

Is there any knowledge out there? Painting the perfect student

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What is it about?

The social constructivists would argue that all knowledge is socially constructed, that is, the individual learns only from a social interaction of one sort or another but where does this knowledge exist? Does it exist in the head of the individual; out there somewhere, for instance, in books; or is it somehow held vicariously between a more capable and less capable peer? To make matters more complicated, some social constructivists also argue that learning leads development. As teachers we can see that this happens; students change as they mature through four years of study and we gradually provide them with more advanced learning opportunities. What we do not know is the nature of the relationship between learning and development.

Why is it important?

The answers to these questions are important because in tertiary education, we almost certainly align teaching and learning through our espoused beliefs, our assumptions and our understanding of how knowledge is constructed and how learning takes place.

At the University of Otago, a longitudinal study is currently underway that examines the learning experiences of a cohort of Zoology students as they pass through their degree program. The study focuses on the social construction of knowledge and how this is understood by students and teachers.

In this TERNZ workshop we want to explore some of the early data from first year students and look at the implications of their various ideas about learning, development and knowledge.

How the session will be run

In this interactive workshop the research project will be explained and then we will briefly present some of the outcomes on student learning experiences using two small case studies. The cases will form the basis of a discussion about constructivist theories and how these might inform teaching practice. The hope is that we can contribute to an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice.