

# Constructing a Psychology of Teaching & Learning

KELVIN L. SEIFERT



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**To everyone who has made this book possible—especially the teachers, who are also students, and the students, who are also teachers.**

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# P R E F A C E T O I N S T R U C T O R S

I have written this textbook about teaching and learning because of experiences I had in teaching educational psychology—but especially because of frustrations I had. For nearly twenty-five years I have taught an introductory course in educational psychology to preservice teachers, searching all the while for a “best” way, or at least a good way, of doing so. How should problems of teaching and learning be organized, I wondered, so that inexperienced but motivated individuals could make sense of them and begin dealing with them? My quest for a best way to organize these topics led me eventually to write or coauthor three college textbooks (*Educational Psychology*, *Child and Adolescent Development*, and *Lifespan Development*, all published by Houghton Mifflin) that I could use in my preservice courses. I learned a lot from these projects, and that’s one reason I was glad to have invested effort in them. The most important insight I gained was that in order to be effective, a book needs to engage students actively with its themes and ideas.

## Approach of the Book: Students’ Constructing Personal Understandings

Eventually I concluded that the “problem” of students’ understanding rested not so much with the students as with my expectations about how teachers, and preservice teachers in particular, ought to think about educational issues and problems. I was not able to see or accept that educators, whether novice or expert, do *not* think about questions of teaching and learning in anything like the logical, scientific ways developed by academic psychology. Instead, they construct their views by simultaneously reflecting on previous personal experience, anticipating future experiences, and interpreting “official” canons of educational research and teachers’ “lore” or wisdom. The result is a personal perspective about teaching and learning—one unique to each teacher, although often bearing a general resemblance to others’ perspectives as well.

Given the inevitability and importance of this process, students need a book that attends to and encourages their active construction of

knowledge and beliefs. That is the book that I have now tried to write. Judging by initial responses from reviewers and editors (and even from my own ed. psych. students!), I am extremely pleased with the result.

Where in some ways *Constructing a Psychology of Teaching and Learning* still resembles a textbook in educational psychology, with its chapters on topics commonly considered part of its domain, it is unique in its basis in constructivist views and philosophy, and especially those that are social constructivist. I have made every effort to present and interpret *all* major topics, themes, and research of educational psychology from this stance. Perhaps even more important, I have tried to model its tenets and spirit, devising multiple ways to invite students' active engagement with these topics, themes, and research, to help them actively build their own understandings about teaching and learning.

## Struggling with a Compelling Question

Not all parts of teaching and learning, of course, assume philosophy(ies) of constructivism, and this fact presented me with the first challenge in writing the book: how to be fair to all prominent research and theories about teaching and learning? My goal has not been to debunk ideas or research that differ from constructivism but to present them as honestly as possible while still framing them in terms of teachers' and students' active sense-making. Take the case of behaviorism and applied behavior analysis. How should this perspective on learning be described in a book like this? That theory, and certain others in educational psychology as well, originated less in constructivism than in the empirical, positivist traditions of natural and social science. To be philosophically fair in cases like this, I have therefore framed the nonconstructivist assumptions of behaviorism as explicitly as possible, rather than leaving them implicit. And I have described them in terms that are informal, accessible, and capable of being related to key ideas of constructivism. To achieve the latter, for example, I addressed these questions: What does behaviorism say about how learners can control and influence their own learning behaviors? And what does it say about how learning principles operate between and among members of a group, such as a classroom? An example of this strategy of presentation occurs in Chapter 2, where I discuss different models (or "metaphors") of learning. Another happens in Chapter 12, where I discuss different types and purposes of educational research.

## Content and Organization

As I wrote the book, I discovered that being true to its purposes required a different balance of topics, compared to conventional textbooks about educational psychology. I found that I needed more emphasis than usual on some topics and less on others, and I needed to sequence certain topics and ideas in unique ways. Yet in making these changes I did not want the book to seem unbalanced or to seem simply like constructivist “propaganda.” To solve this problem, I have compromised between convention and innovation in text organization. Most chapters can be mapped onto classic topics or content of educational psychology, but they are often presented in new terms more consistent with constructivist ideas. And the sequencing of chapters resembles that of many ed. psych. texts—but not of all. But neither the content nor the sequencing is the only one possible. The *Instructor’s Resource Manual* has suggestions about alternatives, and undoubtedly you as instructor and/or students will recombine these topics, now and in the future, to suit your own backgrounds, aims, and contexts.

