



Sociocultural Theory Of Learning In The Classroom

By Chris Drew (PhD) / January 20, 2023

What Is The Sociocultural Theory Of Learning?

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning explains that learning occurs during social interactions between individuals. It is one of the dominant [theories of education](#) today. It believes learning happens first through social interaction and second through individual internalization of social behaviors.

In the sociocultural theory, students and teachers form relationships in the classroom to help the student learn. The relationships help facilitate social interaction and [active participation in the learning](#) tasks. Students learn through observation, listening and talking through their tasks.

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Key Features Of The Sociocultural Theory

The first thing we need is a clear understanding of the theory. So, below, I've provided you with some scholarly definitions.

It's important that you use scholarly definitions when defining the theory. You

don't want to cite a website – you want to cite a [journal article](#) or textbook!



So, here are the definitions I find most useful...

Definitions

Sociocultural theory, also known as social [constructivism](#) or socioculturalism, is defined by educational scholars as:

- [Nagel \(2012, p. 83\)](#) argues that sociocultural theory “reflects the view that learning and development is not just a process of increased mental sophistication but is also mediated through social and cultural interactions.”
- [Bates \(2019, p. 19\)](#) argues that through sociocultural theory, “knowledge and interactions are constructed through social interactions with family, friends, teachers and peers.”
- [Leonard \(2002, p. 178\)](#), in a definition I quite like, states: “sociocultural theory focuses on the causal relationship between social interaction and individual cognitive development.”

A quick note for students: [Paraphrase your definition!](#)

Don't forget to paraphrase the definition to show your marker that you have a [good understanding](#) of the theory. Then, reference these sources at the end of the sentence.

For example, if I were to paraphrase the definitions above, I'd say it something

like:



Sociocultural theorists believe that learning happens as a result of social interactions and takes place within a specific cultural environment (Bates, 2019; Leonard, 2002; Nagel, 2012).

Scholarly Citations in APA Style for the above Sources:

Bates, B. (2019). *Learning theories simplified*. London: SAGE.

Leonard, D. (2002). *Learning theories, A to Z*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

Nagel, M. (2012). Student learning. In R. Churchill, P. Ferguson, S. Godinho, N. Johnson, & A. Keddie. (Eds.). *Teaching making a difference* (Vol. 2, pp. 74-88). Milton, QLD: Wiley Publishing.

Learning Is Influenced By Social Interactions

This is the most important concept in the sociocultural theory of education: we learn *through social interactions*.

This concept differentiates itself significantly from the 'cognitive-constructivist' ideas of Piaget.



Piaget saw children as 'lone scientists' who learn by exploring their environment and absorbing information. By contrast, sociocultural theorists (like Lev Vygotsky) see learning as fundamentally shaped through interactions between children and the adults in their environment. This starts from early childhood and keeps going – right up to adulthood!

Let me repeat this difference, as it's so important:

- **Cognitive-Constructivist Theory (Piaget, Froebel and Montessori):** Parents and teachers (usually) stand back and let children learn in solitude in resource-rich environments;
- **Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, Bruner and Rogoff):** Parents and teachers usually interact with children to guide their learning.

In other words, there is a *bigger role of the teacher or parent* in sociocultural theory than perhaps any other educational theory.

[Related: 5 Examples of Cognitive Tools for Teaching and Learning](#)

Learning Is Influenced By Culture

Above I told you that sociocultural theorists think that learning is influenced by social interactions.

The logical extension of this belief is that children learn differently depending on their social environments.

Let's compare a child learning in a traditional Indigenous Australian culture vs. in a contemporary Western classroom.



In the traditional Indigenous Australian culture, children aren't sitting in a classroom – no way! They're off learning on the job. The sons are learning to hunt kangaroo with their fathers while the daughters are off learning to hunt turtles with their mothers.

In the contemporary Western classroom, children are sitting in classrooms learning to [read books](#) day in, day out.

How might these children's learning differ?

The traditional Indigenous children will probably be fantastic at throwing spears and spotting animal footprints in the soil. They might be very good at walking silently to get close to animals, and they may even be very good at creating clothing out of animal skins.

The contemporary Western children will probably be very good at reading books and standing patiently in line-ups before entering the classroom. But if they end up out in the Australian outback on their own? They'll probably starve.

