Truth, Knowledge, and Constructivism

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When von Glasersfeld says "… to assess the truth of your knowledge you would have to know what you come to know before you come to know it" (1987, p. 37) and "…it appears that knowledge is not a transferable commodity and communication not a conveyance" (1987, p. 48), he is providing a strong argument against the behaviourist theories that assume that "experience is the only contact a knower can have with the world" (1987, p. 36) and, for too many years, have had a damaging influence on "the generation and assessment of knowledge"(1987, p. 37). In other words, the long held notions about best practices for instructional design and learning outcome assessment have been based on theory that presupposes the existence of absolute truths that can be conveyed from authoritative external repositories (teachers and textbooks) into inexperienced and empty repositories (students' minds) where, through drill, practice, quizzing and testing—with little or no time to reflect and assess—those truths eventually transform into knowledge.

From a constructivist educator's perspective, this means that, although Behaviourism based pedagogy may appear to yield positive outcomes (as in test scores), it is probable that those outcomes have more to do with *training* than with actual *learning.* Unless students are given opportunity to grapple with new knowledge, reflect on and discuss how it relates to prior knowledge, take personal initiative to apply, reflect again, and self-correct, those students are deprived of the opportunity of building their own knowledge and learning how to learn.

Near the end of the video (*Ernst von Glasersfeld on teaching and radical constructivism*, 2010), von Glasersfeld describes a longitudinal study of students who had been taught basic arithmetic by a constructivist teacher and he reports that, three years after experiencing that constructivist class, those students were found—*in all subject areas*—to be far ahead of all the other students who had only experienced traditional teaching. This is an excellent example of how, instead of just *training* students, constructivist teaching *enables* students to learn how to learn and provides them with transferable skills that will *empower* them for life.

References

Ernst von Glasersfeld on teaching and radical constructivism. (2010). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YozoZxblQx8&feature=youtube_gdata_player

Von Glasersfeld, E. (1987). Learning as a constructive activity. *Problems of Representation in the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics*, 3–17. Retrieved from http://anti-matters.org/articles/73/public/73-66-1-PB.pdf