing schemata. If the prior knowledge is incorrect, eventually new knowledge will conflict with it and people will be forced to update their old knowledge—Piaget's (1950) accommodation of existing schemata to adapt to new schemata.

Carson (2005, 238) concluded, "If constructivists believe in an independent reality, then they not only must believe in it, but also must possess an objective method of perceiving it and, therefore, have objective knowledge and truth. There is no middle ground." This is another example of faulty logic that belies the idea that objective knowledge is gained through reason alone. Belief in an independent reality does imply a belief in a common sensory system in all humans, but it does not imply that all reality is known in this way. The proposition suggests a disembodied intelligence acquiring knowledge. However, knowledge—particularly scientific knowledge—is a successive social reconstruction of reality. Knowledge is accepted not because we have an objective method of perceiving reality, but because we have a social method of agreeing upon what reality is. In many ways, Carson's argument reminded me of Professor Gradgrind in Dickens' (1854) *Hard Times*. He did not want plums on the wallpaper because plums do not grow on walls. Gradgrind wanted the children only to learn only the facts.

A middle ground does exist between the idealistic philosophy that suggests all reality is in our heads and the realistic philosophy that says all knowledge of reality

comes from the senses. Constructivism is the middle ground—the widely accepted answer to the nature/nurture controversy. Constructivism is the recognition that reality is a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world. As soon as you include human mental activity in the process of knowing reality, you have accepted constructivism.

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