

## Research Article

# The Phenomenology of Constructive Historical Thinking in Higher Education

Aldrin A. Alcantara

University of Nueva Caceres, Naga City, Philippines  
Email: [alcantara.aldrin@unc.edu.ph](mailto:alcantara.aldrin@unc.edu.ph)

**Received:** April 25, 2022

**Accepted:** May 8, 2022

**Published:** May 15, 2022

**Abstract:** This study looked into the experiences of higher education students in a constructivist environment during the skill of historical thinking. The study delved on how effective a constructive pedagogy is in facilitating historical subjects and driving higher education students to skillfully read and write about history. It also looked into the effectiveness of the program and the accompanying activities and provided meaningful insights on how to improve history curricula for college students. This study is anchored on Jean Piaget's Philosophical Theory of Constructivism and the Basic Epistemology of Historical Knowledge of Christophe Bouton. The study included selected students from the College of Education taking History subjects as their field of specialization. The benefits of the constructivist approach as pedagogy towards the development of historical thinking are: capitalization on prior historical knowledge, intrinsic historical motivation, independent learning, collaborative learning, and progressive historical thinking learning experience, while the drawbacks of the constructivist approach are: differentiated assessment on historical thinking sub skills (sourcing, critical reading, corroboration and contextualization), unlevelled learner's prior historical knowledge, and freeloading among members of a group. Constructivism has its benefits and drawbacks at different stages of the learning experience. As for the benefits gathered in this study, future researchers and implementers of such pedagogy should capitalize on said benefits and continually study in the rudiments of the Philosophy and the context of the learners who are the recipient of the pedagogy. Constant practice in the practical teaching strategies that harbor Constructivism to enrich its benefits and turn the drawbacks into opportunities is important since this is a different strategy from the more acquainted lecture method. By doing so, we not only turn the drawbacks to benefits, but also in the long run encourage the learners to be intrinsically motivated with the subject brought by their meaningful experiences, both individually and collectively.

**Keywords:** Historical Thinking, Constructivism, Meaningful experiences.

## Introduction

Teaching Social Science powerfully and authentically begins with a deep knowledge and understanding of the subject and its unique goals (Alvior, 2014). The course prepares students to identify, understand, and work to solve societal challenges. Education for citizenship should help students acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives, who are informed and thoughtful, participative in their communities, are involved politically, and exhibit moral and civic virtues.

One often considers Social Science to be dull. And not only do most students perceive the subject to be dull, but they also fail to see the relevance of Social Science to their everyday lives. Why is this so? Is it because the content is truly dull? Or is it because the instructional methods utilized by the teacher do not engage and inspire students to explore the subject?

Students are required to take a number of Social Science classes while in school, but few come to see this course as a mode of thinking or system of interconnected ideas. In the realm of the Philippine educational system, teaching Social Science, in this case its component subject History, is still generally confined as a series of names, dates, and places—although its goal is to help students learn to detect a degree of cause and effect, a skill applicable in any subject or course. How is Philippine history taught in our schools, and how different is that from the past? History was taught really without its “lessons” (Carpio, 2016).

Studying history allows gaining valuable perspectives on the problems of our modern society. Many problems, features, and characteristics of modern Philippine society can be traced back to historical questions on our colonial past, as well as our pre-colonial culture. Philippine history is a unique narrative of colonialism, reaction, and revolution. It is also a culturally diverse country from pre-colonial times. There is an emerging trend to study the social history of the country and uncover more stories beyond the usual stories taught in schools across the country. The country’s experience of colonialism, the rise of nationalistic feelings, and the people’s subsequent reaction may allow us to gain more perspectives on this subject.

So how can history be taught better? How history be taught in the age of social media? How can one make history appealing to the millennials? Field trips alone could not be the answer. They are important for sure but when looking at teaching, one has to look primarily at two things: the educators (school teachers plus the parents) and the materials used in teaching. These two are critical elements, yet mainly interdependent.

With heavy reliance on the teaching materials, the content and structure of the materials become critical. History books are replete with stories, mostly anecdotes, of our heroes and the villains. The key ingredient (and the one usually missing) is putting the stories in the right context—the culture and the norms, the politics, the economy, etc.—in short, the zeitgeist or spirit of that time. This is the other challenge to the educators—providing context to the stories in history books.

Learners are not typically taught to think critically while reading historical accounts, or to write critically when asked to compose essays on historical events, issues and ideas. For the most part, learners are not taught to listen critically during discussions on history, and are not taught to think through historical concepts, nor internalize foundational historical meanings. The reality is that students are not usually encouraged to make connections between history and important events in life (Elder & Paul, 2015).

