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## Is Non-ideological Education Possible? Didactics from a Constructivist Perspective

### Czy nieideologiczna edukacja jest możliwa? Dydaktyka z perspektywy konstruktywistycznej

**Abstract:** In this article, I discuss the assumptions of constructivism and how it can influence teaching practices in promoting critical thinking and empowering students to become active and engaged citizens. I emphasise the role and significance of constructivist education in minimising the possibility of shaping students with submissive, authoritarian and ideologically susceptible personalities. In the article, I argue that constructivism can be a powerful tool for dealing with any manifestation of ideological thinking and promoting a liberal attitude among students, making it an effective strategy for promoting freedom, a deliberative attitude, and critical thinking.

**Keywords:** constructivism; ideology; didactics; deliberation; critical thinking.

**Abstrakt:** W artykule omawiam założenia konstruktywizmu oraz to, w jaki sposób może on wpływać na praktyki dydaktyczne w zakresie promowania krytycznego myślenia i wzmacniania potencjału uczniów do stania się aktywnymi i zaangażowanymi obywatelami. Podkreślam rolę i znaczenie edukacji konstruktywistycznej w kształtowaniu się osobowości nieautorytarnej, odpornej na wpływy ideologiczne. W artykule argumentuję, że konstruktywizm może być potężnym narzędziem do radzenia sobie z wszelkimi

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przejawami myślenia ideologicznego i promowania postawy liberalnej wśród uczniów, co czyni go skuteczną strategią wspierania wolności, postawy deliberacyjnej i krytycznego myślenia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** konstruktywizm; ideologia; edukacja; dydaktyka; deliberacja; krytyczne myślenie.

## 1. Introduction

The title question covers a multitude of problems typical of philosophical considerations. From a philosophical perspective, we can see that the problem can be resolved only by making a series of assumptions. These assumptions are often no longer evidential themselves and are based on *sui generis* faith, a sense of the obvious, intuition, or rationality in the broadest sense.

The acceptance of assumptions (or presuppositions) conceived in this way is natural in philosophical deliberations, for without them, it would be impossible to resolve any question. Impossible, because in philosophy, we always start from implicit or explicit assumptions; the same is true in other sciences, although the awareness of the existence of such assumptions is sometimes significantly lower. The indicated assumptions significantly affect the education process at the level of planning, organisation and implementation.

In this article, I put forward the thesis that non-ideological education is possible. However, for this to occur, certain conditions must be met. In my opinion, such conditions are met by the constructivist didactics model, exactly because of the aforesaid assumptions.

## 2. Ideology and education

How, then, can we understand ideology itself? Its original definition by Destutt de Tracy referred to it as the science of ideas (Kennedy, 1979, p. 353). For this Enlightenment philosopher, ideology meant the study of the origin of ideas. In this view, ideology is a science that explains the relationship between sensations and ideas. However, this 'neutral' understanding, due to its political and social connotations, did not last long, as the concept of ideology was readily used by Napoleon to deride the work of philosophers and publicists (i.e. any abstract and

literary projects they created<sup>1</sup>). This ‘use’ of the concept of *ideology* contributed to its dissemination, at the same time as it initiated a change in understanding itself. However, it seems that ultimately, the contemporary pejorative meaning of the term is an aftermath of the Marxist narrative, according to which every theory, doctrine, etc., is derived from social circumstances.

Thus, all thinking is ideological, and any philosophy will serve the interests of the social class controlling the means of production (Crick, 2004, pp. 51–53). Besides the means of material production, there are for Marx the ‘means of spiritual production’ (Marks & Engels, 1961). As Bernard Crick avers, ‘In the concept of ideology, even “knowledge” and “reason,” to say nothing of ethics and customs, are seen merely as reflections of the overall structure of society, as relative things, functional to a particular social system’ (Crick, 2004, p. 53), thus, ‘the human being here becomes blurred in the social conditioning; the determination of the human will and the discoverability of the human intellect are lost in the perch of petty circumstances’ (Crick, 2004, p. 53). This is a narrative for which the core assumption is that all social behaviour is determined by a single factor – class struggle.

