

Constructivism, Situated Learning and Sexual Harassment Prevention Training

Christine C. Wessels

George Mason University

Author Note

Christine C. Wessels, Instructional Design and Development Student, George Mason University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christine Wessels, 10439 Todman Landing Ct, Burke, VA 22015. E-mail: cwessels@gmu.edu

Abstract

The following document discusses the fundamental principles of Situated Learning, a Constructivist approach to instructional design and the implications for learning, designing and facilitating sexual harassment prevention training. Situated learning was selected to design a learning environment that provides learners the opportunity to gain an appreciation for the multi-faceted consequences when employers, employees and supervisors fail to fulfill their responsibilities, are not cognizant of their behavior, or failure of the employer to provide employees with the policies, practices and tools they need to maintain a healthy and harassment free workplace.

Constructivism, Situated Learning and Sexual Harassment Prevention Training

Introduction to Constructivism

Constructivism on the epistemological spectrum, resides opposite of objectivism, a behaviorally-based approach to the acquisition of knowledge. Constructivism is distinctive in that it emphasizes a developer-centered approach to design and implementation, results in open-learning environments and elicits socially-based learning theories. A constructivist environment seeks to bridge the gap between the learner's pre-existing knowledge and abilities, and the desired outcomes of a learning experience. Vygotski described this phenomenon as the Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD (Driscoll, 2005) by engaging the learner in a cross-disciplinary, authentic learning environment where skills and knowledge used in the environment are directly applicable outside of the training. Constructivists view the mind as a rhizome whereby knowledge is not only constructed by information as perceived the learner internally alone, but negotiated with others as a collective group with a variety of perspectives that shape and evolve the collective understanding of a concept.

Unlike the objectivist paradigm, learners are not viewed as empty vessels, but unique and complex individuals coming from a myriad of experiences, backgrounds, and learning styles who, when presented with the appropriate contextualized environment and variables, will instinctively construct their own perception of reality and negotiate with others to further that understanding of a given concept or subject matter. Duffy and Cunningham assert, "Constructivists do not assume that we must have a common meaning, but rather we actively seek to understand the different perspectives. Second, from a learning perspective, we do not assume that the learner will "acquire" the expert's meaning, and hence we do not seek a

transmission approach to instruction. Rather we seek to understand and challenge the learner's thinking." (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).

Role of the Designer

When designing a constructivist environment, the focus relies heavily on the "identification of the context in which the skills will be learned and subsequently applied [anchoring learning in meaningful contexts]" (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). As such, use of the Integrated Learning Design Framework (ILDF) for Online Learning is a "systematic and iterative process that can be used not only to develop meaningful instruction, but also to prompt a learning process for the developer as he or she expands his or her understanding of the instructional or training situation." (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). This approach places the "online learning developer" at the center of the process enabling them to explore, discover, enact and evaluate the design of an environment, refining it until learner performance results in the desired learning outcomes. When creating an Online Learning Environment (OLE), data is purposefully embedded for the learner to discover, collect, and use to solve the problem. The pedagogical models and strategies for CLEs promote problem solving, social negotiation, articulation, reflection and role-playing activities, among others (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). Unlike traditional learning strategies, constructivist learning does not provide the learner with the solution, but rather an open-ended, ill-structured problem that is open to interpretation thereby promoting consideration of alternative perspectives to their own and expanding their understanding of the concepts.

Implications for Learning

CLEs are designed with the purpose "actively negotiating perceptual perception with the external world" (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). The learner is empowered to take

ownership of their learning experience and to create their own meaning and perceptions.

Learners more self-directed and must employ self-monitoring and self-regulating [as promoted by the environment] that increase transfer potential and align the learning experience with its application outside of the learning environment. According to Ertmer and Newby, “learners are encouraged to *construct* their own understandings and then to validate, through social negotiation” (Ertmer & Newby, 1993, p. 65). CLEs promote self-monitoring and correction strategies that aid in transferring knowledge into long-term memory.

Instructors in a CLE play a smaller role in that they are not pontificate on a stage and lecture, but rather serve experts facilitating the learning process by mentoring, coaching and scaffolding learners by employing the Socratic Method aiding learners as they decide how to obtain the information they need and engage in self-study.

Situated Learning

Situated Learning is a constructivist pedagogical model based on situated cognition theory. It is hinged on the notion that knowledge is not isolated to the individual but rather, resides within a distributed community of practitioners, both amateur and expert alike. Much like constructivism, situated cognition emphasizes how the individual perceives the situation and is a “distributed phenomenon that is more global – that goes beyond the boundaries of a person to include the environment, artifacts, social interactions, and culture” (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). The more diverse the participant population, the greater the learning potential.