Even the best students are often unable to make connections between the past and the present because they have not learned to think critically about evidence or lack of evidence, the historian’s perspective, or the implications of a particular narrative. How do you see history? To what extent have you come to see history as a disconnected list of names and events and places and times? Or conversely, to what extent do you think you have been taught to see history as a system of understanding which, when understood deeply, can help you live better? These are the objectives of the subject in order for students to develop historical thinking. The question now is what is the best method of instruction and delivery in order to drive the said objectives.

Learning about something from direct experience of doing and engaging is the keystone of the Constructivist Philosophy of Jean Piaget, who focused on how humans make meaning in relation to the interaction between learners’ experiences and their ideas. In its practical sense, constructivism is where a school must mirror present life. Life which is as real and vital to the child where the practical skills such as planning, time management, problem solving, critical thinking and historical thinking, in their homes, neighborhood and playgrounds are carried out. Teaching and learning history certainly is a challenge for both the teacher and the learner, and innovations have been made in the past decades to successfully drive historical thinking as a twenty-first century skill. With the

reality of how Social Science is taught in high school, and the model of thinking our current learners have, the researcher has found it timely and relevant to address the development of historical thinking and to discover a new approach on how to drive this skill.

### **Methodology**

A phenomenological qualitative approach was used in the study. The following were specifically observed and obtained as part of the procedures: (a) participants interaction, (b) pedagogical interaction, (c) analysis of the context and content of the text used, (d) group tasks and (e) journalizing of observations. The study included 9 students from the College of Education taking History as one of their major fields of specialization. These students were also exposed to the constructivist approach in their historical subjects, particularly in historical thinking processes. Before the study was conducted, the prospective respondents were given a copy of the Informed Consent Form. They were given time to read the contents of the said form before signing the document. Only those that have signed the informed consent became participants of the study. The identity of the selected private university, identities of the respondents and data gathered for the entire experimental period were treated with utmost confidentiality. The qualitative method through direct-observation and focus group discussion was facilitated for the respondents. Evaluators observed how the respondents engaged and worked through each of the activities using the pedagogical approach at each session of the observation period. After the observation period, the Focus Group Discussion was conducted to draw out honest responses based on their actual experience. To analyze the qualitative data collected, the researcher, together with the research evaluators, collated the results of the direct observation and focus group discussion sessions and grouped them according to themes mentioned in the statement of the problem—the benefits and drawbacks of constructivist approach in developing historical thinking skills.

### **Results and Discussion**

Learners with strong historical intrinsic motivation impact the overall dynamics of the group. They become the leaders not because they are the best students but because they show confidence in the topic. In the observations conducted, it has been noted that in the nine groups created for the intervention, there are learners from each group who exhibited their interest on historical topics. Although they may not be the above-average learners pre-determined for this sample class, they were the ones who mentored their group mates when it comes to the historical issues and topics assigned to them. These learners readily shared their prior knowledge to their group mates about the topics assigned to them. In this case, controversial events in Philippine History (e.g. Retraction of Dr. Rizal and Massacre of Antonio Luna), and present material that they have read or watched even before the actual activity of the session. This created an active environment for discussion and healthy arguments to enrich the knowledge of historical topic among the group.

These observations reflect that of Glasersfeld (2013), who mentioned in his study on the constructivist motivational techniques that sustaining motivation to learn is strongly dependent on the learner's confidence in his or her potential for learning. These feelings of competence and belief in potential to solve new problems are derived from first-hand experience of mastery of problems in the past and are much more powerful than any external acknowledgment and motivation.

The intervention transferred the learning task from the teacher to the learner. Because topics are not discussed, respondents are “forced” to use resources available in the acquisition of information, which includes: looking for primary and secondary resources, developing a sense of independence from the teacher. As part of the intervention scheme, documents to be used in the analysis of historical topics were not readily given to the respondents. Rather, they were only given guide questions as criteria to look for primary and secondary sources for cross referencing (see Historical Thinking Skill Learning Guide). What this created is a sense of independence from the teacher as the source of knowledge in a traditional classroom, and transferred the responsibility of information acquisition to the learner. In relation to this, the facilitator assumed the role of a guide rather than a

spoon feeder of information. The intervention also gave a picture of an innovative and democratic classroom where priority is given to the students' autonomy and the relationship between students and their peers.