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says: ‘An ideology is a set of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, consciously or unconsciously held, which reflects or shapes understandings or misconceptions of the social and political world’ (Freedman, 1998). There are no assumptions in this passage that would indicate that ideological thinking is inherently dangerous. The next part of the definition of ideology shows its ‘dangerous element’ – ‘It serves to recommend, justify or endorse collective action aimed at preserving or changing political practices and institutions’ (ibidem). What we have here, therefore, is a situation in which action is demanded to achieve a specific (understood as necessary and therefore the only possible) socio-political change. Ideologies like communism and Nazism have proven exceptionally effective. In line with the narrative undertaken within them, they are

to be the necessary and exclusive outcome of the total relationships of every aspect of society – and therefore, in theory at least, claimed to be able to predict

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<sup>1</sup> Napoleon was referring to critics who fought against his ‘tsarist pull’. It was then that the word ‘ideology’ took on a pejorative meaning, simultaneously intended to depreciate the thinking of his opponent (Mannheim, 2008, p. 106).

and explain everything. An ideology, thus, can be stable, final, and free of any internal contradictions only when society as a whole frees itself, or is freed, from those divisive elements of property ownership or racial impurity which impede its fullest possible coherence, generality, and unity. To the totalitarian mind, the limited function of 'mere' politics is both a fallacy and a deceit, a trick of the State to prevent the reign of Society (Crick, 1993, p. 39–40).

Ideological theorists remove from scientific discourse, but thus also from social practice, the essential division between the 'private sphere' and the 'public sphere.' Not only economic institutions but also industry, education, art, and even individual views and feelings become relevant from the perspectives of the system, becoming part of it. The division between the spheres of work and leisure thus ceases to apply, while all aspects of social life acquire a public character, becoming a necessary part of the system. The lack of control over any of the spheres of citizens' functioning, according to ideologues totalising every sphere of social life, would mean the possibility of a 'breach' in the system, creating at the same time the possibility of 'escape' (Crick, 1993, p. 40).

Therefore, by ideology, I mean one that adopts a holistic and total view of the world, while simultaneously having a set of directives and tools for gaining or maintaining power. Though ideology can be spread in various ways, ideologising through the use of institutional education seems to be one of the most effective. It can be argued, of course, that there is no education that is not ideologised. On the one hand, institutional education seems to be always inscribed in a certain, specific kind of thinking (this is precisely 'ideological thinking'), understood as a system of beliefs, values, and principles defining a 'way of looking' at the world and answering questions about social goals and values. Indeed, one cannot deny the existence of such philosophical determinations (axiological, epistemological, anthropological, etc.) that shape our perspective of the world, while also influencing the shape and functioning of the education system itself. On the other hand, however, it can be argued (and this is what I am assuming in this article) that the very notion of 'ideology' is saturated with such content, which contains radical resolutions. In other words, there are such assumptions, the adoption of which (consciously or otherwise) inscribes us into a particular model of the scientific, religious, politically sanctioned worldview, etc., shaping its nature. Ideology additionally includes the demand to change reality as per the axiology it contains. In such a perspective, the question of the ideological

nature of education becomes the impetus for a discussion on the prevailing educational paradigm. The education system, which is subordinate to the state, can be 'used' in many ways and for many purposes. Education can be used to maintain power and to spread the kind of beliefs that cement that power. So, is education always inscribed in ideological discourse, and is non-ideological education even possible?

In response to the above question, I pose the thesis that non-ideological education is indeed possible. I believe that education can not only be 'immune' to ideology but can also be an 'excellent tool' for dealing with all manifestations of ideological thinking. Justifying the above thesis, however, requires 'entering' the level of paradigmatic thinking. I assume that there is no education as such, but that it is always a conditioned education, set in a theoretical context. Consequently, we may wonder whether behaviourist or constructivist education is immune to ideological influence (the other paradigms do not seem so influential and scientifically grounded to be considered here).

