

Teaching Soft Skills in Agricultural Education: Best Practices

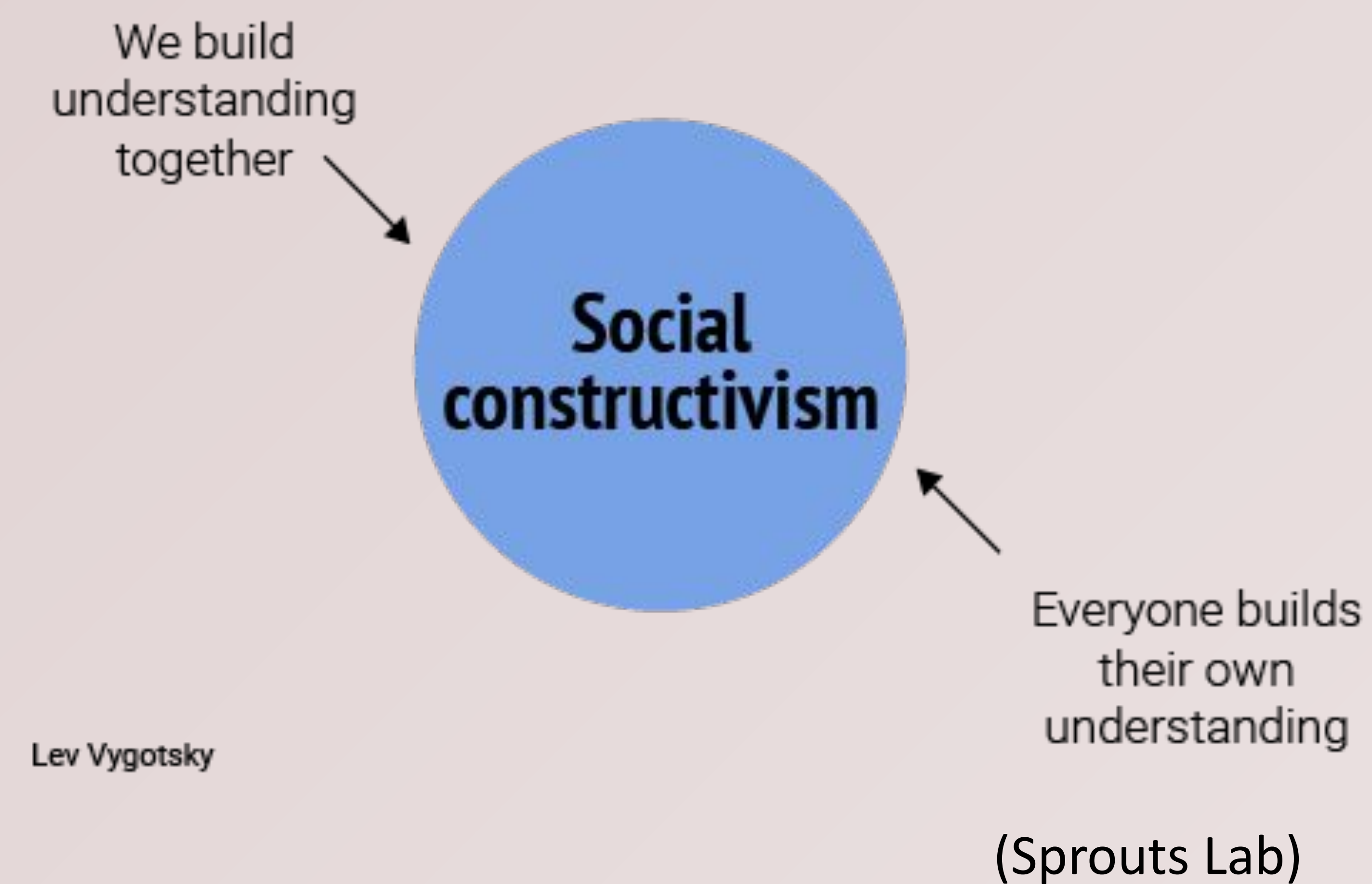
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Introduction

Agricultural education prioritizes incorporating soft skill development (National Research Council, 2009). The Agricultural Education Mission includes preparing students for success in their careers and discernment (Agricultural Education, 2019). Identifying and applying best practices to infuse soft skill development techniques is important to deliver on this priority and mission.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism is a learning theory that explains how knowledge is constructed by people. Vygotsky's Social Constructivism has the greatest impact on educational practices and instructional design. With the purpose of this study being to identify the best practices for teaching soft skills, Vygotsky is the best option for a theoretical framework for this study (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002).



Method

- A purposeful sampling technique was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
- Educators participated in semi-structured interviews.
- The constant comparative method was used to search the data for constant or popular themes throughout the interview process (Glazer, 1965).
- To interpret the raw data, the approach of social constructivism was applied.
- Triangulation was performed on the findings.

Findings

- Agricultural Educators believe that soft skills are a combination of leadership, critical thinking, and communication skills.
- Soft skills are a learned skill
- The elements of home environment and social and peer pressure are the biggest oppressors for teaching soft skills.
- More opportunities for students to develop soft skills in Agricultural Education and the programs and activities it supports.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Application of Humanist Psychologist Abraham Maslow's four stages of learning describes a student's process in learning soft skills. Learners move from unconsciously incompetent to consciously incompetent into an uncomfortable place of practicing and using their new skills until the fourth stage of unconsciously competent (Crosbie, 2005). To have an effective training program the following elements must be present to ensure behavioral change: expert facilitation; contextual awareness; formal support; informal support; opportunities to use the new skills; self-study and self-analysis; stress; and celebration (Crosbie, 2015).

It is unknown if Agricultural Education teacher preparation programs are preparing future teachers to emphasize soft skills. To follow the Agricultural mission statement of "preparing students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices", it is imperative that soft skill practices be taught in teacher preparation programs.

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