The observation revealed that the environment to which the respondents were subjected fostered active learning. In the study of Thompson (2015) on the Benefits of Constructivism, she argued that a constructivist model promotes students' active learning. In Behaviourist learning environments, students were positioned as merely passive recipients of information. This view is supported by Johnson (2015) in his article 'Instructionism and Constructivism: Reconciling Two Very Good Ideas' when he states: "Currently, as well as historically, the practices of education have corresponded, to varying degrees, to either a static passive view of knowledge or an adaptive and active view". From an article entitled 'Active Learning in a Constructivist Framework', where it says: "passive learning activities, in which the students are passive receivers of information, include listening to the teachers' exposition, being asked a series of closed questions, and practice and application of information already presented". However, with the constructivist model, students are no longer merely passive recipients but rather active participants. In a constructivist environment, students are challenged to become actively engaged throughout the entire learning process in various ways.

Learners engage in active discussion. Questions raised to the facilitator are not readily answered, like the reliability of sources and the truth value the author presents in a particular document. Respondents, therefore, throw these questions to their group mates, enabling them to engage in active discussion and scrutinize sources on their own. Corroboration is a skill that requires respondents to compare, for areas of agreement and disagreement, the information from one source with information contained in other sources. The more that the information from one document lines up with the information contained in other documents, the more likely the respondent is able to determine if the information that they have read is at least plausible. VanSledright (2014) averred that corroboration is needed because a source has no innate reliability. As compared to the use of the sourcing skill, respondents utilized the corroboration skill, on a much more consistent basis, and were able to use it to create a deeper understanding of the content.

This active discussion among peers fosters the constructivist principle of collaboration, where learners construct, share, and challenge ideas and knowledge. Building on understanding that social interaction is indispensable to the development of thought, a constructivist learning environment is organized to include ample opportunities for students to collaborate and to exchange ideas with peers and adults. Classrooms are set up to include cooperative learning and peer teaching situations so that students can talk together freely as well as question and argue with each other about ideas. These kinds of exchanges enrich, extend, and solidify understandings as well as continually expose students to different perspectives (Thompson, 2015).

Learners benefited in learning through technology. The use of the learning management system and electronic-related instructional materials harnessed the interest of the learner while acquiring historical knowledge, putting emphasis on learning with technology rather than simply learning from technology. Since the respondents did not have access to authentic primary documents, their immediate source of historical documents was the internet. While the respondents are fully aware that the web holds innumerable information, their knowledge on the reliability of sources ensures that they are critical in choosing material to be used for their topic analysis. Even before entering the material, respondents scrutinize the authenticity of the website, the background of the author and use the principle of triangulation in verifying the validity of the content.

Moreover, with the integration of technology in a constructivist environment, a plethora of technological tools can be used to simplify and support the collaboration process between students, teachers, and peers. For example, email, chat-rooms, video-conferencing, social media, and blogs are

just a few ways to collaborate. When learning from technology, the tool is used as a means to deliver information to the student. As described in Jonassen and Reeves (1996), much of the disappointing results of the application of computers in education can be attributed to a misguided emphasis on using technology as something that students should learn “from” in a fashion similar to how they might learn “from” classroom teachers, textbooks, or television”.

However, when learning with technology, tools can be utilized in a way to challenge student skills such as critical-thinking and problem-solving. Students become more involved in the learning process because the learning activity requires active involvement. Learning with media and technology means that learners function as designers using media and technology as tools for analyzing the world, accessing and interpreting information, organizing their personal knowledge, and representing what they know to others.

For cognitive tools to actually become an extension of human cognition, learners must strive for mindful engagement activities. Mindful engagement requires learners to be fully involved in examining novel, multiple perspectives and categories when problem-solving. The learning process is performed via computers that have access to the internet, World Wide Web, and many variations of software applications. When learning with these tools, it enhances the opportunity to learn by seeing and learning by doing.

Learners contextualize texts. When asked to describe the historical topic assigned to them, respondents often relay the thought of the issue or topic and not focus on the dates and names but rather on the causes and effects of the event and why it happened during that time. This is what they remember when being asked. Contextualization is the process by which a respondent tries to place the source and the events it reports in proper place and time. Scheurman (YOP) and Newmann (YOP) argued that understanding the context of an event requires one to explore the issues, relationships, and complexities of the topic being investigated. One cannot say that they have participated in the process of contextualization, if one has merely restated the order of the events for which they have read. The respondents attempted to use the information of when and where the event took place to try and gain a deeper understanding of the event. They do not anymore memorize the date of Rizal’s arrest or his death, but the reasons and the repercussions of such an event and why it happened during that time.

Respondents benefit in independent learning. They feel a sense of accomplishment knowing that the outputs of the day were a result of their own effort, with the facilitator guiding and not dictating the course of the topic.

