

The Constructivist Reader

Constructivist notions of meaning making turned long-held views of comprehension upside down. They highlighted that the reader, not the text, is the key determinant of meaning. The reader does not extract meaning from the text by some form of translation; rather, constructivist readers draw upon their knowledge of the world, including their existing awareness of such elements of characters (e.g., traits, motivations, and most likely actions), events (i.e., their possible antecedents and outcomes), and settings (e.g., the nature and influence thereof).

For educators and curriculum developers, constructivism brought to the fore a number of flaws in researchers' notions of comprehension, such as the tendency to both align instruction with a hierarchy (i.e., from literal to inferential to interpretative) and to assume that a reader's meanings could be fixed and deemed accurate without regard to likely variations (i.e., due to background knowledge and perspectives).

The Shift for Readers

Constructivism moved us from notions of reading tied to a delivery model (from text or author to reader) to a model of reading tied to an interaction between the reader and the text. The interaction might be spurred by the text, but the true driver of meaning-making is the reader—stemming from their background knowledge and views of the world. The reader is the meaning maker—assessing what make sense and how ideas fit together and judging what is salient to their interests, purposes and perspectives. Informational text, expositions, or arguments are understood in terms of whether the ideas suggested by the text are viable in relationship to the reader's experience.

The shift to constructivism and the constructivist reader represented a shift of the locus of control from the text or teacher to the reader. Likewise, it represented a shift of authority from a set of predetermined answers or interpretations to a respect for meaning-making that evolves from the interactions between the reader and the text. Judging the understandings and interpretations of readers requires a consideration of the plausibility rather than the correctness of

a reader's answers. And, to judge such plausibility requires an appreciation of the reader's interaction with the text, especially in terms of their background knowledge, purposes, etc.

A constructivist reader is not engaged in an effort to read by translating the words into meaning. At the outset of reading, constructivist readers are asking their own questions, making predictions, and scoping possible ideas. As they move forward, they formulate hypotheses shaped by their own experiences and the ideas presented with their reading of the text, the plot suggested, and the discoveries that they have discerned—all while enlisting and adjusting their pre-existing schema or knowledge structures. They do not proceed one brick at a time, but holistically fit the pieces into what they deem to be the most reasonable whole. This process involves repeated cycles of forward inferencing and predicting, combining prior knowledge with prompts and clues suggested by the text. Meaning making thus entails shuttling back and forth between the whole and the parts as plausible and coherent understandings are sort.

A reader's agency is paramount in a constructivist model. Accordingly, reading comprehension through this lens is concerned with how readers weigh elements suggested by the text differentially, depending upon the possible meanings and their unique fit with the successively refined model of meaning they are building. In other words, according to Collins, Brown and Larkin (1980), reading comprehension requires a progressive refinement model. They suggest readers make meaning for a text that unfolds as follows:

... text-understanding proceeds by progressive refinement from an initial model to more and more refined models of the text. ... The initial model is a partial model, constructed from schemata triggered by the beginning elements of the text. Successive models incorporate more and more elements from the text. The models are progressively refined by trying to fill the unspecified variable slots in each model as it is constructed. As the questions associated with the unfilled slots in more refined models become more and more specific, the search for relevant information is constrained more and more. ... people pursue the refinement process until it converges on a solution that satisfies a number of conditions for a plausible model. (pp. 387–388)

Likewise, notions such as a reduction of uncertainty and psycholinguistic guessing games have been used by scholars in an effort to capture meaning-making processes. In accordance with such a model, a constructivist reader may be engaged in what might be described as a form

of detective work—using their understanding of the world, knowledge of events and people to discern patterns or instantiations of what took place or is occurring (Side Comment III.1a.1).

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Considered in terms of processes, constructivist readers are repeatedly doing the following:

- *Accessing relevant background knowledge to help them suggest possible meanings*
- *Asking questions as they read about what makes sense*
- *Making predictions*
- *Checking the fit of new ideas with what they know and what they have already constructed for the text they are reading.*
- *Judging plausibility, coherence, fit, and comprehensiveness*

Constructivist reading is not passive. Constructivist readers are engaged and actively enlisting strategies to relate ideas to their world (recognizing how patterns and ideas occur differently and in various contexts). In other words, constructivist readers ask questions, relate what they read to the worlds they discern, adopt different perspectives, and perhaps visualize and make predictions. Whereas assembled and enculturated readers might be limited by a set of prior questions—assigned a text to read, sometimes quickly, either silently or aloud, and then asked questions—constructivist readers are initiators, engaged in generating questions, moving in, out and around the text. They contemplate the saliency of ideas as they consider meanings that they deem pertinent.

From the outset, every reader is engaged in making inferences based upon their understanding of the world, their purposes and perspectives. They use these inferred understandings to weigh either the poignancy or comparative insignificance of that which others might simply take as literal. In other words, the pathway to reading for understanding is not a direct route from literal to inferential to evaluative; it can just as easily begin with the inferential and evaluative. Likewise, the reader is immediately critical, contemplating and judging the feasibility and integrity of ideas in ongoing ways. Constructivist reading—really any reading for understanding—does not proceed from the literal to the inferential to interpretive to crucial; it

can move and morph in a variety of directions depending on how a particular reader's model of meaning evolves..

The constructivist reader also is apt to use cues from the text that go beyond the word or the sentence. They are apt to know that ideas are presented with key words within and across sentences but also that these ideas are connected across texts structured and predictable ways. Stories follow an event structure tied to key characters. Informational texts will often enlist variations on familiar structural templates that organize information within and across paragraphs and section: problem-solution, compare and contrast, conflict-resolution, sequences of events, steps, or stages, etc. Constructivist readers use their knowledge of text structures and genres as they move across and between texts as checks on ideas.

Finally, the understandings developed by constructivist readers may be difficult to judge without understanding the purposes they enlisted and the perspectives and background knowledge that they activated, and the monitoring routines they enacted to check the fit of the new to the known. Answers will vary, befitting the range of meanings that arise from the interactions between the ideas suggested by the text and those that the reader brings to the process. If teachers are to assess constructivist reading, they need to adjust their judgments in ways that acknowledge and affirm the different meanings readers are apt to construct.

References

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