What does this example teach us about learning development?

Well, the key point is this: children's development will differ depending on their culture.



This means that Piaget's universal stages of children's cognitive development may be a bit wrong. Children may develop very, very differently around the world!

Key Theoretical Concepts In The Sociocultural Perspective

There are many, many theoretical concepts within the sociocultural theory. This is because this theory is one of the most influential educational theories of the past 50 years.

Below, I outline what I see as the most important terms and concepts you need to use in order to show deep knowledge of the theory.

Let's get started by looking at our key theorists:

Key Sociocultural Theorists

Okay, now we know the central pillars of the theory, let's look at our three key theorists: Vygotsky, Bruner and Rogoff.

- **Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934):** The most well-known sociocultural theorist, Vygotsky developed many key terms like 'Zone of Proximal Development' and 'More Knowledgeable Other' (see below). He wrote the influential text *Thinking and speech* (1934) (also published as '*Thought and Language*') and had a collection of his other works published under the title *Mind in Society* in 1978. Despite his scholarly



work taking place in 1920s and 30s Russia, his ideas only gained popularity in the West in the 1980s.

- **Jerome Bruner (1915 – 2016):** Following the lead of Vygotsky, Bruner continued to prosecute the argument that language shapes thought. He worked in Harvard and Oxford Universities and wrote extensively on the role of the parent and teacher in influencing language. He videotaped interactions between parents and children to examine how children imitate and internalize their parents' language. In 1983 he wrote *Child's talk: Learning to Use Language*. His most influential contribution today remains the concept of 'scaffolding', discussed below.
- **Barbara Rogoff (1950 – now):** [Barbara Rogoff](#) is one of the most influential female developmental psychologists of all time, representing a break from the all-male establishment that resulted from gender bias in the academies of the 20th. She completed a PhD exploring language development amongst the Tz'utujil Mayan people of Guatemala. Through her works, she reinforced the idea that language develops in unique cultural contexts. Her key contributions to sociocultural theory include the terms 'cognitive apprenticeships' and 'guided participation', discussed below.

You Need To Know The Term 'Internalization'

One of the most important terms in the sociocultural theory is 'internalization'. It's a term Vygotsky used to explain how we learn.



It is really quite a simple concept: we internalize the knowledge that we observe, see and interact with. The more we're exposed to a certain way of thinking, the more we internalize those thought patterns.

This is different to Piaget's view, because Piaget didn't say much about how we were influenced by others. He didn't think we internalized others' ideas. Rather, he thought we came up with ideas all by ourselves.

Let me break this difference down again:

- **Vygotsky's Internalization:** Our ways of thinking are influenced by the thought patterns of those around us;
- **Piaget (not a sociocultural theorist):** Our ways of thinking happen independent from the people around us.

This makes sense, when you think about it. If you're born into a Christian family, you're more likely to come to believe in Jesus than if you aren't. If you're born into an atheist family, you're more likely to internalize atheist ideas and grow up atheist, etc.

So, if you're a university student reading this – I recommend one thing: when you're [writing your essay](#) on the sociocultural theory of education, use the term 'Internalization' when explaining what sociocultural theory is. Explain that we develop our ways of thinking by internalizing the thought patterns of others.

Then, cite Vygotsky (APA Style below):

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language* (A. Kozulin, trans.). Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Active Learners Co-Construct Knowledge



If you read the above points, you'd be forgiven to think that sociocultural theorists think children are [passive](#) learners who just internalize every thought of the people around them.

For sociocultural theorists, this isn't the whole story.

Sociocultural theorists believe we can influence each other.

So, I'm not just going to passively internalize and absorb the knowledge around me. I'm going to mull it over, think about it, and propose new ideas.

I might share those new thoughts and ideas with the people around me and they might think "Yeah, you've made a really good point. I'll change my thinking a little based on your point, too."

There's two important things I've just highlighted here:

1. **Learning is Active:** Socio-cultural theorists believe we have 'agency'. This means that we are capable of thinking about things and rejecting some ideas. We work best when we talk things through and come to informed conclusions based both on what we hear from others and our own internal logic;



2. **Knowledge is Co-constructed:** Sociocultural theorists believe we can influence *each other*. So, as groups in classrooms, we can all share our ideas together and come up with an agreed 'truth' or set of facts after we've all thrown in our two cents and influenced one another's ideas.

'Language Is A Tool'

One of Vygotsky's key ideas is that language helps us learn.

Again, this is in clear contrast to Piaget's idea that language is merely the expression of our learning.

Here's a few examples of how we use language as a tool for our own learning:

- Writing down our thoughts on a pros and cons list;
- Reading out loud to help us remember the words better;
- Telling ourselves what to do next. We might say "get up!" out loud to psych ourselves into standing up.

The next point expands on this by highlighting one of Vygotsky's key arguments: that as our language skills get more complex, we internalize our language.

Private Speech Is How We Think!

To Vygotsky, language is so integral to learning that we may not be very good at thinking anything in much detail, really, if we don't have command over language.



Vygotsky observed that children often speak out loud when thinking. They might just blurt out their thoughts as a matter of course. Next time you're watching a 2 or 3-year-old, observe how they might randomly start saying things: "Duck!", "Look there!", "Water!" as they go about their lives.

As we get older, we manage the skill of internalizing our language. This is probably most evident in reading. We begin by reading out loud before mumbling the words and then, eventually, reading in silence.

Here, Vygotsky believes that language hasn't disappeared – language remains central to our thinking – but it has become *private speech*.

Interestingly, as I'm learning Spanish, I've become very conscious of this. I realize that I still *think* in English and have to translate my *thoughts* into Spanish. Hopefully one day I will master the mental tools of the Spanish language and learn to think in Spanish, too.

The Zone Of Proximal Development

Perhaps Vygotsky's most famous concept, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the ideal learning 'zone'.

Vygotsky has three 'zones' of learning:



1. What we can do alone;
2. What we can do with the help of others;
3. What is far too hard for us right now.

According to Vygotsky, the middle zone: what we can do with the help of others, is the zone where learning happens.

I like to think of the ZPD as the Goldilocks principle for learning:

- If you give a task that's too easy, well, not too much learning will occur;
- If you give a task that's too hard, not much learning will occur either;
- If you give a task that's not too easy or not too hard, the student will experience the best cognitive development.

This idea is great for teachers. It shows us where we need to focus our teaching. It's our job to provide tasks that fit right inside a student's ZPD.

To do this, we need to know our students very well. We need to conduct pre-tests of their [prior knowledge](#) to figure out what they need to know next: something that we think is within their grasp if only we give them a little help along the way.

Pretend Play Is Amazing For The ZPD

Play. Play as a child. Play as an adult. Play, explore, and play some more.

Why?



Well, according to Vygotsky, when we play we often work right within that zone of proximal development.

Think about a child playing: they might mimic their parents answering phone calls, sweeping the floor or putting on lipstick.

When they're doing these play tasks, these children are practicing new tasks that are just beyond their grasp: they can't *really* answer a phone call. But we might play with them and say: "Pick up the phone" and they'll hold the phone to their ear and say "Hello!" and we'll clap and laugh with them.

By playing, the child is practicing those just-too-hard tasks.

Even as adults we do this regularly. I might use a game simulation to practice how it feels to fly a plane before giving it a go myself. I might use 3D computer design software to see whether my ideas for my kitchen renovation will work out properly.

Or, I might practice playing baseball with my friends before the game on the weekend. Here, I'm using fun and low-risk play-like activities to prepare myself

for 'the big game' when I have to perform those tasks that are just a little hard right now!



Related:

- [Pros and Cons of Play-Based Learning](#)
- [Benefits of Risky Play in Early Childhood](#)

More Knowledgeable Others

Any student of sociocultural theories of education needs to know this term.

Vygotsky developed the term '[more knowledgeable other](#)' to explain how learning occurs through social interaction.

He thought that the best sorts of social influences for students' learning are people who are ... well, more knowledgeable than us!

For our students, we are their more knowledgeable other.

For children, their first and most important more knowledgeable other is their parents.

Other more knowledgeable others might be peers: older siblings or friends who are just a little bit smarter than us.



A more knowledgeable other is a really great positive influence because they can help us move more into our ZPD. If we're working with someone not as smart as us, they might not be as good for our learning. They can't extend us quite as much as our more knowledgeable other.

