

4. "We create the world in our minds": constructivist learning in EDC/HRE¹⁶

When we read a story in a book, we create something like a movie in our minds. We add details and scenes that the author hints at or leaves out, and we may even imagine the faces of the characters. Some novels appeal so strongly to our imagination that we are disappointed if ever we watch a "real" film based on the story. Our imagination had produced a far better one, and it is unique, as every reader's mind produces a different "film".

This is an example of our capability to "create the world in our minds". The world that we live in is the world as we perceive it – it consists of the images, experiences, concepts and judgments that we have created of it. As learners, people want to make sense of what they hear or read – they want to understand it. A brain researcher characterised the human brain as a "machine seeking for meaning". Things that do not make sense must be sorted out somehow. If information is missing, we must either find it somehow, or fill in the gap by guessing.¹⁷

With some experience, teachers find out that when they give a lecture, each student receives and remembers a different message. Some students will still remember the information when they are adults because it appealed to them so strongly, others may have forgotten it by the next morning because it did not relate to a knowledge or value structure that they had. From a constructivist perspective, it is important what happens in the students' minds.

Constructivism conceives learning as a highly individualised process:

- Learners construct, reform or create structures of meaning. New information is linked to what a learner already knows or has understood.
- Learners come to an EDC/HRE class with their individual biographies and experiences.
- Gender, class, age, ethnic background or religious belief and other identities can influence learner outlook.
- We possess different forms of intelligence that go far beyond the conventional understanding of being good at maths or languages.¹⁸
- There is no absolute standard for personal or political relevance.

Constructivist learning can be further differentiated into three sub-categories, and the teacher plays an important part in supporting them.

4.1 Learners "construct" meaning – they discover and create something new

Teachers can support their student by, among others:

- creating learning opportunities;
- designing challenging tasks;
- providing instruction through media and inputs (lectures) that represent the objects of learning;
- providing encouragement and support for the learner's self-esteem.

16. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Volume IV in this edition.

17. See Gollob R. and Krapf P. (eds) (2008), EDC/HRE Volume III, Unit 1, *Stereotypes and prejudices. What is identity? How do I see others, how do they see me?*, Strasbourg, pp. 19-38.

18. See Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences.

4.2 Learners "reconstruct" what they have learnt – they apply it and put it to the test

To a large extent, we all create such applications ourselves, but in school, the teacher provides them by, among others:

- giving opportunities for sharing, presentation and discussion;
- formal testing and assessment;
- offering or demanding portfolio work;
- designing challenging tasks, for example in projects.

4.3 Learners "deconstruct", or criticise, their own results or each other's

Without this element of critical reviewing and testing any learning effort would become irrelevant for society, and for the individual learners themselves. Here, learning also has a social dimension.