

# CONSTRUCTIVISM IN LITERATURE EDUCATION: INTRODUCTION TO THE THEMATIC BINDER

MARCO MAGIRIUS

*University of Hamburg, Germany*

## Abstract

Constructivist learning theories emphasize learning as a process of construction without externally predetermined results. Applied to literature education they have potential not only to foster literary learning but to empower pupils to better understand themselves, their culture and society. Although this thematic binder is predicated on the notion that teachers play a key role in successful school education, teachers are of course part of a larger picture. While the introductory article focuses on the discourse of literature education in Germany, the other texts in this collection give access to experiences about the demands and limitations of constructivism in other political and cultural environments by comparing curricula, discourses on literature education and teachers' beliefs and practices in different countries. This is aimed at avoiding harsh generalizations and premature judgments.

Keywords: literature education, constructivism, practices of teachers, beliefs of teachers

Constructivism in literature education is based on assumptions from several different domains. The wide span of reference includes disciplines such as epistemology, sociology, the psychology of learning as well as literary theory. The assumptions made by these different disciplines are often wildly conflated and confused (Diesbergen, 2012, Law & Wong, 1995, Lebow, 1993, Reusser, 2006). The main aim of this introduction is to clarify the central ideas of constructivism in order to relate them to literature education. Instead of sharing normative statements about aims and methods of literature education from my point of view, the selected articles of the thematic binder will provide empirical evidence. Considering that these articles cover teachers' beliefs and practices outside Germany, this introduction concludes by outlining German discourses on literature education.

### 1. FUNDAMENTAL TENETS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

The claim of the observer-dependence of all knowledge is almost as old as philosophy. Already Plato interpreted the pre-socratic Protagoras' "Man is the measure of all things" as a rejection of objective truth (Russell, 2004, 83). Since Plato, this basic idea has emerged and resonated through various epistemologies such as Vico's or Kant's. Since around 1990 the abundance of not only relativist but constructivist publications have risen enormously (Phillips, 1995, 5). What are their common tenets besides the rejection of absolute truth? While (non-constructivist) cognitivism left behaviorist theories behind by focusing on internal structures and processes, both adhere to objectivism, i.e. the assumption of a "unique, independent reality existing external" to the observer (Law & Wong, 1995, 78). For the behaviorist, the external data act as stimuli. From the perspective of (non-constructivist) cognitivism, desirable cognition reshapes and models reality as accurately as possible. For constructivists "external phenomena are meaningless unless they are perceived by the mind" (Law & Wong, 1995, 80, cf. Schmidt, 1987, 14). Furthermore, cognition does not necessarily represent the world outside the subject (Weinert, 1996, 3). Hence constructivists do not ask what is perceived but how conditions led to the creation of the observer's reality. Although the observer is dependent from the outside, he constructs his reality autonomously, in the sense that all perception is self-description of a mind (Schmidt, 1987, 16, Schwahl 2015,11). For this purpose, the "informationally closed" "organism" is only able to use "building blocks which it has gleaned through some process of abstraction from the domain of his own experience" (Glaserfeld, 1990, 1). These experiences are shaped and stabilized via socialization (Schmidt, 1987, 35, Schwahl, 2015, 12).

All of this holds for every construction including constructivism itself. Nobody is able to tell whether constructivism is true, i.e. it describes ontic reality (Schmidt, 1987, 41, Rusch, 1988, 383). We can only say a construction seems valid to us and we should do that if any predictions resulting from it prove their value to us (Luhmann, 1992, 97). This fundamental conception of knowledge as observer-dependent

results in the constructivists' interest in the differences within the multitude of idiosyncratic constructions (Pörksen, 2015, 13).

## 2. VARIANTS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

To delineate different variants of constructivism beyond this core notion, Phillips (1995) suggests a classification along two axes which is quite common for introductory articles and can also be found in Diesbergen (2012) and Reusser (2006). Such classifications inevitably entail some simplification. It is worth noting that I am simplifying in order to establish common ground and not to create artificial arguments, which are legitimately criticized by constructivists (Schmidt, 2015) as well as by their opponents (Boghossian and Gabriel, 2013).

