

## Constructivist Theory of Learning

Since the late 1980s, through the observation of children and adults in various environments, cognitive and developmental psychologists have developed a number of learning theories. These theories have coalesced into the **constructivist theory of learning**.

Essentials of the constructivist theory of learning are:

- We learn by constructing our own understandings based upon our experiences. Even very young children learn (and quickly) through experience.
- We are not born as “blank slates” on which to write endless information. A newborn infant comes equipped with all the necessary information for his/her survival; from the moment of birth s/he experiences the world and reflects on those experiences – “What do I do to bring Mama here?”
- We all have experiences to draw upon and any new information we receive is, initially, compared to what is already known – “What does \_\_\_\_ remind me of?” What we learn is affected by what we already know. If we have no experience of a cat then it would be very difficult to understand lions and tigers as members of the cat family.
- Our experiences are unique, and therefore our understandings are unique. Even though we might all be presented with the same information; for example, as in a lecture or a film, we will all walk away with a different understanding of what happened.
- To learn, we apply what we already know to a new situation. If new information doesn't fit with what we know then we feel uncomfortable and struggle to make sense of it. Often understanding new information means that we have to adjust how we thought about existing information. For example, if a machine doesn't work like the similar machine, as expected, then perhaps we didn't really understand how the first machine worked in the first place. We may have to go back to the first machine and find our “mistake” or misconception.

### Author

**Anita Elworthy**, BSc, BEd, develops innovative programs that integrate Science with arts, language and mathematics. Anita is a physical chemist and has a certificate in adult education, and is a mother of two.