### **3. Constructivist didactics as anti-ideological education**

The school, with its adaptive function, becomes a place where a type of formative influence occurs, by definition 'rooting' the young person in culture and society. Unfortunately, adaptability is programmatically inscribed with certain forms of coercion implemented in the behavioural paradigm of education (cf. Klus-Stańska, 2010; Sajdak, 2013). Consequently, the educational process assumes the contours of a cultural phenomenon, in which a relationship of subordination, and therefore a relationship of power, plays a fundamental role. Such an educational institution just does not constitute a space in which any manifestation of non-ideological thinking is born. The behaviourist paradigm of education is based on notions of 'stimulus' and 'reinforcement,' which are naive and misleading. Although the behaviourist movement had immense influence several decades ago, its fundamental principles continue to be prevalent and operational in the thinking of numerous educators. The behaviourist paradigm assumes that (a) knowledge is passively received by the cognising subject; (b) the function of cognition is the discovery of ontological reality. The methods of teaching so far have concentrated their efforts on two main tasks: (a') transferring ready knowledge to pupils or students; (b') developing

the best possible means of transmitting information (Glaserfeld, 2012; Moroz, 2015, pp. 78–79). Such theoretical assumptions have significant consequences at the level of educational practice. Above all, the student is deprived of the opportunity to actively participate in the learning process. He or she is, thus, not treated subjectively, becoming only a passive participant and the object of educational interventions. This model of education encourages the transmission of a particular worldview, through the official and hidden curriculum. School can easily become a venue for the transmission of a dominant ideology whose aim is to ‘produce’ individuals who will meet its criteria. At the same time, institutional education can become a place for the formation of ‘proper’ civic consciousness. Therefore, it seems reasonable to recognise that the behaviourist paradigm can be successfully used to support all kinds of ideologies.

The constructivist paradigm is the opposite of the behaviourist paradigm in didactics. Not only does it not support ideological thinking – it protects against it. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge.

It asserts two main principles whose application has far-reaching consequences for the study of cognitive development and learning as well as for the practice of teaching, psychotherapy and interpersonal management in general. These two principles are:

- (1) knowledge is not passively received but actively built up by the cognizing subject;
- (2) the function of cognition is adaptive and serves the organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of ontological reality (Glaserfeld, 1989, p. 162).

These assumptions, relating to the cognitive processes of an individual, find their reflection in the theory and practice of education. Constructivism, in a way, replaces the theory of teaching with the theory of learning. Consequently, there is a change in educational relations, affecting the position of both the teacher (and with it, the position of knowledge) and the student. First of all, the centuries-old tradition of transmissibility of knowledge, which fundamentally influenced the shape of formal education, is abandoned (Moroz, 2019, pp. 110–111). In constructivism, it should be assumed that in a sense, it is our mind that performs the operation of ‘modelling reality.’ We construct systems of elements, classify them and operate them. In similar conditions,