A good idea for teachers is to pair lower level students up with the top students so the top student can influence the lower-level student and help them move through the zone of proximal development.

A good more knowledgeable other will slowly release control of the learning from the teacher to the student. They might start by modelling information, then doing the task as a pair, then facilitating the learner while they do the task alone. This is often called guided practice or the [I Do, We Do, You Do method](#):

[>>> Related Post: The I Do, We Do, You Do method of Scaffolding](#)

Scaffolding

This term is usually attributed to Vygotsky. But that's a myth. The person who came up with the term 'Scaffolding' is Bruner.

When we think of [instructional scaffolding](#) we usually think of those ugly structures that builders put up around buildings during construction.

The point of scaffolds is to help build the building. They're there when the building is being built to help hold it up and make it easy for builders to construct

it.



But, when the building can stand on its own and is ready for the world ... builders take the scaffolding away!

In just the same way, *instructional scaffolds* can be used for students.

Scaffolding for learning is all about helping children learn concepts that are just too hard to do on their own.

In other words, scaffolding is what we do to help children move through their ZPD.

Some ways we can scaffold learning include:

- **Modelling tasks in front of students** – demonstrate how to complete the task before asking students to give it a go themselves to give them a chance to see how it's done.
- **Open-ended questioning** – requires students to respond in full sentences, think deeply about their answers, and justify their response.
- **Breaking tasks down into manageable steps** – helps decrease overwhelm and see a path to success. After they complete each step, ask the students to do the full task without assistance.
- **Providing visual aids** – visual aids can act as cues to help students work through a task. Consider placing visual aids strategically around the

classroom for students to draw on when necessary.



- **Directing attention** – point students' attention to important elements of the task to keep students on track.

Can you think of any more ways you scaffold learning? Provide your ideas in the comments section at the end of this article!

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

One theoretical idea that very closely aligns with the social constructivist approach is Bronfenbrenner's [Ecological Systems Theory](#).

According to Bronfenbrenner, learning is influenced in four different socio-historical spheres: the micro, meso, macro and chronosystems. Let's take a look at each:

- **Microsystem:** The microsystem is the student's immediate environment composed of their parents, siblings and other people they have direct contact with on a daily basis. These people are some of the strongest social influences on a student's learning.
- **Mesosystem:** The next step out is the mesosystem, which represents the relationships between the microsystems. The ways parents interact with one another, and the relationships between parents and schools, have an effect on the student who is observing and learning from the behaviors around them.



- **Exosystem:** The exosystem is the local environment that a student may not have direct daily contact with, but still influences them at a personal level. It might be Mum and Dad's workplace which are putting stress on them, which they bring into the home after work. It might be local political decisions or the local church.
- **Macrosystem:** The macrosystem represents broader society and culture. The forms of government, cultural values and national pass times all have an impact on a child as they grow.
- **Chronosystem:** The chronosystem is the historical time and place in which a student learns. Our learning today – with [communication technologies](#) and internet connections – does a great deal to influence how we learn. 200 years ago, learning would have been far different!

I could delve very deep into this theory, but that's for a whole different article! If you want to learn more about Bronfenbrenner, try out [this post](#) from the Mental Help website.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura's Bobo Doll Experiment



Another theorist who is very closely connected to the sociocultural approach to teaching and learning is Albert Bandura.

Bandura believes that learning essentially happens through observation. By observing others, we can learn.

Bandura uses Vygotsky's ideas of the importance of private speech for learning, but calls it 'self-talk'. He sees learning happening through three processes:

- **Observation** (**'[vicarious learning](#)'**): we learn through watching others and imitating their practices. When it involves learning about others by watching them be punished, we can call it [vicarious punishment](#);
- **Language** (**'symbolic processes'**): we learn through communicating with others; and
- **Self-talk** (**'self-regulation'**): we learn through internal dialogue and reflection.

Bandura's work is perhaps best represented through the bobo doll experiment, which is shown in the video above.



According to this experiment, children saw adults' physically aggressive actions towards dolls, and then later tended to repeat those aggressive actions against the doll. Here, we can see children learn and imitate the actions of people around them.

Read More: [15 Social Learning Theory Examples](#)

Cognitive Apprenticeships

The two terms 'cognitive apprenticeships' and 'situated learning' are *basically* the same terms.

[Lave and Wenger](#) are two of the most influential theorists for this discussion.

To give you a fly-by of these ideas: they mean that learning appears to happen really quite well when people are paired up with 'experts' in a craft.

The most obvious version of this is trade apprenticeships. A young person – maybe 18 years old – might start a plumbing apprenticeship.

How do you think they'll learn?

Well, they'll follow an experienced plumber around and learn from him as he does his craft. A pipe breaks: and the apprentice watches and learns as he

watches the expert fix it. Two pipes of different sizes need to be connected: the apprentice observes again to learn how to manage this situation.



When multiple people come together to work on a craft, they're called a 'community of practice'. When a young person joins that community of practice and learns-by-doing, what happens? They learn from the experts!

Guided Participation

Look, I'm a huge fan of Barbara Rogoff.

Like, really ... she based her PhD on learning within Guatemalan Mayan cultures. She is THAT cool!

Okay ... back to business.

Rogoff uses the sociocultural idea of cognitive apprenticeships (see above) and applies it across cultures.

She sees cognitive apprenticeships as a form of learning that seems very natural in non-Western cultures. This goes for the Mayan culture she studied in Guatemala, but also many Australian Indigenous cultures, too. I'm sure it's common in many Indigenous cultures around the world.

By contrast, we in the West seem to separate the adults *doing* things with the children *learning* things.



I mean, think about it: we literally send the adults off to work and the children off to school. We place them in classrooms with four walls and teach them through direct instruction rather than *guided participation*.

Why shouldn't children learn by participating in life? Why shouldn't they go to work with the adults and learn how to do the tasks the adults do?

Well, I probably just opened a huge series of new thoughts in your mind about the pros and cons of each approach.

But hey, I want you to think and learn and come to your own conclusion and ... most importantly ... find this stuff interesting enough that you think about it in your car on the way to work tomorrow.

So you can decide on the merits of the Mayan approach vs. the Western approach tomorrow in your car!

Distributed Cognition

Distributed cognition is a concept from sociocultural theory that explains how, if learning is social, then we can *share* our thinking!

Distributed cognition is defined by [Busby \(2001, p. 238\)](#) as:



“Solving problems by collaboration, where none of the collaborators individually can have a full appreciation of the problem”

Think about it this way: a task is too hard for one person to do. There are just too many moving parts.

But, what if you got four people together and shared the task? Could you complete the task now? Maybe different people in the team have different packets of knowledge, and together the task can be achieved.

Distributed cognition also works with computers. You might use a calculator or excel worksheet to help you to complete a task.

This means that you can offload all of the big data analytical tasks to the computer and focus on the [higher-order thinking](#) tasks like problem solving and making strategic decisions.

Here, then, social learning is becoming not just about people interacting with other people. Now, computers can have a social impact on our learning, too!

Advantages And Disadvantages Of The Sociocultural Theory Of Learning



Like all theories, sociocultural theory has many positive and negative aspects. The theory has blindspots and limitations which you need to know about in order to minimize any harmful effects in the classroom.

But, on balance, it also has some amazingly useful elements that you should use regularly in your teaching.

So, let's take a look at the key benefits and limitations of the sociocultural theory for teachers.

Advantages

Sociocultural theory is one of the most useful theories for education. Most of us use it every day in classrooms!

Here are a few of the benefits of the theory for educators and learners:

- **You can leverage multiple experts' knowledge:** One of my favorite aspects of sociocultural theory is that students learn from more than just the teacher. If we believe that learning through social interactions is ideal, then we would value bringing experts and practitioners into the classroom. You might bring in a firefighter to teach about fire safety or a soldier to speak on the importance of Remembrance Day.
- **It can be inclusive of multiple cultural perspectives:** Sociocultural theorists understand people of different cultures learn in different ways.



What does this mean for learning? Well, it means that you as a teacher would want to learn what your students' cultural perspectives are and include them in your teaching. If a student comes from a storytelling culture, you might want to bring their stories into learning scenarios. This not only helps people of minority cultures in your classroom; but it helps all children learn to respect cultural difference.

