

Is Siegfried Schmidt's Constructivism Alive and Well Today?

Art Graesser

The University of Memphis

Constructivism has had a tremendous impact on both cognitive science and the field of discourse processing throughout the last 25 years. What do I mean by constructivism? It means that the human mind actively constructs meanings rather than merely translates explicit text. It means that cognitive mechanisms dynamically interact with stimulus input during comprehension, and collaboratively produce cognitive representations (Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; Kintsch, 1998). So meaning does not reside in the text, nor does it reside in the mind, but rather it resides in a dynamic dance between the two. Because of these cognitive complexities, any enterprise that dissects the linguistic and semantic properties of the text alone is not a psychologically plausible model of comprehension and appreciation. Any text-analysis enterprise is also fundamentally limited as a formal theory because it will never go the distance in offering a complete explanation of the composition of the explicit text.

Constructivism has deep roots in cognitive science and discourse processing. But it was Siegfried Schmidt who did what he could to sell the foundation to colleagues in literature, literary criticism, media studies, and empirical studies of literature. His 1982 book was the cornerstone contribution that launched his position (Schmidt, 1982). As far as I can tell, his impact literature and literary criticism has not produced the revolutionary change that Siegfried Schmidt and many of us had hoped. Literature has a much different scholarly agenda, and those in literary criticism have always been stubborn. In contrast, those of us in empirical studies of literature have been profoundly influenced by Siegfried's ideas. Indeed, his ideas created a whole new society (IGEL) and journal (SPIEL), in addition to substantially influencing the

journal *Poetics* during the last 20 years. Siegfried is the founder and intellectual Godfather of empirical studies of literature.

My conversations with Siegfried at the IGEL conferences have always had the perfect combination of pleasure and intensity. As we talk about the theoretical and empirical trends of recent years, there has always been a deep connection and mutual admiration (at least I hope it's mutual). There has always been an intensity because everything matters and both of us quickly get bored with dilettantes. Even our laughter is intense. One of the first questions I ask myself and others at any IGEL conference is "What's Siegfried up to these days?".

Nevertheless, a pure eulogy is not as interesting as a good argument. So I must confess that it is the disagreements that I have had with Siegfried Schmidt that have been particularly stimulating and sustaining over the years. Interestingly, a surprising number of these arguments have been with his colleagues rather than Siegfried himself. I suspect that these disagreements are a result of our growing up in different continents, countries, cultures, and intellectual traditions. Perhaps we would have been intellectual clones if I had grown up in Germany. A couple of disagreements immediately come to mind and hopefully are worthwhile to share.

First, we have a disagreement on what constitutes a theory. What Siegfried calls a theory, I call a meta-theory. For me, a good theory tries to explain a complex phenomenon (like text comprehension), but also does so with enough specification and decisiveness that it generates predictions on what will happen in a particular experiment or empirical study. For Siegfried, such predictions are somewhat beside the point and miss the big picture. Sometimes I even wonder whether he believes that experiments are beside the point and miss the big picture. I have always wished that there were enough time for Siegfried and I to resolve this question, perhaps over a case of good cognac and two boxes of cigars.

A second disagreement addresses the role of the stimulus in constructivist theories. As I have reconstructed Siegfried's position over the years, the stimulus plays a minor or negligible role in the comprehension and appreciation of literature. It is what the mind constructs that counts and the stimulus does not dictate what the mind does. In contrast, my theoretical position is that the stimulus imposes substantial constraints on the course of comprehension. There is a constraint satisfaction mechanism that incorporates the constraints of the stimulus with the mechanisms of the mind. It is quite possible, however, that I have misunderstood Schmidt and his intentions on this matter of the stimulus, and have thereby made a fundamental attribution error. If so, then I suppose I have indirectly proven that Schmidt's position is correct (i.e., the position that I had "incorrectly" attributed to Schmidt). Perhaps Schmidt could show me an excerpt to prove me wrong and clarify any misunderstanding.

In closing, I want to express that Siegfried Schmidt has had a tremendous impact on my own career. What he started became part of my destiny. In addition to attending and presenting papers at all of the IGEL meetings, I served as the president of IGEL 1989-1992 and part of the governing board for several years. As editor of the journal *Discourse Processes* (1996-present), I have embraced constructivism and empirical studies of literature as one of the important developments in the field of discourse processing. So the ideas of Siegfried Schmidt have indeed managed to spread from Europe to North America. Siegfried's constructivism is alive and well today.

References

Graesser, A.C., Singer, M., & Trabasso, T. (1994). Constructing inferences during narrative text comprehension. *Psychological Review*, *101*, 371-395.

Kintsch, W. (1998). *Comprehension: A paradigm for cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schmidt, S.J. (1982). *Foundations for the empirical study of literature: The components of a basic theory*. Hamburg, Germany: Helmut Buske Verlag.