



## **Perspectivism: a new theory for learning development**

**Jonathan Denham**

University of Bradford, UK

### ***Abstract***

There have been recent calls for renewed focus on the theory of Learning Development (LD; Slawson and Eyre, 2024). A range of theoretical approaches are used across the profession (Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024; Slawson and Eyre, 2024), though some of the more prominent, social constructivist, approaches have been critiqued in terms of their applicability and appropriateness to LD (Hilsdon et al., 2019; White and Dhillon, 2024).

This piece responds to this call by introducing Perspectivism, a theory on how individuals perceive, create, and interact with their environment (Alrøe and Noe, 2012). This broadly critical realist model may provide a stronger way to describe LD than social constructivist-aligned models. The theory also offers a defence against criticisms of generic academic skills support (Richards and Pilcher, 2023) and an associated provocation to the centrality of discipline literacy practices in social constructivist theories in LD.

**Keywords:** perspectivism; learning theory; third space.

### ***Perspectivism***

Perspectivism is the name given by the philosophers of science Alrøe and Noe (2011; 2012; 2014) to a body of ideas drawing from writers on biology and cognition (Uexküll, 1982; Maturana and Varela, 1998), cybernetics and social systems theory (Luhmann, 1989; 2012), and associated with complexity theory (Cilliers, 2002). The ideas behind Perspectivism relate to a system's interaction with its environment, whether that system is a biological cell or a university tutor. Perspective in this context refers to any form of

interaction with an environment, including sensory perception, memory, language, and cognition.

The term Perspectivism appears in multiple separate traditions: Nietzsche engaged with similar ideas (Strong, 1985; Knoll, 2021). The term, also as perspectivalism, is used in writing on scientific methodology (Massimi and McCoy, 2020), and also appears in the anthropological field Amerindian Perspectivism (de Castro, 1998). These traditions differ in focus but share a key recognition that perspective forms our worlds and our selves, but not in an isolated, solipsistic or relativist way. The tradition drawn on from Alrøe and Noe, used in this paper, has seen some limited application to education (Kay, 2002; Murray, 2003) and in environment education (Souza et al., 2019). Its use in higher education is emergent, though will hopefully be recognisable in the daily experience of learning developers.

Below, I will discuss four statements that explore Perspectivism and its relationship with LD. The fourth statement considers how the others impact on an understanding of the role of the learning developer.

### ***Each individual perceives their own version of the world***

Perspectivism understands perspective as a creative process which ‘brings forth a world’ (Maturana and Varela, 1998, p.26). Maturana and Varela (1998) describe how the whole self, down to the individual cells across a body, are involved in the process of responding to environmental triggers to create this perspective. In doing this, perspective creates an environment ‘governed in all its parts, by the meaning it has for the subject’ (Uexküll, 1982, p.30).

The limits of our perspective, therefore, are the limits of our world. As Maturana and Varela (1998, p.242) have it: ‘We do not see what we do not see, and what we do not see does not exist’. The sociologist Luhmann (2012) calls this the horizon or blind-spot, which limits how the environment can be interacted with. Taken together, this tell us that the world we experience is not ‘the world but a world’ (Maturana and Varela, 1998, p.245).

## ***This version is as valid as anyone else's***

A challenging aspect of Perspectivism is that a perspective's validity is relevant only to the individual who holds it. As each individual can only perceive their own environment, then there is no way to judge validity compared to an objective or even socially constructed environment. In this is a significant warning against certainty in perspectives. Maturana and Varela (1998, p.245) state: 'If we want to coexist with the other person, we must see that *his certainty – however undesirable it may seem to us – is as legitimate and valid as our own*'.

## ***By turning perspective on itself, it changes***

For Perspectivism, learning is change in perspective (Alrøe and Noe, 2012). Perspectives allow an individual to change itself in response to its environment, and these changes then change the perspective in a cyclical manner (Alrøe and Noe, 2012). This continuous process leads to patterns in the development of perspectives within and across lifetimes, allowing, for example, the lines on this page to have shared meaning.

Maturana and Varela (1998) describe how these patterns, which they call traditions, can be a source of false certainty when they become so static as to seem real and objective rather than subjective. Maturana and Varela (1998, p.242) exhort us to work against this: 'Only when some interaction dislodges us ... and when we reflect upon it, do we bring forth new constellations of relation that we explain by saying we were not aware of them, or we took them for granted'.

This dislodging and reflection refer to the blind-spots and horizon of our own perspectives. Luhmann focused on how, when perspective is turned upon itself, the horizon becomes visible and so perspective changes, and he identified methods to enable this (Andersen, 2003). This is what Perspectivism tells us is the practice of learning. In short, it is reflection: perceiving our perspectives, discussing our discussion, thinking about our thinking.

## ***Learning developers provide opportunities for change but cannot control it***

Here, I will draw out implications of the preceding statements and make a short comparison to social constructivist interpretations of LD. To do this, I will use an example of a student who asked me, 'What is flow?'. In the table below (Table 1), I summarise how the statements discussed here impact upon my answer.

