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A Brief History of ACT: The Association for Constructivist Teaching

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The Association for Constructivist Teaching (ACT) is a professional educational organization dedicated to fostering teacher development based on constructivist learning theory. Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning, describing both what knowledge is, and how it evolves. Initially based on the work of **Piaget** and **Vygotsky** in cognitive psychology, it was extended to the fields of philosophy and education by von Glasersfeld, Duckworth, Forman, Kamii, and Fosnot (among many others). It currently draws further support from complexity theories in science, i.e., physics, and biology (Prigogine, Maturana, and Varela, and Kauffman). The theory describes knowledge not as truths to be transmitted or discovered, but as emergent, developmental, nonobjective, viable constructed explanations as humans engage in meaning-making in cultural and social communities of discourse. Learning from this perspective is viewed as a self-regulatory, organizing, evolutionary process by humans in dynamic “far-from-equilibrium” states as they struggle with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights. As humans act on and attempt to interpret their surround (assimilation), they construct new representations and models of reality (accommodation) with culturally developed tools and symbols, and further negotiate such meaning through cooperative social activity, discourse and debate in communities of practice. Although constructivism is not a theory of teaching, it suggests taking a radically different approach to instruction from that used historically in most schools. Teachers who base their practice on

constructivism reject the notions that meaning can be passed on to learners via symbols and transmission, that learners can incorporate exact copies of teachers' understanding for their own use, that whole concepts can be broken into discrete sub skills, and that concepts can be taught out of context. In contrast, a constructivist view of learning suggests a developmentally-appropriate, student-centered, active workshop approach to teaching that gives learners the opportunity for concrete, contextually meaningful experience through which they can search for patterns, raise questions, and model, interpret, and defend their strategies and ideas. The classroom in this model is seen almost as a mini-society, a community of learners engaged in activity, discourse, interpretation, justification, and reflection. The traditional hierarchy of teacher as the autocratic knower, and learner as the unknowing, controlled subject studying and practicing what the teacher knows, dissipates as teachers assume more of a facilitator's role and learners take on more ownership of the ideas. Autonomy, mutual reciprocity of social relations, and empowerment become the goals.

The Association for Constructivist Teaching was the natural evolution of the Annual New England Piaget Conference, a small annual conference for teachers held every fall at the Park School in Norwalk, Ct. The school was established and directed by Rose Park, an educator interested in applications of Piagetian theory to educational practice. In the late 1980s, the Association for Constructivist Teaching incorporated as a non-profit and Catherine Fosnot was elected as the first president. Some of the early board members were Barry Wadsworth, George Forman, Lloyd Jaeger, and Calvert Schlick. Annual conferences were held around the New England area. Since 1990, the organization has had more of a national presence, and the annual conferences are rotated around the country.

The mission of ACT is to enhance the growth of all educators and students through identification and dissemination of effective constructivist practices in both the professional cultures of teachers and the learning environments of their students. ACT membership is open to anyone interested in the field of education. Current ACT members are practicing classroom teachers, school administrators, supervisors, consultants, college and university personnel, students, parents and retired educators. Membership continues to flourish with recent members joining from as far away as Australia, Japan and Mexico. The meeting format of the annual conference is usually one that includes two keynote speakers and several sessions of concurrent hour and a half workshops over a two or three-day period. Presentations include

research, curriculum ideas, panel discussions, hands-on workshops, all focused on applying constructivist theory about learning to classroom practice at many levels of education.

In addition to the annual conference, the organization publishes a scholarly journal, *THE CONSTRUCTIVIST* (now available online to the membership), distributes CDs of keynote conference speakers, sponsors an online discussion group, compiles a list of constructivist schools and teacher-education programs. Conference and membership information, ACT board contacts, and news are available on the ACT website at <http://www.odu.edu/act>.