

## WHAT *Dumbing down* SAYS ABOUT CONSTRUCTIVISM

In his book *Dumbing down*, Kevin Donnelly condemns constructivism, arguing that it considers the content of learning secondary to the process of learning (p. 54) and that it is student-centred, related to student interests, adopts open-ended tasks and has students work more in groups and individually (p. 143); students are not taught in a formal way, they learn at their own pace, negotiate learning and engage in ‘discovery’. ‘Whole language’ and ‘fuzzy maths’ are based on such an approach (p.195).

### THE FACTS

Donnelly here displays a lack of knowledge of some of the most basic issues in education. The New Age hippy who first popularised the learning theory that came to be called constructivism was none other than 18thC philosophical father of contemporary conservatism, John Locke. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke proposes that the mind constructs ideas in different ways – by combining simple ideas to form complex ones; by bringing two or more ideas together and forming a view of them in relation to each other and by abstracting from specific examples. Perception is conceived of as a construct. Piaget built on these ideas in his empirical studies on developmental psychology. Piaget’s concepts of *assimilation* (by which new information is attached to a view of the world already held) and *accommodation* (in which the internal world has to accommodate itself to the evidence with which it is confronted and thus adapt to it) are constructivist concepts from which learning theory developed. Other key figures in the development of this theory of learning are psychologist George Kelly (“man ... builds construction systems through which to view the world” - *A theory of personality*), Jerome Bruner (“I suspect that much of growth starts out by our turning around and recoding in new forms” – *Toward a theory of instruction*) and Douglas Barnes (who sees students using language to “reshape their view of the world” -p.141, *From communication to curriculum*). Donnelly does not have a theory of learning – except that all learning appears to have to be rote-learning, but his lack of knowledge of the history of learning theory leads him to confuse *teaching practices* (group work, negotiated learning etc) with *learning theory* – constructivism belonging to the latter. Of course, constructivist theory may imply particular classroom practices such as the importance of providing opportunities for extended language use in order for students to assimilate/accommodate/recode/ build/interpret, but, to use the work of Barnes as an example, two things need to be borne in mind about this:

- Barnes’ *empirical* finding that teachers who valued intellectual exchange were those who valued social relationships and classroom talk. The memorising of established knowledge was valued by teachers who valued neither social nor intellectual exchange (*From communication to curriculum*, p. 144)
- it is precisely the *understanding of subject content* that learning theorists like Barnes are concerned to advance.

Hence, constructivism is not a classroom process, but a label for a set of learning theories. These theories value intellectual work and they value the understanding of subject content. In every way, Donnelly’s discussion of constructivism is, simply, wrong.