With the constraints and responsibilities in mind, I divided the book into fourteen chapters, and grouped thirteen of the chapters into five major parts. Chapter 1, *Starting with You*, is not a member of a major part; rather it describes the overall purposes of the book and the philosophy underlying the selection and presentation of material used in later chapters. After this introduction comes *Part 1, Human Changes*, which consists of three chapters that discuss major forms of individual change and which challenges both students and instructors to think about the implications of an individual’s learning and development for teaching and learning. Chapter 2, called *Learning, in School and Out*, describes three major perspectives about learning—behaviorism, cognitive science, and social constructivism—though, as the chapter points out, the distinctions among these are not clear-cut. Chapter 3, *Thinking About Thinking*, highlights the currently dominant learning perspective, cognitive science. The chapter explores several forms of cognitive psychology as well as their implications for teaching and learning. Chapter 4, *Developmental Change*, extends the exploration of cognitive psychology to include Piaget and Piagetian models of development and learning. As with Chapter 3, the emphasis is again somewhat cognitive, though in this case it is meant to reflect the typical focus of teaching on students’ thinking.

The next two parts of the book also look at influences on students but from increasingly broad, societal perspectives. *Part 2, Relationships*, is about the face-to-face interactions that dominate classroom life. Chapter 5, called What Teachers Do, outlines three roles that all teachers play in various combinations: the teacher as instructional manager, as caring person, and as generous expert. It also invites students to reflect on how they expect to combine these roles, or others as well, into their own teaching. Chapter 6, *Motivating and Managing Your Class*, explores ways of thinking about classroom control that focus on students' positive learning and motivation, and not just on misbehaviors. A key theme of this chapter is the close link between motivating students, creating a positive learning environment, and managing students and their activities smoothly and wisely. Chapter 7, *Among Classmates and Parents*, describes the diversity possible both in students' families and in students' relationships with each other, and the implications of the diversity for managing a class and for fostering effective learning.

*Part 3, The Social and Cultural Context*, broadens the exploration of influences on learning still further. Chapter 8, *The Meaning of Classroom Talk*, looks at patterns of discourse and structures of participation in classrooms and how these can either help or hinder students' learning. This discussion is a natural extension of issues that emerged initially in Part 2 of the book, but which deserve a closer look by anyone wishing to teach well. The discussion also provides a bridge to Chapter 9, *Gender and Culture as Influences on Learning*, because many differences in students' (and teachers') classroom talk are related to differences in gender and culture. Chapter 9 goes beyond talk as such, however, to look at other aspects of gender and culture, such as the distinct meanings that "self-identity" has for boys and girls and for children from different cultural backgrounds. Chapter 10, *Teaching Students with Special Needs*, discusses the classroom diversity created by children with special needs, focusing especially on needs that classroom teachers are likely to encounter most frequently.

*Part 4, Identifying Success and Value in Teaching*, moves more directly to encourage reflection on teaching practice. For example, Chapter 11, *Assessing Students' Learning*, examines the issues of evaluation from the separate perspectives of students, of parents, and of teachers. It considers alternatives to conventional forms of evaluation, especially portfolios, and encourages the college student-readers of the chapter to reflect on both the opportunities and the problems of the newer methods. Chapter 12, *Hearing Distant Voices*, is about the nature and purposes of educational research and ways that classroom teachers can



make use of the research even as beginning professionals. A major theme is the special value of teacher-conducted research; the chapter describes several examples of this kind of work and points out its unique strengths. Finally, Chapter 13, *Care and Justice in Teaching and Learning*, confronts the inherently value-oriented nature of both teaching and learning, and makes suggestions for how to understand students' (and teachers') implicit values, as well as how to foster mature, thoughtful moral thinking and moral actions on the part of students.

*Part 5, Reflections*, contains Chapter 14, *Looking Ahead*. The chapter invites students to take stock of what it will take to consider themselves truly accomplished as a teacher. It also invites students to reflect on what they have learned about teaching and learning so far and what they can expect to learn in the future. The chapter points to the key resources that students can expect to draw on—their personal experiences, their reading (including reading of this book), and knowledge and materials gained from colleagues. Since the chapter parallels the tone and purpose with which the book began, I was tempted to call it *Ending with You* (to match *Starting with You* in Chapter 1). But such a title might imply a finality to individuals' thinking about teaching and learning, which is definitely not a message consistent with the purposes of the book!

## Fostering Active Understanding with Special Learning Features

In a number of ways, I have encouraged readers to develop their understandings about educational issues actively. Although some of the ways resemble standard pedagogical features of a college textbook, they are all integral to one of the major purposes of the book: to invite dialogue about teaching and learning.

- **In Your Own Voice** These are brief thought-provoking questions located throughout each chapter and set off in a visually distinctive type font. The questions can be used to generate discussion, to stimulate brief journal writing, or simply to encourage silent reflection about educational issues. They do not assume that readers have experience with classroom teaching, but they do assume that they care about teaching, learning, and students. In other respects the questions also honor the diversity among preservice (and among experienced) teachers. In general the questions call attention to difficult issues or dilem-



mas inherent in teaching, and they relate to issues and dilemmas discussed at the point in the text where the box is located. In responding to the questions, readers must deal with the open-ended quality of many educational debates—the fact that there may be more than one good solution to an educational problem.