Situated Learning Environments (SLEs) are compact, and more structured than other methods. The goal of situated learning is to promote use of the skills and acquire the knowledge they will use when applied outside of the learning environment. The discovery and exploratory processes are collaborative and require the designer to provide the resources and tools of a

contextualized environment with embedded data. The instructor's role is that of an expert available to support learners on their journey of discovery. Situated learning is highly collaborative and thereby dictates use of dialogic strategies such as articulation, reflection, and social negotiation. This requirement is fundamental in selecting the appropriate technologies and learning activities that support the SLE. These technologies include tools such as discussion boards, chats, wikis, blogs, and the like all with the purpose of challenging one's own perceptions in relation to the rest of the group.

Situated Learning and Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a controversial and emotionally-charged subject matter that is steeped in misconceptions and requires a delicate touch. Everyone has their own opinions, feelings and beliefs about what sexual harassment is, why it has become such a prominent issue over the past several decades and efforts to mitigate the resulting damages and costs associated when a complaint progresses into a law suit. The workplace differs from the broader community, because at work some people have authority over others, and this authority relationship can lead to coercion. People at work are not as free to come and go as they are elsewhere, and since they have to work where they are assigned, they are entitled to an environment free of sexual harassment.

The unfortunate reality when it comes to sexual harassment prevention training programs within the corporate industry is that it is a "check-box" exercise implemented for the purposes of alleviating as much liability on the employer as possible. Federal law requires employers to make their policy highly visible and accessible to all; it is for this reason that the company policy often times is included within the training itself. Comprehension of the policy is based on mastery quizzes and tests that largely reflect inert knowledge acquired for the purposes of *getting*

through the exercise and moving on to other things. Motivation to truly understand the importance of the concepts is low while completing the course is paramount. It is not a priority for employees who are pressed to produce results, especially in the government-contracting industry that are not compensated for time spent learning. In an effort to distance learners from the traditional, objectivist methodologies of corporate training, situated learning; a constructivist pedagogical model was selected. The purpose of which, is to enable a more learner-controlled environment where they have the freedom to discover embedded data and engage in multi-disciplinary techniques for solving the existing problem. Situated learning is a more effective method for immersing learners into an authentic learning environment designed to challenge personal ideas and opinions, engage in social negotiation, and gain an exponentially increased appreciation for the complex implications of sexual harassment at work.

This program was designed to engage learners to actively participate in the review of a case from the perspective of a third party consulting firm. Learners are provided resources that contain embedded data for them to discover in the form of interview transcripts, company policy documents, meeting with the CEO and access to Human Resources and business objectives and performance information. This environment takes into account previous experience and knowledge in the subject matter itself and seeks to increase understanding of employer, employee and supervisor responsibilities, an understanding of the “reasonable person” standard, and the difference between one’s intent versus impact on those around them. By placing the learner in a position of that of a third party consultant, they have the advantage of access to information that might not otherwise be available. The transcripts of the involved parties are designed to promote multiple perspectives on the same case containing little bits of data that aid the learner in assimilating a grander comprehension of the economical, psychological, emotional

and financial implications of sexual harassment. Learners are required to produce two deliverables, a report documenting their findings following analysis of the embedded data and presentation containing their recommendations for reducing the number complaints and law suits. During this process, they are required to participated in asynchronous online discussions and are provided a collaborative space in the form of a wiki complete with chat, embedded with tools they may use at their discretion to monitor progress such as a calendar, task list, and document library.

Informal evaluation methods are used to determine learner success by measuring the difference between the learners' initial entries into the discussion topics and journals and the rationale used to support their recommended solutions for the "client". Since there is no right or wrong answer, it is the supporting evidence and rationale behind these documents that ultimately reveals whether or not the experience resulted in a change in attitude and/or behavior. On a more formal level, true success is measured by a reduction in complaints, law suits, and the associated costs from the time this program is implemented until every employee has participated. Given the size of the organization, the results would take at a minimum twelve months to realize.

Summary

When used appropriately, situated learning is an excellent constructivist approach to promote a shift in attitude or perception of a controversial subject such as sexual harassment. Multiple perspectives, role playing, articulation and reflection all seek to guide learners in the exploration of a subject that can only truly be appreciated simulating an authentic, contextualized situation that promotes the use of skills to be applied outside of the safety of a controlled learning environment.

References

- Dabbagh, N., & Bannan-Ritland, B. (2005). *Online Learning Concepts, Strategies, and Application*. Upper Saddle: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Driscoll, M. P. (2005). *Psychology of Learning for Instruction*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Duffy, T. M., & Cunningham, D. J. (1996). Constructivism: Implications for the Design and Delivery of Instruction. In D. H. Jonassen, *Handbook of Research for Educational Communications and Technology* (pp. 170-198). New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.
- Ertmer, P. A., & Newby, T. J. (1993). Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Constructivism: Comparing Critical Features from an Instructional Design Perspective. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 50-72.
- Kitsantas, A., & Dabbagh, N. (2010). *Learning to Learn with Integrative Learning Technologies*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, Inc.