### 2.1 *'knowledge is made' versus 'knowledge is discovered'*

The first axis is the more crucial one, since it intersects with one of the aforementioned basic tenets. It is conceived by Phillips (1995) as a continuum between 'new knowledge is made' and 'new knowledge is discovered'. At one end of the continuum is a naïve or, less pejoratively, direct realism. According to this conviction, "nature serves as 'instructor' or as a sort of template" that observers "copy or absorb" (ibid., 7). At the other end of the continuum stand radical constructivism and solipsism. Radical constructivists like Glaserfeld and Maturana think not only that all knowledge is "influenced chiefly" by the observers (ibid.) but also that there is no reason to presuppose the existence of entities outside the observer's perception (Schmidt, 2015, 577). In contrast to some variants of solipsism, radical constructivists do not deny the existence of an external realm of nature (ibid.). They simply see no reason [and possibility] to consider it.

Before exploring the impact of such conceptions on educational discourses, at least one case should be added in the middle of the continuum. Popper's views of theories as tentative "creations by the human intellect" which can be falsified by nature ("man proposes, nature disposes") involve both poles of the spectrum (Phillips, 1995, 9). Such views can be compared to a mild constructivist position, stressing the interaction of both internal cognition and external data (Law & Wong, 1995, 80). Of course, this continuum is only an attempt to conceptualize a very difficult epistemological problem and many thinkers are difficult to place securely on this continuum. For example, where to put Locke who thinks that ontic entities are "causally responsible for producing our knowledge" but, on the other hand, notes that our mind has the ability to relate perceived ideas (Phillips, 1995)? And where is Descartes, whose 'cogito ergo sum' thinks of himself as part of an ontic reality (Glaserfeld, 1990, 4)? Obviously, his thoughts are incompatible with radical constructivism. A radical constructivist version of his 'cogito ergo sum' would be "by distinguishing, I create myself as an observer" (ibid.).

How do such epistemological endeavors actually translate into discourses on education? ‘New knowledge is made’ versus ‘new knowledge is discovered’ corresponds loosely to ‘learning as recording’ versus ‘learning as interpreting’ (Law & Wong, 1995, 83). Correspondingly, the role of the teacher becomes either ‘presenter’ or ‘facilitator’. In the first case, fixed knowledge is transmitted to the learner via instruction. Hence, we speak of instructionist (Winkler, 2011) or transmissive approaches to teaching (Voss et al., 2011, 238). In the second case, as there can be no direct access to the internal structures of learners (Reusser 2006, 154), learning is active and thus knowledge must be constructed by the learners themselves (Mairwald, 2010, 83). This ideally avoids inert knowledge and happens in immersive learning settings, where the individuals develop transferable problem-solving skills (Reusser, 2006, 154). Such positions oppose an alienating, impersonal imposition of knowledge and harmonizes well not only with the individualism of contemporary western societies (ibid. 156) but also with recent competence-oriented theories and policies (Schwahl, 2015. 27, 31).

However, these positions raise questions regarding the importance of domain-specific (declarative and procedural) knowledge. A moderate epistemological view like ‘knowledge-based constructivism’ (Reinmann & Mandl, 2006, 683) offers answers. According to this view, knowledge is constructed by the individual learner but he or she can only succeed if sufficient prior knowledge is available. This prior knowledge can be transmitted via instruction (ibid.). Domain-specific examples for moderate constructivism will be presented in section 4.

It needs to be stressed that the opposition of educational instructionism versus educational constructivism does not follow analytically from epistemological constructivism. From the epistemological viewpoint all learning involves constructing—even the mere reception of instructions (Diesbergen, 2012). The epistemological paradigm is employed to provide a general framework of orientation.

## *2.2 Individual versus social constructivism*

The second axis is closer to education and pedagogy, since the most important representatives of both poles are philosophers of education. Piaget tends to be concerned “with how the individual learner” uses his “own cognitive apparatus” (Phillips, 1995, 7). Despite the fact that his description of learning as processes of assimilation, accommodation and equilibration presupposes external resources, he depicts the child, according to Phillips (ibid.), as a “lone, inventive scientist”. Vygotsky, by contrast, is usually related to social constructivism, since he emphasizes construction via social interactions and negotiations (Diesbergen, 2012, 54, Reusser 2006, 155).