we produce similar results, which we ourselves, as cognitive subjects, become aware of by 'testing' in various configurations of social situations and matching them to the communication pattern. These systems form cognitive structures whose origin is genetically dependent (without being determined in any way) on perceptual processes. While some structures will be repeated, others will be eliminated by the organism (Glaserfeld & Cobb, 1983). With the understanding of the nature of learning, the relationship between the teacher and the learner changes. The essential task of the teacher is to nurture the learner's sense of security by creating conditions conducive to free development, as well as to arouse in the learner a sufficiently strong intrinsic motivation, prompting them a desire to make a cognitive effort. The nature of the relationship between the two significantly affects the whole learning process, including the learner's belief that they can and should act and solve problems independently. The teacher, on the other hand, who is aware that problem-solving learning is based on the ability to consider different ways of proceeding, when planning a teaching strategy, should consider three aspects wherein multiple options can be presented to children for finding solutions: activation (triggering the search process), sustaining this state and directing the search process (acting based on non-accidental, and therefore, structured and systematic actions). Triggering the learner's activity requires arousing his or her curiosity, which Bruner defines as a response to uncertainty and ambiguity (Bruner, 1974, pp. 72–73). However, the creative search for a solution to a problem cannot be aroused by using extrinsic motivation. Rather, by exerting pressure in the form of punishments and rewards, the teacher develops in the pupil a submissive attitude, as a result of which the pupil submits and conforms to external expectations. Authentic cognitive activity can be aroused in the pupil by freeing him or her to find the 'right solution,' while simultaneously 'instilling' in him or her a feeling of satisfaction from the very fact of discovery (Bruner, 1971, pp. 117–118). The 'practice' of presenting each difficulty to the pupil as a kind of puzzle that he or she must solve can make the learning process extremely invigorating. In time, the pupil who, through the teacher, has been confronted with the problem, will himself/herself be able to give it the form of a solvable task to propose a hypothesis and an already concrete solution (Bruner, 1971, p. 125).

Self-exploration and solution-finding thus become a natural part of learning, and active class participation, besides an awareness of control over what and how 'happens' in class, not only contributes to a sense of agency but also

the internalisation of information. This is why the constructivist teacher does not pay much attention to traditional teaching methods and the verification of the student's knowledge understood as a set of information on a given topic. Instead, the teacher's field of interest is the ability to deal with problematic situations.

An example of an activity that makes good use of a student's cognitive potential may be a scheme of action for a constructivist teacher, for whom the primary goal is to provoke students to act by solving a problem posed to them. The scheme comprises four procedural stages:

- (i) orientation, aimed at obtaining information about the student's pre-knowledge,
- (ii) involving students in the work on their notions, existing ideas, etc.,
- (iii) reorganisation and application for the student's knowledge-building process. Knowing that the reorganisation of ideas depends on the learner, the teacher actively supports the creation of new ideas among students, provoking them to exchange their views and ideas. Revealing incompatibilities in the thinking of students provokes, in turn, the questioning of particular perspectives. This stage of work with students is extended by testing through discussion or a student-designed experiment, etc., the theory, thesis, or explanation they have formulated. This enables the verification and correction of the theory proposed earlier.
- (iv) review changes in student concepts, and compare current thinking with previous thinking (Scott, Dyson & Gaber, 1987).

Without the ability to analyse, synthesise and evaluate and use basic logical tools, a student would not be able to complete all the steps involved in solving a problem, including formulating the problem and finding a solution. The knowledge constructed by the student in the problem-solving process is also of great importance in the constructivist paradigm (cf. Leś & Moroz, 2021, p. 118). The nature of work in the constructivist paradigm was well captured by Catherine Twomey Fosnot (2005):

Classrooms soon became workshops, with teachers as facilitators, rather than transmitters of knowledge. The role of questioning, disequilibrium, learners paraphrasing each other and discussing ideas in learning communities, the importance of think time and pair talk and the role of problem-solving and inquiry all began to be descriptive of the 'new' classroom.



If we assume that one of the aims of the school is to develop democratic attitudes in pupils, then mere knowledge of rights and responsibilities is not enough. To gain a 'proper' political consciousness, and with it, the understanding and ability to exercise civil liberties and rights, it is necessary to participate in a community guided by democratic values. Institutional education can create an adequate space for critical-analytical thinking, which is a necessary condition for the development of socio-political competence. Nevertheless, any anti-authoritarian community will, as it were, naturally be entangled in overt conflicts, arising from the multiplicity and diversity of positions held within it. The role of education is not only to reduce intra-group tensions but to seek mutually acceptable solutions (as far as possible).

