Constructivism and the SACSA Framework

Every educational process contains some notion of the learner and of the society in which the learning takes place. In addition all educational work carries an implicit concept of learning: what it is, who does it, how it happens and what can be done to facilitate it. In the SACSA Framework the underpinning learning theories are made explicit.

The theoretical basis for the conception of learning in the SACSA Framework is provided by the family of theories of learning that are grouped under the title ‘constructivism’. While theoretical distinctions exist between particular versions of constructivism, such as personal, social and radical, it is this family of theories which have guided the preparation of the Framework.

The central thesis of constructivism is that the learner is active in the process of taking in information and building knowledge and understanding; in other words, of constructing their own learning. Learning then is the active process of engaging in experience and its internalisation in terms of thinking. All forms of experience can be called upon here. Constructivism also has clear implications for the social situation or context in which learning happens, in so far as learners are more likely to engage in constructing their own understanding in a supportive social environment.

Learners, however, are not social islands. They exist in a cultural context with others, and in turn this social context is shared with other groups and, at a different level, with other species. Individuals enter a context where there are already many shared understandings. In their most sophisticated form such understandings can be classed as cultural knowledge. Each individual is not expected to remake or rediscover such knowledge.

Thus, while individuals actively give personal meaning to a given situation, they do so within frames of cultural understandings that are made up of some knowledge that is relatively stable and other knowledge that is very dynamic. A learner's prior experiences and prior knowledge will shape the meanings they draw upon in particular situations.

It follows that learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current and past understandings. That is:

- the learner selects, interprets and transforms information; constructs hypotheses; and makes decisions, relying on a cognitive structure to do so
- mental models provide the means by which an individual interprets and organises experience in order to elaborate and extend current understandings, and their overall framework of knowledge.

There are a number of implications which flow from a constructivist approach, not the least of which is that the Framework itself has been written to be consistent with constructivism in order to support the development of teaching and learning.
The SACSA Framework does not represent a prescribed body of knowledge or authorise a particular way of going about teaching. Rather, it describes a set of parameters within which educators work to design their own teaching, and promotes contexts within which children and students construct their own learning.

Constructivism, with its emphasis on holism and on learners making connections, sets up the potential for developing learning across subject areas as well as between stages of education. From this perspective the curriculum framework is best understood in terms of knowledge across fields, rather than as rigidly boxed into discrete subjects. Within this model of learning educators play a crucial role in encouraging children and students to discover deeper principles and make connections among ideas, or between concepts, processes and their representation. The pedagogy that is best suited to this process is engagement in interactive talk, through which the educator aims to offer, reinterpret and challenge relevant information, based on an assessment of the learner’s current state of understanding.

In general educational terms this view of learning suggests the need for curricula that match, and also challenge, children’s and students’ understanding, fostering further growth and development. In a representational sense the constructivist view of learning can be depicted as a spiral in which learners continually extend and deepen what they have already learned. This view of learning calls for holistic approaches to planning, teaching, learning and assessing. For example, it involves fostering motivation by making learning purposeful, contextualised, challenging and inherently interesting. Teaching means providing a range and variety of learning tasks with appropriate kinds and levels of scaffolding. It no longer means strict adherence to a pre-determined linear series of facts, skills and sub-skills set out in a program of study. Rather, it involves professional judgment as to where learners are and what they need next in their learning. It recognises that children and students learn collaboratively in a team or social setting, within highly challenging but low threat environments, that children and students welcome challenge and prefer to search for and find patterns for themselves. Assessment becomes a matter of judging, through a range and variety of assessment tasks, how children and students are progressing in their learning within Learning Areas, Essential Learnings, and across the curriculum as a whole.
SACSA teaching/learning principles derived from a constructivist view

- Learning is the process of constructing knowledge.
- Learning is not linear; it involves learners extending, elaborating, reorganising, reformulating and reflecting upon their own frameworks of knowledge.
- Learning involves building on prior knowledge.
- Learning is making explicit the implicit conceptions, frameworks and explanatory systems in the minds of learners, which shape how they interpret and what they learn. Learners’ conceptions are embedded in their culture and tied to their use of language.
- Learning occurs in a context, and the understandings about the context are part of what is learned.
- Learning involves learners communicating their questions, intuitions, conjectures, reasons, explanations, judgments and ideas in a variety of forms.
- Learning involves developing knowledge, skills and dispositions to think and act in ways which determine individual effort, the setting of personal goals, self-assessment and awareness of the uses (and misuses or abuses) of knowledge.
- Learning involves the progression of learners through cycles of growth.

What knowledge, skills and dispositions should children and students develop within a constructivist learning framework? One of the responses to this question involves a second common aspect of the SACSA Framework: the Essential Learnings.