**Table 1. Implications for LD practice of perspectivist concepts.**

	<b>Implication for my practice</b>
<b>Each individual perceives their own version of the world</b>	I cannot answer this question objectively. The student cannot perceive the same 'flow' as me.
<b>This version is as valid as anyone else's</b>	I cannot answer this question with an appeal to an external or collective authority, including my own. I need to support them to engage with the validity of their perspective.
<b>By turning it on itself, perspective changes</b>	I can give opportunities for the student to engage in that question and their own perspective.

These implications led to my initial reply of, 'What do you think?'. In this, I provided an opportunity for her perspective to come to the fore and we further considered it, making comparisons over to other perspectives she had encountered, including my own. There is little in this which is not the normal practice of LD.

I call this perspective-work: supporting a student's reflective engagement with their own perspective. These ideas abound across LD literature. For example, in Gravett's (2025) work on relational pedagogy and pedagogy of mattering, where engagement with the material reality of the self and the environment is key (Gravett and Winstone, 2018); Webster's (2023) innovative work on engaging with students via multiple reflective perspectives; or Abegglen et al.'s (2019) varied engagements with student-led reflective practice on self and environment.

Perspectivism supports us in understanding the perspective-work of LD from alternative angles to that of social-constructivism. It also provides provocation to the criticisms of generic or centralised academic support as requiring expertise in discipline literacy.

Criticisms of generic academic skills support focus on the lack of discipline expertise in terms of understanding discipline or institutional discourses and literacy practices (Richards and Pilcher, 2023; White and Webster, 2023). There are many approaches to

teaching academic writing which use this understanding, such as those outlined by Wingate (2012). We can broadly describe these approaches by using the concept of third space as a learning theory (Moje et al., 2004). Moje et al.'s (2004) influential article established the related language of 'bridging' and 'navigating', which can be found across writing on LD (e.g., Webster, 2022; Hood, 2024) and is a central part of the current Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (2025) definition of a learning developer. Taken together, these ideas work on the model that the 'second space' of HE, which an individual joins, is, to some extent, empirically observable. The expert can observe its features and communicate them to the student, which then becomes the role of academic support. In this way, the third space around the expert can function as something like a filter, determining the limits of the other two spaces and the practices which are acceptable within them (Mertala, 2019).

For Perspectivism, this model is inherently flawed. Maturana and Varela (1998) use the analogy of a submarine pilot to explore this.

A submarine pilot is navigating through a series of rocky outcrops which an observer perceives. The pilot cannot see the rocks; instead, they are responding to pings and signals on their consoles. The observer may be able to become the world's foremost expert on the rocks, understanding their geology, chemistry, and role in the ecosystem; they may be able to communicate this information in rich detail. However, the pilot in the submarine has never seen the rocks and not a single thing the observer says will necessarily have any relevance to the pings and flashes the pilot perceives.

Perspectivism tells us then that our role is not to help the students to 'see' the same HE that we perceive. As learning developers, we can take time to share our perspectives, including of oppressive parts of HE with our often-marginalised students, and the perspectives captured in social-constructivist-aligned works, including academic literacies (Hilsdon et al., 2019). Yet, Perspectivism helps us to hold on to the idea that our real role is to help the student explore what they perceive: to experiment with their perspective's pings and flashes, to reflect and discuss what they may mean, and to express their perspectives and emotions without fear of a judgement based on the validity of a world they do not perceive.

Perspectivist learning, or perspective-work, is a matter of providing opportunities for students to do this in a supported environment, while accepting that we cannot control the changes that may emerge from this self-perspective.

### ***Conclusion: learning development as perspective-work***

Perspectivism offers us a theoretical description of the profession and practice of LD, which is potentially of greater value to the role than the social constructivist models in use currently. These models at times keep the profession in a bind whereby we simultaneously acknowledge that we are not discipline experts, but discipline expertise is required for learning in this field, but enforcing compliance is oppressive. This bind is captured in a question asked by Hilsdon et al. (2019, p.22) in their review of academic literacies in LD: 'How do we teach a disciplinary form without inducting students into normative genres?'

Perspectivism provides an answer to this question: we do not. We do not teach disciplinary forms; we support students working on their perspectives of their environment, which includes, but also extends far beyond, their discipline.

We are not discipline experts. We are experts on developing learning. Perspectivism provides the theoretical foundation to state this clearly. Just as LD holds a radically student-centred perspective, Perspectivism affirms that we are always, wonderfully, of far secondary importance to the individual themselves. It is within the individual and their perspective that all learning and all of the remaking and transformation of worlds is taking place. Our role is never only to teach a student how we perceive the environment but to support them to learn more about how they perceive it. This can be summed up in a small re-writing of Johnson and Bishopp-Martin's (2024, p.22) description of the uniqueness of learning development: 'This primary focus on understanding HE as the student experiences it ... is the crucial delineating hallmark of LD.'

Perspectivism allows us to rephrase this and ensure that we keep the focus clearly placed not on our understanding of the environment of HE, but onto the student's: *the primary focus on supporting the student's understanding of their own perspectives is the crucial delineating hallmark of LD.*

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## **Author details**

Jonathan Denham is Senior Academic Skills Advisor at the University of Bradford and member of the ALDinHE Research and Scholarship Working Group. His research interests

are focused on the theory of learning development and its practice. In particular, he is interested in finding new ways to better understand the field's unique theoretical position.

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