#### **4. Constructivist didactics as education supporting a deliberative attitude**

One mechanism for reducing the aforementioned inter-group tensions is deliberation, which can be understood as a communication process oriented towards the search for a rational solution to a problem. Thus, within the framework of education, deliberative communities can be created, which naturally construct analytical tools to 'test' individual claims and whole concepts to ultimately reject those for which no rational justification can be found. Education can therefore enhance deliberative attitudes by encouraging critical thinking, reflection and decision-making based on reasoned arguments. Philip Selznick (2004, p. 265) argues thus:

When people are forced to justify claims and cannot cut off the discussion by resorting to violence or severing relationships, they are likely to appeal to easy-to-understand aspirations and shared expectations. When a lie is inflicted on them, they suddenly begin to grasp objective rationale because they need such an idea to suppress their own resentment. This is why the primary form of moral argumentation is the demand to put oneself in another person's shoes.

By using the deliberative dispute resolution model in constructivist education, we can create counterfactual situations that, as it were, force us to take different positions and adopt different (sometimes mutually exclusive)

perspectives. Given this, there is little opportunity for the teacher to push a particular style of political thinking. The deliberative model supports the student's 'open-mindedness.'

It seems that the deliberative dispute resolution model could have many societal benefits. In such 'deliberative practices,' a group of randomly selected individuals (in a school setting, this would be students) acquire knowledge about a particular problem, then decide on the course of action. Such an approach, already shaped within the walls of the school, could consequently contribute to changing in adulthood the student's attitude towards doing politics, i.e. making it more partisan. Such a practice stems from the conviction that, in the course of deliberation with others, people will modify their viewpoint and, simultaneously, develop a joint and responsible solution to an issue. Further, deliberation can contribute to increased mutual understanding and respect (Shapiro, 2006, pp. 29–30). Ian Shapiro further argues thus:

People advocate deliberation for different reasons. Some believe that it is intrinsically valuable. More often, however, it is valued for instrumental reasons, believing that it contributes to consensus, the discovery of truth, or the growth of consciousness. Indeed, in at least some situations, deliberation fosters these values as well as values similar to them (Shapiro, 2006, p. 29).

The development of a deliberative attitude also allows one to 'more easily' achieve the kind of thinking capacity that leads one to demand coherence and justification from both oneself and others. In addition, it reinforces what we might call the experience of cooperation and reciprocity and consequently allows one to achieve an impersonal viewpoint and think in universalist terms. In the review *Who Can Tell Right From Wrong?*<sup>2</sup> Herbert L. A. Hart (1986, p. 52) wrote:

It is evident that those who are most likely to abandon their moral convictions when they are shown that they have a subjective source are those whose moral inclinations have been formed in isolation from concrete situations and modes of behaviour and centred on general principles or theories or the divine will

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<sup>2</sup> Review of Bernard Williams' book (1985): *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

or whatever is taken as the general authoritative source of all moral good and evil... By contrast, those whose moral education or self-education has not led them to adopt such a way of considering moral questions and who find moral justifications for their actions not at the level of abstractions, but at the level of particular concrete situations, are least likely to be shocked if it were to come to light that their moral practices, and the feelings of compulsion and necessity that accompany them, reflect aspirations rooted in their own personality.

So, we can ask how constructivist education supports a deliberative attitude. Education plays a vital role in shaping deliberative attitudes. Deliberation requires the engagement of both strictly abstract thinking and practical imagination, which receive little attention in traditional school education, but can serve admirably as building blocks for the student's essential cognitive mechanisms. The ability to adopt an impersonal perspective requires considerable intellectual work but allows one to see much more – to transcend not only one's own (subjective) but even the 'local point of view.' At the same time, it can contribute to strengthening subjective self-reliance and refining moral sensitivity. The shift in epistemological and consequently didactic perspective that the constructivist paradigm entails, provides such opportunities for students.

