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Objectivism and Education: A Response to David Elkind's 'The Problem with Constructivism'

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Abstract

This paper responds to David Elkind's article "The Problem with Constructivism," published in the Summer 2004 issue of *The Educational Forum*. It argues that Elkind's thesis—teacher, curricular, and societal readiness lead to the implementation of constructivism—is conceptually problematic. This paper also critiques constructivism and supports objectivism as a viable philosophy of education.

In "The Problem with Constructivism," David Elkind (2004) made several claims about why constructivism has not been implemented in schools. He argued that constructivism will be implemented only when we have *teacher, curricular, and societal readiness*; that teaching needs to become a science before it can be a true profession; and that constructivism is the only philosophy that will reform education. In this essay, I present counterarguments for each of these claims.

Constructivism is the theory that students learn by individually or socially transforming information (Slavin 1997). This theory necessarily entails certain metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. To accept constructivism, one must believe that:

- reality is dependent upon the perceiver, and thus constructed;
- reason or logic is not the only means of understanding reality, but one of many; and
- knowledge or truth is subjective and relative to the individual or community.

One philosophy of education that challenges this theory is objectivism, which asserts that students must be engaged actively in the subject matter to learn. This theory does not advocate, however, that students "transform" or "construct" reality, reason, knowledge, or truth. Objectivism holds that one reality exists indepen-

dent 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). I argue against Elkind's claims primarily from an objectivist viewpoint.

Failures of Readiness

Elkind's main thesis was that constructivism has not been implemented in schools because of failures of teacher, curricular, and societal readiness. Teacher readiness requires that a teacher be educated in a science of education such as child development. Curricular readiness involves knowing exactly when and how students are developmentally ready to learn specific information. Societal readiness is when society is eager for educational reform or change.

Elkind did not explain the causal relationship between these states of readiness and the implementation of constructivism. He only implied that a causal relationship exists. There is no reason to believe that a relationship exists or that any state of readiness would lead to a specific philosophy of education. A teacher must accept the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of a pedagogic practice before he or she can implement it.

Elkind's definitions of readiness also were problematic. When defining teacher readiness as having good teacher "training"—which comes only from scientific knowledge (e.g., child development)—he stated (2004, 308), "Teaching will become a true profession only when we have a genuine science of education." Though education is not a true science, teachers generally are taught one unique body of knowledge. Most college and university teacher preparation programs, alternative certification programs, and professional development seminars teach the same information, and a great deal of it is constructivist in nature or a variant of it.

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Elkind's definition of curricular readiness also has problems. He (2004, 307–08) defined curricular readiness as knowledge of "what, when, and how the subject matter should be taught" and then claimed that "only when we successfully match children's ability levels with the demands of the task can we expect them to reconstruct the knowledge we would like them to acquire." The phrase "we would like them to acquire" contradicts constructivist metaphysics and epistemology. If constructivism assumes that students construct their own knowledge, then how can a constructivist teacher choose the knowledge they would like students to acquire? The phrase "we would like them to acquire" presupposes an objective philosophy which holds that given a specific context, some knowledge is objectively superior to other knowledge. For a constructivist, this is a contradiction, if one views reality, reason, knowledge, and truth as subjective and relative to the perceiver, then what is the

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basis for arguing for any knowledge at all, let alone one over another? Any curricular choice, according to constructivist philosophy, should be as valid as any other. When constructivists make absolute claims about what, when, and how something should be taught, they are either objectivists or making arbitrary claims.

Finally, there are problems with societal readiness. Elkind (2004, 310) suggested that “to be successfully implemented, any reform pedagogy must reflect a broad and energized social consensus,” which the United States currently does not have. Yet, a broad and energized social consensus in the United States does exist. The consensus is that public education has not adequately educated its students, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status. This societal readiness has paved the way for programs like No Child Left Behind. Progressive reform pedagogies like constructivism are usually prescribed by administrators to improve education or raise test scores. Despite the social consensus that education needs reform pedagogy and constructivism has been one of those pedagogies, education still has not closed the gap between rich and poor—assuming that is education’s aim in the first place.

