# ED 6225 – Designing Constructivist Learning Environments
## COURSE OUTLINE

**Course information:**

Term:          Fall 2014
Dates:         Sept. 4 – Dec. 3

**Instructor information:**

Instructor:    Dr. Ellen Rose
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Phone:         (506) 452-6125

(Note:  Just send me an e-mail whenever you want to set up a time to talk on the phone, Skype, or meet face-to-face.)

## What's the course about?

In recent years, educators and instructional designers have been paying increasing attention to constructivism.  Constructivism is not an instructional practice but, first and foremost, a way of thinking about teaching and learning that is philosophically divergent from *objectivism*.  Objectivists believe that a stable body of knowledge exists out there in the world and that, given effective and efficient instructional strategies, it can be transferred into students' heads.  Constructivists, on the other hand, argue that meaning is not given but made; each learner, in other words, must construct meaning and knowledge for him- or herself.  Of course, this view of education has important implications for how we conceptualize learning and structure learning experiences.

While some teachers and instructional designers regard constructivism as an instructional panacea, others tend to focus on the many challenges that surround reconciling constructivist thinking with institutional and societal needs to, for example, assess learning and promote mastery of certain skills or objectives.

During this course, you will explore constructivist ideas, apply them in the design of constructivist learning environments, and discover what constructivism means for you as a learner, educator, and instructional designer.

## What are the course goals?
Specifically, I want this course to offer you opportunities to:

- think about what constructivism is (or constructivisms are), how it relates to other ways of thinking about teaching & learning, and how it relates to your own philosophy of teaching & learning
- read widely about constructivism and share with others your thoughts about what you read
- reflect on and discuss the issues and challenges surrounding constructivist instructional design
- identify strategies and guidelines for designing constructivist learning environments
- design constructivist learning environments
- function as learners within constructivist learning environments, and reflect on the experience
- set and meet your own learning outcomes (different, of course, from my course goals)

## What textbook(s) will you need for the course?

There is no textbook for this course.  Instead, we're going to make use of the vast amount of freely available online information on constructivism.  I've identified some resources to start; as you come across additional useful information, feel free to share them—you'll find that I've set up a Padlet for this in each session folder.

## How is the course organized?

This is an online course; therefore all of our interactions will take place via the D2L learning management system, which we will use to collaborate on the exploration of ideas through a variety of activities, including group discussions and the design and exploration of constructivist learning environments. We are going to push D2L to its limits by trying to make it function as much as possible as a constructivist learning environment! Given this goal, we may also agree to use other tools (e.g., Wiggio) as necessary to support discussions and learning activities.

The course is divided into 13 sessions. **Most sessions will begin Monday morning and end Sunday night,** although this pattern will change toward the end of the course because of the two-day reading break in November—so I recommend that you use the dates in this course outline as a guide to when sessions begin and end. In each session, we will address a different topic or set of questions about constructivism, as shown below.

As you begin each session, **the first thing you should do is open and read the session instructions,** which contain a complete list of learning activities for that week.

## What are the key topics/questions around which the course is organized?

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| Session 1  (Sept. 4-7) | Introduction to the course:  What does constructivism mean to you? Are you a constructivist? What are your learning goals for this course? |
| Session 2 (Sept. 8-14) | Constructivism as a philosophy:  How do we know something?  What is learning?  How do we create meaning? |
| Session 3 (Sept. 15-21) | Constructivism as a pedagogical approach:  What does constructivist instruction look like?  What is a learning environment? |
| Session 4 (Sept. 22-28) | Applying constructivism:  What is the ZPD? What is scaffolding?  How do teachers and instructional designers scaffold learning? |
| Session 5 (Sept. 29-Oct. 5) | Assessment and evaluation in constructivist learning environments:  If everyone constructs meaning differently, how can we assess learning?  What alternative modes of assessment can we use? |
| Session 6 (Oct. 6-12) | The limits of constructivism:  Is it always the answer?  For what learners, content areas, levels and types of learning is it appropriate?  Is constructivism possible without systemic change? |
| Session 7 (Oct. 14-19) | WebQuest sharing |
| Session 8 (Oct. 20-26) | Constructivist approaches:  What are some approaches to instruction based on constructivist principles?  What are their characteristics?  How are they the same and how do they differ? |
| Sessions 9-12 (Oct. 27-Nov. 26) | Group-led sessions |
| Session 13 (Nov. 27-Dec. 3) | Wrap-up:  What have you learned?  What questions remain? |