Here are some ways in which education can help shape these attitudes. (i) Critical thinking is an essential component of a deliberative attitude. Therefore, education needs to teach students how to analyse information, evaluate arguments and question assumptions. Educators can encourage critical thinking by using open-ended questions, case studies and discussions. (ii) Education can help shape a deliberative attitude by promoting diversity. Educators can expose students to diverse perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds. This can help students develop empathy and a better understanding of different viewpoints. (iii) Education can encourage students to become active citizens and engage with their communities. By participating in civic activities, students can learn how to work together to solve problems and make informed decisions. (iv) Education can promote a deliberative attitude by creating a safe and respectful learning environment. When students feel valued and respected, they are more likely to engage in constructive dialogue and consider different viewpoints.

However, promoting deliberative attitudes can be done in a non-ideological educational environment, and non-ideological education would be impossible without constructivist assumptions. These include: (i) active learning, (ii) col-

laboration, (iii) problem-solving, (iv) teacher as facilitator, (v) inquiry-based learning, (vi) reflection and metacognition, (vii) contextualised learning and (viii) multiple perspectives. Given the above, constructivist didactics (a) emphasises that learners actively build their knowledge through experiences and interactions with the environment; (b) encourages learners to work together, share ideas and support each other's learning, fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility; (c) emphasises the importance of developing learners' problem-solving skills and (d) shifts the teacher's role – the teacher ceases to be the manager of the learning process and the main source of knowledge. In the constructivist model, they play the role of a facilitator, who guides, supports and challenges learners as they explore and construct their understanding; (e) encourages learners to ask questions, explore and investigate; (f) emphasises the importance of reflection and metacognition, helping learners to become more aware of their own thinking processes and learning strategies; (g) stresses enabling learners to connect new knowledge to their existing knowledge and experiences; (h) and encourages learners to consider and explore multiple perspectives and interpretations. Teachers foster students to consider different views, helping them develop open-mindedness and respect for diversity and nurturing critical thinking.

Constructivism suggests that there is never just one right way of teaching. However, it can provide valuable insights into why certain attitudes and procedures are unfruitful or counterproductive. Further, it can encourage teachers to use their spontaneous imagination and creativity to shape their teaching practices. Therefore, constructivism may provide new perspectives for teachers thinking about education and its role in an open society. It can offer an alternative perspective on traditional teaching methods and inspire teachers to develop more effective strategies aligned with the principles of constructivism. Constructivism's primary role is not to prescribe a specific teaching procedure but rather to challenge traditional practices and encourage teachers to adopt a more imaginative and student-centred approach to education. This is how constructivist didactics support anti-authoritarian thinking, while simultaneously becoming a good example of non-ideological education. The shaping of the aforesaid attitudes seems to be essential for independent, autonomous and highly critical thinking, which not only systemically (due to the educational model used) prevents the ideologisation of education but

actually 'supports' anti-ideological attitudes. In this article, the deliberative model serves as just one example of the 'didactic realisation' of constructivist education. This means that education, understood in this way, enables the implementation of deliberation in the classroom (which is impossible in the behaviourist didactics model).

## 5. Conclusions

The article highlights the epistemological assumptions of constructivism and how they influence teaching practices. It emphasises the significance of constructivist education in minimising the possibility of shaping students into submissive, authoritarian and ideologically susceptible personalities. Constructivist education focuses on organising the learning environment to support the intellectual creativity of students, offering them and teachers freedom of action at every level of classroom organisation. This approach helps students understand problems and appreciate diverse viewpoints, cooperate and agree with others, and most importantly, 'talk sense' by presenting hypotheses, citing arguments and challenging illogical claims. These skills can prepare students for informed and full participation in deliberative democracy.

Overall, the article presents an argument in favour of constructivist education as a means of promoting critical thinking and empowering students to become active and engaged citizens. So, constructivism opens the doors to freedom not only on the thinking level but also in planning and realising an educational strategy. It is very important for developing all manifestations of the promotion of a liberal attitude among students. As all forms of authoritarianism are 'programmatically' excluded in constructivist education, given the above, the latter may not only be 'immune' to ideology but may even be an 'excellent tool' for dealing with any manifestation of ideological thinking.

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