This often seen “polarisation of Piaget and Vygotsky” is not without issues. Piaget himself pointed out that the individual and the social needs to be valued equally and Vygotsky thinks of the two in terms of a close, dialectical interaction (Liu and Matthews, 2005, 389, 392). Furthermore, as has already been pointed out, the radical

epistemological constructivists explicitly adopt a dialectical stance to individual and social constructivism. However, in educational articles the polarization of social and individual constructivism appears quite frequently. Educationalists affiliated with individual constructivism like Bruner propose “learner-centered and discovery-oriented learning processes” (ibid., 388). Social constructivism prescribes “context-bound” learning settings (ibid.), where knowledge and methods of inquiry are negotiated within peers and “collective cultural practices and values” are assimilated by the individual (ibid., 392).

Although (or due to the fact that) this axis lacks analytical precision, it will be useful to describe the discourse on literature education.

### 3. CONSTRUCTIVISM IN LITERARY THEORY

Constructivist literary theories apply epistemological constructivism quite directly to describe the act of interpreting literature. The interpreter is understood as an informationally closed observer. When interpreting or even when merely reading (Scheffer, 1993, 141), he or she autonomously constructs knowledge about the literary text (and through this process, of the text itself). Constructivists call this knowledge an interpretation. He or she may share this understanding of a text in an interpretative community. If the interpreter is successful, the newly constructed knowledge of readings of the literary text will prove to be ‘viable’ (ibid., 144). But even in the case of his or her success, no interpreter can claim to have access to a perfect interpretation. There is no absolute, authoritative interpretation which could be considered ‘ontic’ but only a social consensus over the range of interpretations (ibid., 145) established by mutual observation/interpretation of observers/interpreters (Luhmann, 1992, 97).

Constructivist literary theories, therefore, combine individual and social constructivism. For example, there is Scheffer (1992), who thinks that a text is only an impulse for the interpreter to utilize and add to his or her biography (“Lebensroman”) when constructing meaning. The literary text itself is ‘mute’ (ibid., 39) and has no meaning (Rusch, 1988, 394), like meaningless nature in epistemological constructivism. Since every meaning is attached to the literary text by the reader, the inquiry into texts mainly results in propositions about the characteristics of the reader and not about the text (Scheffer, 1992, 39). Again, epistemological notions are applied directly to the realm of literary studies, in this case Maturana’s (1980, 39) “the logic of the description is the logic of the describing (living) system (and his cognitive domain)”. Every time we describe something, we describe only ourselves, since the denotative function of language can only self-referentially map onto our cognition (Schmidt, 1987, 31). Literary language, like all language, is therefore not a tool to transmit information (ibid., 28, Scheffer 1993, 146, Rusch 1988, 392). Language is merely a reservoir of expressions to construct viable and socially accepted realities (Maiwald, 2010, 84).

Such viability is essential for constructivist conceptions of interpreting. Constructivist literary theories do not fall into a subjectivist, ontological solipsism (ibid., 89) (but into an epistemological one [Schmidt, 1987, 35]). When the interpreter validates his or her readings within an interpretative community, this process is moderated by semantic and contextual knowledge, which is shared by members of the particular interpretative community. Additionally, there are rules to prevent community members from over-interpreting. These rules cannot be found in the text but only in the discourse rules of the community (Scheffer 1993, 147). Here Scheffer's conception resembles older well-known approaches like Fish's (1980). The interpretative community and therefore notions of social constructivism play a crucial role for the process of interpreting.

This is even more true for the position of Schmidt (1991). Instead of considering interpreting literary texts as a central activity of literary studies, Schmidt demands to empirically describe actions like literary criticism, production and distribution of literature. Linked actions form 'literary processes', which are all part of the system of literature (Schmidt, 1987, 66). This system is interwoven with other social systems of society. Therefore, Schmidt's 'Empirical Literature Studies' utilize methods of the social sciences (ibid.), not only aiming at description but at optimizing literary processes (Rusch, 1988, 391).