“I like it that we are not being spoon-fed. Since all of my group mates are girls, it was easy for me to handle the group. It was easy for me to designate tasks. All of my group mates liked the way the lessons were discussed (constructivist way) because everybody actively participated in all of the activities.” “What I like about my group mates is that despite the fact that they didn’t know about the topic, they were willing to learn. I like that we learned the concepts on our own, instead of being taught how the topic was about.” “I want to do something like this again. I want to have a historical thinking activity as a group again due to the following reasons: We get to learn on our own; The topics are very controversial; very confusing, but we get to teach our classmates.” The responses suggest that respondents for this study were eager to do their part in the teaching-learning process. This motivation to learn independently is an affirmation of their own accountability for learning.

## **Conclusion**

The common themes for observation and responses for the benefits of the constructivist approach as pedagogy towards the development of historical thinking are: capitalization on prior historical knowledge, intrinsic historical motivation, independent learning, collaborative learning, and progressive historical thinking learning experience. The common themes for the drawbacks of the

constructivist approach as pedagogy towards the development of historical thinking are: differentiated assessment on historical thinking sub skills (sourcing, critical reading etc.), unlevelled learner's prior historical knowledge, and freeloading among members of a group.

Constructivism as a pedagogy for the development of historical thinking is beneficial for learners who have prior knowledge on historical content, who works well in groups and are benefitted by working and solving problems in groups, beneficial in the sense that the lessons on the skills of sourcing, critical reading, corroboration and contextualization of sources are not condensed or congested, and that there is liberty in the manipulation of the learning experience on the part of the facilitator while developing a sense of independence on the part of the learner in the acquisition of historical knowledge and skill. Constructivism also has drawbacks which are opportunities for improvement: Because knowledge rests on the learner, their prior knowledge is naturally not leveled which needs a differentiated assessment for each learner. And because learning is collaborative, there is a risk of freeloading and misguided learning experience outcome.

Constant practice in the practical teaching strategies that harbor Constructivism to enrich its benefits must be done by facilitators to turn the drawbacks into opportunities, which is important since this is a different strategy from the more acquainted lecture method. Facilitators are encouraged to devise assessments that do not only measure the performance of the group, but also the contribution of each member and their accountability as group members. By doing so, drawbacks do not only turn to benefits, but also encourage the learners to be intrinsically motivated with the subject as brought about by their meaningful experiences, both individually and collectively.

Longitudinal studies involving teachers who routinely use a constructivist teaching approach could also provide interesting data. The research topics could be about changes in teachers' beliefs, attitudes and teaching behaviors in implementing constructivist teaching in their classrooms. On the facilitator's development aspect, public and private teacher education institutions should conduct research on how they can help in-service teachers to implement a constructivist teaching approach in classrooms.

**Conflicts of interest:** There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

## References

1. Alvior, M.G. 2014. The Meaning and Importance of Curriculum Development. <http://simplyeducate.me/2014/12/13/the-meaning-and-importance-of-curriculum-development/>.
2. Carpio, J.A. 2016. Teaching Philippine History. <https://www.manilatimes.net/teaching-philippine-history/267871/>
3. Elder, J. and Paul, R. 2015. Introduction to Teaching Strategies in Social Studies. <http://www.udel.edu/dssep/strategies.htm>.
4. Glasersfeld, J. 2013. Evolution of Human Cognitive Architecture. Psychology of Learning and Motivation. San Diego: Academic Press.
5. Johnson, W. 2015. Deception, degeneration, and the delegation of duty: Contracting safety obligations between the NCAA, member institutions, and student-athletes. Valparaiso University Law Review, 49(3): 1045–1094.
6. Jonassen, D.H. and Reeves, T.C. 1996. Learning with technology: using computers as cognitive tools. In: Jonassen, D.H., (Ed.), Handbook of research for educational communications and technology (pp. 693e719). New York: Macmillan.
7. Thompson, D.S. 2015. Benefits of constructivism. Boise State University College of Education. [http://deborahthompson.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/4/7/26477939/dthompson\\_edtech504\\_benefits\\_of\\_constructivism\\_\(final\\_paper\).pdf](http://deborahthompson.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/4/7/26477939/dthompson_edtech504_benefits_of_constructivism_(final_paper).pdf)

8. VanSledright, B. 2014. *Assessing Historical Thinking and Understanding*. New York: Routledge.

**Citation:** Aldrin A. Alcantara. 2022. The Phenomenology of Constructive Historical Thinking in Higher Education. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 6(5): 5-11.

**Copyright:** ©2022 Aldrin A. Alcantara. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.