## What are you expected to do?

**1) Participate in learning activities**:  Each session you'll be asked to participate in a variety of unmarked individual, small-group, and whole-class learning activities that will support your learning and the learning of the group.  These activities include readings, discussions, and group projects, as well as peer assessments of your classmates' work using criteria we develop together.

Social interaction is an important component of constructivist learning, so regular and active participation is an essential, unmistakably important aspect of this online course.  You should expect to spend about three hours a week on these learning activities, but please don't leave it all until the last day of the session!  If you do, you will likely find yourself feeling lonely and frustrated rather than an integral part of the class.  My expectation is that you will log on and post at least three times during a one-week session, but remember:  *quality counts more than quantity*!  A short, to-the-point post is preferred by all to a long rambling one.

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**Posting Protocol**

So that we can make the most of our interactions, please make sure that your posts are:

- *directly related to the discussion topic* (if you do post on a new topic, make sure you change the thread and the subject line to reflect the change)

- *made early on in the session*, not in a last minute scramble (if you leave all your participation to the last day of the session, you'll likely find yourself feeling lonely and frustrated rather than an integral part of the class)

- *in response to what others have posted* (once again, if you introduce a new topic, please add a new thread)

- *substantive* (substantive postings refer to the reading, expand upon points made in other postings, and somehow deepen the discussion; while positive, "I agree" is <u>not</u> a substantive posting!)

- *as concise as possible* (if you find a helpful resource for others, paste a link to it in your message rather than the entire text)

- *clearly written and error-free*

- *respectful* of others' ideas and contributions

- and above all *thoughtful* (one thoughtful post a week is preferable—for you and for your classmates—to five hasty, ill-thought-out contributions)

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**2) Create a constructivist WebQuest** (**Due Oct. 14**):  Working alone or with one or two classmates, develop a constructivist WebQuest that allows learners to explore and learn about a topic of your choice.  A WebQuest is an online, inquiry-oriented activity in which all the information needed by learners is drawn from the Web.  (For more information on WebQuests as well as many examples, see the links in the Info on WebQuests folder.)  Choose a topic/problem that is well-defined but not so limited in scope as to prohibit exploration.  Eclectic examples: deconstructing advertisements, Chinese poetry, life on Mars.  You can use a tool like Weebly, QuestGarden, Zunal WebQuest Maker, or Google Sites (which has a WebQuest template) for this project.  Your WebQuest will be peer assessed, using quality indicators that we will agree upon as a class.  (If creating a different kind of learning environment, other than a WebQuest, would better help you to meet your learning outcomes for the course, feel free to contact me it and we can discuss it.)

**3) Summarize a session (Sept. 15 to Oct. 12)**:  Each group will be asked to choose a session (Session 3, 4, 5, or 6) and prepare a summary of the key points, issues, and questions raised for that session.  The summary can take any form you want—e.g., discussion post, poster, or video.

4) **Prepare and conduct a session (Oct. 27 to Nov. 26):**  Each group will be asked to select a topic related to constructivist instruction/instructional design and to prepare and conduct a one-week session on that topic.  Topics can include everything from a constructivist thinker such as Dewey or Vygotsky, a constructivist approach such as problem-based learning (preferably not an approach explored during Session 8), constructivism in a particular discipline or instructional context, or a particular slant on constructivism, such as virtual learning environments, how teacher and student roles change, or inclusion or multiculturalism in the constructivist classroom—but don't let these suggestions limit you.  Your group will be responsible for developing the instructions for your session, which should include identifying learning activities (such as discussions, readings, presentations, group work—whatever you feel would best help your classmates learn); providing the necessary resources; and facilitating discussions.  These sessions will be peer assessed, using criteria that we will develop as a class.