Both of them, Scheffer and Schmidt, employ systems theory—like Luhmann's (2002)—to generalize concepts of informationally closed psychic systems to informationally closed (= autopoietic) social systems without necessarily following all of Luhmann's abstractions (Maiwald, 2010, 81). In the case of Scheffer's constructivist literary theory, these social systems are thought of as consisting of individual subjects and not only as sequences of communicative acts (Luhmann) (ibid., 87) or interactions of symbols (poststructuralists like Derrida) (Scheffer 1993, 152). Another important distinction has to be made from the other major branch of reader-orientation, namely the reception theory for example of Iser (1994). The significant difference according to Scheffer (1992) lies in the concept of the reader. The reader of the reception theory is implicit within the literary text (ibid., 28). For radical constructivists the situation is inverted. Speaking about reception-theoretical gaps in the text which the reader has to fill does not make sense from a constructivist standpoint. As already noted, inside an interpretative community there is no shared text which serves as an objective and ultimate authority to falsify interpretations (ibid., 39).

Such radical views, corresponding to the 'knowledge is made' pole of the axis in 2.1., are not compatible with Eco (2008), who takes a more moderate stance. He applies Popper's falsification principle on interpreting literature and claims that there is no way to validate interpretations. It is only possible to falsify them utilizing the internal consistency of the literary text. Constructivists would accuse Eco of referring to the literary text as an ontic entity. Another example of the middle camp of the first axis is Zabka (1999) who explicitly reflects on such accusations and the role of the shared text within interpretative communities. He claims that all members of an interpretative community defend their own subjective interpretations and

evaluate other interpretations based on their fit to the shared literary text. He calls meaning which is attached to this shared text 'objective'. Zabka (*ibid.*, 9) does not consider objective characteristics of the text as ontic. They are as constructed as subjective meaning. Consistent interpretations which fit a subjective reading of a text are called 'plausible' (*ibid.*, 10). If the subjectively constructed interpretations are additionally compatible with the historical (and also constructed) origin of the text, the interpretation qualifies as 'appropriate' (*ibid.*). Zabka shows that it is possible to speak about objective characteristics of the literary text without violating the fundamental tenets of constructivism.

#### 4. CONSTRUCTIVISM IN GERMAN LITERATURE EDUCATION

Many scholars throughout the history of the German discussions on literature education criticized the interpretation of literature in schools which applies fixed categories to the text and results in a clear solution coinciding with the teacher's interpretation (Hiecke, 1982 [1842], Havenstein, 1925, Kreft, 1977, Zabka, 2012). Therefore, and of course due to the intrinsic polyvalence of literature (Scheffer, 1993, 149), it is not surprising that constructivism fell on fertile ground. The impact of reader-oriented positions of literary theory on the German discourse on literature education flourished especially in the nineties when academic pedagogy proposed learner-oriented, hands-on practices (Haas, Menzel & Spinner, 1994) like theatrical plays (Scheller, 2004) or creative/literary writing (Waldmann, 2004, Abraham & Brendel-Perpina, 2015). All of these methods enable learners to find their own approaches to the literary text and to reflect on their appropriateness. Moreover, pupils might even reach a deeper level of understanding when producing art or stepping into the role of a literary figure in a play. From a constructivist perspective, these methods might induce first-hand experiences of observer-dependent interpretations (as well as examples of constructive perception itself [Schwahl, 2015, 44]), and subsequently reflections on the relation of the viability of their interpretations to institutional conventions (Maiwald, 2010, 91). In order to reach such goals, Schwahl (2015, 60) recommends that the teacher makes explicit that his or her interpretations are only one possible, fallible reading among others. Creating an environment where teachers and pupils meet on equal terms to openly exchange readings of literary texts was prominently put forward by the Heidelberg group and their concept of literary conversations, in which the teacher does not necessarily have the final word (Härle & Steinbrenner, 2014, Härle 2004). Such positions obviously comply with constructivist notions as presented in sections 3 and 4. In fact constructivist scholars of literary theory like Schmidt (1988, 69) and Rusch (1988, 388) explicitly urge literature teachers to depart from claiming to have the best interpretation, which would only cut off literary communication (Maiwald, 2010, 88).