- **Multiple Voices** These are brief comments by an educator to a topic discussed in one of the chapters. I invited both experienced teachers and college professors with specialties related to the topic of the chapter to comment on points raised in early drafts of the book manuscript. Not surprisingly, the two sorts of commentators call attention to different issues raised in the chapters, and they offer different solutions to educational problems. Their differences highlight the importance of dialogue in the formation of educational ideas, and illustrate vividly that there are multiple legitimate perspectives about many educational problems. Most chapters have at least one or two Multiple Voices excerpts.
- **Chapter View and Re-View** To help students to build their own models of teaching and learning, I have included graphic diagrams at the beginning and end of each chapter that depict the topics contained in that chapter. The one at the beginning, called Chapter View, illustrates only the main topics to be covered and invites readers to add to or construct the diagram with more detailed concepts and ideas as they develop their own thinking. The diagram at the end, called Chapter Re-View, illustrates one way of responding to this invitation; it builds on the initial diagram by showing more detailed subtopics and concepts in relation to the main ones illustrated earlier.
- **Terms for Further Thought** At the end of each chapter is a list of key terms called Terms for Further Thought. I selected these because of their centrality to the topics of the chapter, and not always because they were unusual, specialized, or technical. Some of the most familiar terms (such as *learning* or *teaching*, among others) are actually the most ambiguous—and as the name of this feature implies, they are deserving of further thought.
- **For Further Reading** At the end of each chapter is an annotated list of references called For Further Reading. I selected these to encourage reflection as well and also because they are relatively accessible conceptually. Calling the references “readings” may be a misnomer, though, since about half of the citations are to Internet web sites related to topics and issues discussed in this chapter. The web sites selected are

all major ones in order to ensure their reliability and quality (they should not go out of existence by the time this book gets in print nor be excessively specialized).

## Fabric of Presentation

But the most important ways in which the book fosters active understanding are woven into the manuscript itself. Throughout all chapters, I have made liberal use of *informal, first-person commentary* (“I think this . . .” or “My experience was . . .”), where appropriate, alongside more formal descriptions of research. I also freely interspersed *narrative sections and “stories”* of particular teachers’ or students’ experiences in the classroom. These elements of style do occur in other texts about educational psychology. But they are more prominent in this text, in order to make a crucial point about teaching and learning: that they are human endeavors and that they are actively constructed through human effort, rather than simply “received” from some distant authority. Dialogue and reflection account for much teaching and learning about education, or perhaps even all of it. The style of writing in this book is meant to embody that idea.

## Instructor’s Resource Manual

In addition to the book itself fostering active understanding of teaching and learning, the *Instructor’s Resource Manual* also contains ideas and materials useful for reaching this ideal. In Part 1 of the *Manual*, for example, you will find discussions of general factors to consider in teaching educational psychology, such as the impact of time constraints on “coverage” of topics, alternate ways of sequencing chapters and topics, and implications of physical space on teaching educational psychology. Most important, Part 1 offers advice about ways to assess students’ learning that are consistent with constructivist approaches, such as the use of group projects and portfolios and the use of conventional structured testing in innovative ways.

In Part 2 of the *Manual*, you will find suggestions for class discussions, in-class activities, brief out-of-class assignments, and resources for further exploration. These are organized around each of the chapters and take into account the book’s overall nature and purposes. Part 2

also contains a selection of test items (both multiple-choice and short essay) for each chapter, which you can use either as is (that is, for conventional testing or grading) or in one of the alternative ways suggested in the *Manual* (for example, as discussion starters). Test items are also available in a computerized format.

## Teacher Education Station Web Site

This web site (found at <http://www.hmco.com/college>, then click on “Education”) provides additional pedagogic support and resources for beginning and experienced professionals in education, including the unique “Project-Based Learning Space.” This special learning space links to five extended problem-based projects and background theory about project-based learning. The goal of this site is to help teachers learn by doing. The extended projects in this site support, and are supported by, the approach of *Constructing a Psychology of Teaching and Learning*. They integrate many forms of learning, encourage cooperation among students, create mentoring roles for both students and teachers, and draw on ideas and questions formulated by students themselves. In addition, the “Concept Cards” in the Teacher Education Station offer discussion and explanations about a number of key learning themes—cooperative learning, constructivism, inclusive classrooms, learning environments, and technology as a tool—which can significantly enhance the discussion of these same topics in this book.

## Acknowledgments

This book lists only one author (myself), but it was really created by numerous people—in writing this Preface, I was often tempted to write *we* wherever the word *I* appears! There are so many participants, in fact, that thanking them all individually runs the risk of omitting someone by mistake. (If that has happened, in fact, let me apologize in advance to whomever has been left out.) But it is important to honor their participation because in various ways this book is as much “theirs” as it is “mine.”

Special thanks go to the many reviewers who evaluated early versions of the book, in whole or in part, and who articulated both the problems and the potential of it in helpful ways. The reviewers, I should point out, included both supporters of constructivism and critics of it—but constructive (if not constructivist) criticisms were welcome from both:

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Adam Winsler, George Mason University, comments on learning as assisted performance.

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K. L. S.

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