5) **Keep a reflective journal:** An essential step in the construction of knowledge is reflection:  much constructivist learning takes place with others, but should be followed by independent contemplation of what you have learned, using the reflective journal as a space in which you construct your own understandings and meanings.  For this reason, I have included in the instructions for each session some questions/issues for reflection.  Of course, your reflections need not be confined to the questions posed in the learning activities!—consider them a starting point, or feel free to take your reflections in a completely different direction.  For example, you might also want to include reflections on "aha" moments that occur during the course—that is, moments when something you've been reading or contemplating suddenly makes sense with unexpected clarity—as well as reflections on your ability to apply constructivist ideas to the design of instruction, supported by examples of your work, if appropriate.

   The format in which you record your reflections is up to you:  for example, a journal, a blog, or a video diary.  I recommend Penzu (http://penzu.com), which is a private, easy-to-use online journal that can easily be shared with chosen people.  (When choosing your journal format, please keep in mind that I'll want to read and respond to your journal entries each session, so that it becomes a sort of ongoing dialogue between us.)

## How will your mark be determined?

When it comes to constructivist learning, evaluation is, as we will see, a thorny issue.  Is a learning situation truly constructivist if, when all is said and done, the teacher assigns the learner a letter grade as usual?  Of course, like most instructors, I am required to do just that!  Keeping in mind that constructivist assessment is typically part of the learning experience and allows the learner to take part in the determination of learning goals, activities, and even assessment criteria, I propose that we use in this course three methods of assessment common in constructivist learning environments:

1) *Peer-assessment.*  Peer-assessment promotes the constructivist goals of encouraging learners to work cooperatively and to learn from their interactions with each other.  During the course, you/your group will be asked to assess another group's/classmate's WebQuest as well as the sessions that other groups lead.  In order to ensure that you offer helpful feedback, we will work together to practice peer assessment techniques and develop appropriate criteria.

2) *Portfolio.* As a record of a learner's accomplishments and intellectual growth, a portfolio can be a key tool of constructivist assessment. At the end of the course, you'll be asked to submit a portfolio which should demonstrate that you have:
   - thought deeply about constructivism and how it relates to your own philosophy of teaching and learning
   - read about constructivism, beyond the suggested course readings
   - reflected on the issues and challenges surrounding constructivist instructional design and the development of constructivist learning environments
   - designed constructivist learning environments
   - reflected on the experience of learning in a constructivist learning environment
   - taken steps to meet your own learning outcomes for the course

   To this end, I suggest that your portfolio include a collection of your work in the course—this may include what you consider to be your best work, but you may also include work showing the development of your thinking over the duration of the course. Your portfolio could also include:
   - reflections on your learning and accomplishments, in relation to the course goals as well as your own learning outcomes
   - peer assessments of your work
   - a selection of what you believe to be the most significant entries in your reflective journal and/or discussion posts, with an explanation of why they are significant
   - evidence of how some of the ideas from the course are altering your own pedagogical philosophy or practice

3) *Participation Self-assessment.* Self-assessment is commonly used in constructivist instruction because it encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, at the end of the course, you'll be asked to assess your participation throughout the course, using the quality indicators in the Assessment Information folder. This is your opportunity to reflect honestly and deeply on your engagement and contributions. Keep in mind that this is a *personal* self-assessment: you're not being asked to compare your participation and contributions to that of your classmates but to offer reflections on your own participation.

Please submit your portfolio and participation self-assessment to me at erose@unb.ca by **Dec. 5**.

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**Academic Integrity Statement**

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- quoting verbatim or almost verbatim from a source (such as copyrighted material, notes, letters, business entries, computer materials, etc.) without acknowledgment;
- adopting someone else's line of thought, argument, arrangement, or supporting evidence (such as, for example, statistics, bibliographies, etc.) without indicating such dependence;
- submitting someone else's work, in whatever form (film, workbook, artwork, computer materials, etc.) without acknowledgment;
- knowingly representing as one's own work any idea of another; or
- contravention of written instructions of the instructor dealing with plagiarism.

A complete description of university procedures for dealing with plagiarism and resulting academic penalties can be found online at https://eservices.unb.ca/calendar/graduate/display.cgi?tables=regulationsSubLevel2&id=18.