However, the depth and theoretical consistency of the methodological proposals mentioned above varied quite heavily, especially among constructivist imports from literary theory (Kämper-van den Boogaart, 2007). Some conflated reception theory

with constructivism. Furthermore, while newer articles discuss the social and cultural aspects (Abraham, 2015, 2016) of literature education (and writing as social practice), in particular older ones one-sidedly excluded social constructivism (Maiwald, 2010, 91).

Additionally, positions which are linked to moderate 'knowledge-based constructivism' by Steinmetz (2018) note that too much learner-orientation can have counter-intentional effects. Insisting on autonomous choices regarding the learners' approaches to the literary texts might result in arbitrariness of understanding (Köster, 2010), counterproductive reductions of complexity (Winkler, 2010) or overexaggerated demands on pupils (Steinmetz, 2013). Therefore, these authors among others suggest supporting elements in interpretation tasks by providing, for example, information on context (Stark, 2016, 2012), interpretation hypotheses or hints about critical elements of the literary text (Möbius & Steinmetz, 2016).

Empirical studies of German teachers and student teachers showed that most of the participating L1-teachers (Winkler, 2011), in-service practical student teachers (Wieser, 2008) as well as L1-teacher-training students at university (Magirius, 2018) reject instructionist views and ex-cathedra teaching. Recent inquiries of actual classroom practices apply the concept of cognitive activation to literature education (Winkler, 2017, Kernen, 2018). Tasks which prompt learners to relate their beliefs, emotions and knowledge to characteristics of the literary text are considered as potentially activating (Winkler, 2017, 84, Winkler, 2015, Winkler and Steinmetz, 2016). Suggesting interplay of internal and external resources as desirable classroom activity is again a moderately constructivist position.

## 5. OVERVIEW ON THE TEXTS OF THE READER

I will finish by briefly introducing the articles in this collection. The first article lays a theoretical foundation for the following empirical ones.

- 1) Witte and Sâmihaiian (2013) investigated "paradigmatic tendencies of the literature teaching curricula between grades 7 and 12 of five countries (Czech Republic, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Romania) and three German states (Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Thuringia)". They familiarize the reader with paradigms of literature education, concretize them and report that the investigated curricula mostly correspond to a framework which resulted from the "shared pedagogical content knowledge of teachers and experts in six countries". Furthermore, they "draw attention" to the dominance of the "linguistic paradigm", which emphasizes discursive analysis of the formal aspects of the text, where the teacher acts as an "expert" reader. Constructivist teaching seems to be institutionally hampered and a connection of the literary text to the perspective of young readers is not necessarily established.
- 2) That is unfortunate, since "literary fiction can be a vehicle for gaining insight into themselves and others" even when pupils are no 'bookworms' as

Schrijvers, Janssen, Fialho and Rijlaarsdam (2016) premise in their insightful empirical inquiry. They showed that Dutch pupils reported experiences of personal and social learning, especially when their teachers' beliefs indicate constructivist notions like fostering classroom interaction and supporting autonomy.

- 3) Should we conclude from this that constructivist teaching approaches are superior in principle? Penne and Skarstein (2015) reveal with three qualitative studies that in Scandinavian lower-secondary classrooms liberal, individual-oriented cultures can paradoxically lead to more inequality. While successful learners who know how to act as independent pupils seem to benefit from autonomy, learners without this precondition seem to fall even further behind in literary learning.
- 4) Even though the Israeli curriculum was created in a "constructivist spirit", literature teachers are concerned by the vast amount of obligatory literary texts which are very remote from the learner's horizon. Despite that concern, Elkad-Lehman and Gilat (2010), conducting a mixed-methods study, show that Israeli teachers with constructivist beliefs report surprisingly transmission-based, "conservative teaching behavior".
- 5) The thematic binder ends with a work by Doecke, Gill, Ilesca and Ven (2009). They discuss the lesson plans of an accomplished Australian teacher and her reflections with a "critical friend". The teacher succeeds in establishing literary understanding, interpretative depth and cognitive activation. This case is special, as she works at an elite private school, where pupils can choose to study 'literature' in addition to regular 'English' classes with a "stronger emphasis on language for communication purposes". But her beliefs and practices are compatible with a moderate social constructivism. She broadens the constructivist perspective of this collection by appealing to theories of literature and literary language inspired by Bakhtin in order to blur the boundaries between the text and the pupils' life.

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