Science of Education

Most teachers receive the same education, but not all teachers readily accept what they are taught, whether it be constructivism or some other philosophy of education. Unlike medical practitioners, for example, educators disagree about nearly all issues within their field. Medical practitioners simply observe whether or not the treatment cured the patient. They may disagree about why or how a treatment worked, but at least they have objective and verifiable evidence of whether or not the treatment worked. Education, on the other hand, possesses many more points of disagreement. How do people learn? What should people learn? How do we measure learning? The complexity of these questions results in virtually no consensus about what works among all educators. Though education draws from a unique body of knowledge to prepare its teachers, it is not scientific and probably never will be because there is so much disagreement about the definition of education.

Assuming that Elkind is correct in believing that education must become a science, his argument is still flawed. It is contradictory for a constructivist to advocate a science of education. The philosophical foundation of constructivism rejects an objectively knowable reality. The philosophical foundation of science claims that one reality is objectively knowable through the senses and reason. Science, therefore, undermines constructivism rather than serves as a prerequisite to it.

If Elkind used Kuhn’s (1996) definition of science—reality is observed by a perceiver who sees it through the lens of socially constructed paradigms that are periodically overturned by new paradigms that are incommensurate with past paradigms—then any science of education still has no claim of truth over any other method of inquiry within education. Claims like “teaching will become a true profession only when we have a genuine science of education” are equivalent to saying that teaching will be a profession only when it becomes an art. If we construct our own reality, what is the difference?

If Elkind believes that most of what educators consider science comes from constructivists like Rousseau, Kant, Piaget, and Vygotsky, his argument is flawed. It is circular logic for a constructivist to claim that a science of education is needed and then to select only constructivists as the founders of that science. Though some beliefs are obtained in experiments, most are not—especially philosophical views about *literally* constructing reality, which are not testable or falsifiable and thus should not be accepted as scientific.

Philosophy of Education

Elkind seems to have overlooked the role of the educator's metaphysical and epistemological assumptions in accepting constructivism or any philosophy of education. He admitted that educators who "are wedded to an objectivist view that knowledge has an independent existence" have resisted constructivism, but he quickly dismissed this cause in favor of teacher readiness. Ironically, teacher readiness is more likely the cause of resistance to constructivism. For an educator to implement a pedagogical practice, he or she must consciously or unconsciously accept its metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. Constructivists possess certain metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that lead to constructivist practices, while objectivists possess other metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that lead to objectivist practices. Elkind overlooked the possibility that not everyone holds the same assumptions about reality, reason, knowledge, and truth that lead to constructivist practices. Some have other worldviews and, therefore, reject constructivism as a theory of learning because it contradicts their philosophical assumptions.

Elkind said that constructivism is the "best philosophy of education we have available," and that it has been "widely accepted." This is true only at the university level, where the majority of professors possess the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that lead to constructivism. It is not true at other levels of education, where one is likely to encounter different metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that lead to other pedagogical practices.

Constructivism is not the best philosophy of education. Objectivism is more reasonable from a theoretical and practical perspective than constructivism. Objectivism holds that there is one reality independent of anyone perceiving it. This means that regardless of whether or not someone perceives something, it still exists. For example, I can leave the room with a table in it and be convinced that the table still exists. Most people probably would agree with this statement. Constructivism, on the other hand, holds that reality is dependent upon the perceiver. This means that something exists only if someone perceives it. From a constructivist perspective, if I leave a room with a table in it, the table ceases to exist. Most people would disagree with such a statement or at least have

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difficulty accepting it.

Objectivism also holds that humankind takes in data through the senses and uses reason to obtain knowledge. Constructivism does not deny the efficacy of reason completely, but does consider it as only one of many ways of knowing. This belief is another theory that does not stand up in practice. The theory of multiple intelligences, for example, proposes at least ten “intelligences” or ways of knowing: verbal, logical, musical, physical, spatial, inter- and intra-personal, natural, existential, and spiritual. When analyzed or reduced to their epistemological foundation, these intelligences seem more like specialized bodies of acquired knowledge than actual processors of information. Reason exists in all of them, which suggests that each is the *primary* way of knowing.