- **Differentiation is embedded into the theory:** Differentiation is a [student-centered pedagogical](#) concept that highlights the importance of changing up teaching for each student. Some students need easier tasks, some students need harder tasks. Theories like behaviorism [fail to differentiate](#). By contrast, sociocultural theory is very strong on differentiation due to the idea of ZPD.

Weaknesses

Teachers also need to be aware of the many limitations of sociocultural theory. Why? Well, because we should realize that different theories are needed in different circumstances.

Social learning isn't ideal in all situations!

So, here are some limitations that seem to be inherent in this theory:

- **It doesn't take into account children's emotions:** The theory of humanism does a much, much better job of taking into account children's emotions than sociocultural theory. In fact, the socioculturalists are



almost completely silent on the idea that children's emotions impact their learning. This is a big oversight.

- **Sociocultural classrooms can be extremely noisy:** This is my biggest quarrel with social learning environments. Your classroom becomes so noisy and hard to manage that you need to be a very effective educator. You need to teach your students self-regulation and ensure students both say on task and keep their voices down so they don't distract others.
- **Shy, timid or introverted students may struggle:** I've found many students who are shy or prefer learning in isolation have a lot of trouble in social learning environments. As a pretty introverted person myself, I get very exhausted in these environments and feel I could have learnt much more effectively in silence and solitude.
- **Students with sensory challenges find it hard:** I've had many students who struggle with the high-energy, noisy and active environment of a sociocultural classroom. The students I am particularly concerned about are students with autism who can really be set off by these challenging environments.
- **Differentiating learning for ZPD is very time consuming with big groups:** As a teacher in social learning spaces, I can find it hard to differentiate my content so that students are all learning within their ZPD. To differentiate content 30 times is unrealistic. The best I can achieve is [splitting students into table groups](#).

[Related Post: What is the Importance of Emotions in Education?](#)

How Is The Sociocultural Theory Used In Classrooms Today?

Before we finish up, you may be wondering how we can apply this theory to practice.



So, below, I'll outline a few of the key ways sociocultural approaches to learning and teaching are applied in education today. You can use these examples to implement these strategies in the classroom, or if you're a student, use examples like these in your essay to grow your grades:

Examples Of Sociocultural Theory

Here are four common [examples of sociocultural theory](#) in classrooms:

- **Table [Group Layouts](#) are used to Support Social Interaction:** By placing students into table groups, they are placed in situations where they can look at one another. This encourages them to discuss and interact while learning. You will commonly find table group settings in contemporary classroom, particularly in the early years.
- **Guests are Invited into the Classroom:** Inviting guests into the classroom encourages social interactions between learners and experts in the 'real world'. Teacher will often bring in key experts on the topics they're learning (often called 'incursions') to help children learn through interactions with real-life experts.
- **Parent-Teacher Collaborations bring Culture into the Classroom:** Teachers are widely encouraged these days to interact with and collaborate with parents on their teaching. By consulting with parents, teachers can learn more about their students' cultures and bring those



desirable cultural values and culturally-specific ways of learning into the classroom.

- **Play-Based Learning is Common in Early Childhood Centers:** Play-based learning is one of the [most effective forms of learning](#). Through play, children use language to interact with one another and help to move each other through their ZPD. Often, peers in play situations are the best ‘more knowledgeable others’ who teach their friends new ways of thinking and doing tasks.

Can you think of more applications of sociocultural theory? Add them to the comments below and I'll add them to the official list in the post!

Scholarly Sources

I always tell my readers to cite scholarly sources in their essays rather than this article. Scholarly sources will always get you better grades! ([See here for an explanation of what a scholarly source is.](#))

Here is a list of scholarly sources used when compiling this article. They're all in APA style. If you need to convert it to another referencing style, [see my post on scholarly referencing.](#)

Once you've used the below sources, I recommend [looking on the web for more scholarly sources](#) to add to your essay.

Bates, B. (2019). *Learning theories simplified*. London: SAGE.



Duchesne, S., McMaugh, A., Bochner, S., & Krause, K. L. (2013). *Educational psychology: for learning and teaching* (4th ed.). South Melbourne, VIC: Cengage Learning.

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Dr. Chris Drew is the founder of the Helpful Professor. He holds a PhD in education and has published over 20 articles in scholarly journals. He is the former editor of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education.



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