Objectivism also holds that we have objective knowledge and truth. A person observes reality via his or her senses, forms concepts through the use of noncontradictory (i.e., Aristotelian) logic, and thus acquires knowledge and truth. Constructivism posits that only subjective knowledge and relative truth are possible. If knowledge is subjective or relative to an individual or a group, then *any* knowledge could be true. Sacrificing virgins to appease the gods or believing that the universe revolves around the earth would count as knowledge and truth. Notable constructivists (Lawson 1989; Noddings 1998; Rorty 2003) have raised these criticisms about constructivist metaphysics and epistemology and have admitted that they have no answer to them.

Constructivism in Practice

Practically, objectivism is more reasonable than constructivism. As a high school English teacher, I implemented constructivism in my classes by allowing the students to construct what an English class is—choosing its purpose, curriculum, and instruction. Most of the students did not understand how they could “construct” an English class. They expected me to define the English class for them—a very reasonable assumption considering how young they were and how limited their experience. After a fair amount of prompting, a few bold students thought English should be spelling and grammar. Some might argue that the students’ answer proves only that they had been prevented from constructing previous curriculums, and thus had not learned to think for themselves or to question the curriculum. I concede that the students’ previous conception of what constitutes schooling was part of their inability to construct the course. However, perhaps children naturally look to adults to share with them their learned and acquired knowledge. They expect teachers to pass on to them a body of knowledge, imperfect though it may be, that they can update according to their discoveries. Many practicing constructivists refuse to do this, believing instead that a child’s knowledge is equal to that of an adult’s and a student is no less an authority on a subject than a teacher. This assumption is untrue and dangerous. It assumes that children are better off entering a world with no knowledge and creating their own rather than entering a world full of knowledge, learning it, and then updating it if it does not stand the test of their scrutiny.

The students in my English class could not be pure constructivists in the context of day-to-day assignments either. For example, when we read *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, the reality of the story presented obstacles. If the students would have said

that the story was about an aging salesman who imagines he is a success when he is not, a constructivist teacher would have to accept their response—right or wrong—because reality is constructed. For an objectivist English teacher, however, every claim must be supported by textual evidence and logic—by reality. *Romeo and Juliet*, therefore, must be about what the text supports and what logic dictates, not about the subjective feelings of the reader, which may not be in accordance with reality. Constructivist English teachers who tell students that there are no right-or-wrong answers or that their interpretation is as correct as anyone else's only encourage students to be careless and uncritical readers, writers, and thinkers.

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I shifted to giving students a choice supported by evidence and logic because of the flaws in the practical application of constructivism. Students could choose the purpose,

curriculum, and assignments of the course, but ultimately their choices had to conform to reality, not to their subjective whims. In other words, their choices had to have a compelling connection to their literacy development.

Conclusion

Constructivists must ask themselves whether they want to cling to the literal interpretation of constructivism that sees reality as constructed or simply believe that students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process. The two definitions are not the same metaphysically or epistemologically. The former entails an untenable theory and practice and should be modified or rejected.

Noddings (1998, 117–18) addressed the distinction between moderate and radical constructivism in this way:

[I]f radical constructivists are just saying that our perception and cognition are theory-laden, that all knowledge is mediated by our cognitive structures and theories, then they have lots of company among contemporary theorists. However, if they are saying that there is no mind-independent reality, then they seem to be arguing a line long ago rejected.

Though Noddings seemed to advocate a moderate constructivist view that denies a mind-dependent reality, I maintain that constructivists cannot be moderates. All constructivists necessarily must believe that reality is dependent upon the perceiver. It is logically impossible to believe that a person's perception and cognitive structures are theory-laden, while simultaneously believing that reality is independent of the perceiver. If reality is perceived by a theory-laden perceiver, then the reality is theory-laden too. The moment that one becomes theory-laden, one is prevented from knowing an objective reality.

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Objectivists believe humans are not theory-laden in the pejorative sense of that word. Objectivists do not consider prior knowledge or cognitive structures as a subjective lens through which one views reality. Rather, one possesses prior knowledge that informs new knowledge and, consequently, makes the new knowledge meaningful. If the prior knowledge or cognitive structure is incorrect, eventually the new correct knowledge will conflict with it and a person will be forced to update his or her old knowledge. 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.

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