

Learning to Teach in a Constructivist Teacher Education Environment

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Abstract

The author presents her process of understanding what “constructivism” means, and how it applies to teaching in a Language Arts course for pre-service teachers. Three specific constructivist strategies employed in the course are explained.

Introduction

In educational environments, *learning* is typically associated with students and the tasks they engage in during instructional time. However, what happens when the teacher is the learner? Situated in a new environment, and faced with the task of learning about an unfamiliar educational philosophy, what process does a teacher engage in to learn about such concepts? This narrative describes my journey of learning about constructivism as I embarked on teaching in a constructivist environment. I will also provide specific examples of practices from my classroom.

Learning to Apply Constructivist Theory at Niagara University

A few years ago, I was hired as an adjunct instructor at Niagara University in an Education Department that is framed within a constructivist perspective of learning. Education course syllabi acknowledge this framework by stating, “This course is framed within a constructivist perspective which embraces the belief that knowledge is created by people and influenced by their values and culture” (Niagara University, Department of Teacher Education, 2005, p. 1). In my prior experiences as an elementary school reading teacher and University instructor, I had taken an active learning approach to teaching, yet I was not sure how this compared to the “constructivist approach”

professed by Niagara University. Having little knowledge of the term “constructivism,” I spent much of the summer prior to that first fall semester trying to understand what this concept was, and how it applied to the teaching of pre-service teachers in the Language Arts courses I was appointed to teach. My inquiry about constructivism led me to search online resources and professional publications (e.g., Brooks & Brooks, 1993, 1999; Olsen, 2000; Richardson, 1997) and an exploration of Piagetian theory (e.g. De Lisi & Golobek, 1999), which provided me with an appreciation of this theory of learning.

It became clear to me that “constructivism” has to do with *constructing*, or *making*, meaning. Under “Method of Teaching” in the Niagara University course syllabi, it states “Learning is viewed as a developmental process that is enhanced when students learn to view problems and issues from multiple perspectives, constructing knowledge from their own interpretations of numerous pieces of evidence. Teaching approaches are directed toward open-ended inquiry, critical thinking and reflection, and social interaction” (Niagara University, Department of Teacher Education, 2005, p. 1). Therefore, I realized that to teach within this framework, I would need to engage students in a process of constructing knowledge based on integrating what they already know with new information and experiences they encounter. This was similar to my previous active learning approach, but it pushed me to think about helping my pre-service teachers *challenge* their existing knowledge, and *reflect* on their new learning. I also realized I needed to allow opportunities for students to learn from each other. Through what ended up being a very constructivist learning process, I blended *my*

existing knowledge with new information I was reading and developed my own notion of what constructivism is and how it looks in a classroom of pre-service teachers.

Over the course of four years, and currently as a full-time Visiting Professor, I continue to adjust, modify, and mold my views of constructivism and my personal philosophy of teaching. I believe that I, as the teacher, do not dispense knowledge to the students in my classroom, but rather I am a facilitator to help students construct their own knowledge. I am essentially a mediator in the classroom (Kozulin, 2003). This facilitation and mediation can be carried out in a number of different ways including activating learners' existing schema, encouraging them to examine their beliefs, and then facilitating their construction of new understandings by incorporating fresh information and experiences with existing knowledge.

My role as the teacher is to create an environment where students can interact and learn from each other, texts, technology, and personal practices. Creating this environment encompasses everything from the arrangement of furniture (for example, groups rather than rows of desks) to the activities presented (interactive rather than lecture-based) and to the forms of assessment implemented (open-ended, higher-level thinking projects rather than multiple-choice tests). My current work environment has provided me with opportunities to learn about constructivism in a variety of ways, including collaborating with colleagues, learning from veteran teachers, reflecting on feedback from students, attending workshops and conferences, and continually reading and doing research.

Constructivist Strategies in Language Arts Studies

Based on my personal beliefs about how students learn, I have incorporated several constructivist learning strategies in my courses in Language Arts studies. I will discuss three of these in detail: activating background knowledge, examining personal experiences, and collaborative/cooperative working groups.

Activating Prior Knowledge. Before introducing a topic or concept, I believe it is imperative to activate students' existing knowledge of the subject so they have a framework in which to connect new information. This can be done in several ways, including asking questions, using anticipation guides, or Know-Want-Learn (Ogle, 1986) charts. By simply asking relevant and thought-provoking questions, I can help students begin to draw upon their appropriate schema. For example, if the topic of discussion is phonemic awareness, I could ask students, "What are some nursery rhymes you know?" or "What type of rhyming games do you remember from your childhood?" An anticipation guide for this same topic may include true/false statements such as, "Phonemic awareness is an indicator of a child's future reading ability" or "Phonemic awareness involves making connections between written letters and sounds." A typical K-W-L chart would begin with "What do you **know** about phonemic awareness" and "What do you **want** to know," and conclude with "What have you **learned**".

Students typically respond positively to these strategies of activating prior knowledge. Once they realize that they already come to the classroom with some background knowledge, students tend to feel more confident, and unfamiliar terms become less intimidating. Phonemic awareness is a perfect example of this. While

many pre-service teachers may not have heard of this term, all are familiar with rhyming. Once they realize that the two are related, they have a frame of reference for incorporating new information. As a result, student engagement increases, and students take a more active role in their learning.

In addition to building confidence and engagement, another benefit of activating prior knowledge is to dispel inaccurate prior knowledge. Often, my students will believe something about a topic, but it turns out that their existing schema was incorrect. During the process of activating prior knowledge, I encourage students to challenge their prior knowledge and reflect on their beliefs. Each of the above strategies (and indeed there are many more) help students draw their prior knowledge to the forefront of their minds, build confidence, improve student engagement, and promote critical thinking.

Examining Personal Experiences. The pre-service teachers in my class keep a journal or notebook that we refer to as a “Learning Log.” The learning logs provide a written record of their knowledge and experiences of various concepts addressed throughout the semester. Students use the learning logs to respond to questions, do a “quick write,” and explore their thoughts and experiences. They often share with fellow classmates and discuss similarities and differences. This written record allows individuals the opportunity to reflect upon, think deeply about, and analyze their experiences. Students are constantly encouraged to connect theory and beliefs to practical teaching applications. This encourages students to make connections

between what we are discussing in class and what they see in their classroom placements, as well as what practices they will use in their future teaching careers.

My experience has shown that students respond to these “quick writes” more positively than if I were to ask them to write a “reflection” about their experiences, yet both provide students with an avenue for thinking critically. A quick write appears to be a less daunting task, and is one that is completed in class. For example, when we study the writing process, I ask students to do a quick write about their memories of writing instruction in elementary school and their feelings about writing. Students spend five to ten minutes writing, and then share their thoughts with a partner or small group. During discussions, students are encouraged to add to or modify their own response, based on what they hear from others. We then examine their responses in light of how their experiences, beliefs, and values may affect their future teaching of writing. Since we refer back to these writings and thoughts throughout the semester, students are encouraged to continually build connections and reconstruct their knowledge.

Collaborative/Cooperative Learning. Each student completes a unit plan as part of their coursework in my class. This unit plan gives them the opportunity to put into practice the concepts, strategies and ideas they have been constructing throughout the semester. A large component of the planning for this unit plan involves collaborative feedback from peers. As Bakhtin (1981) notes, dialogue enhances meaning-making. As a means to provide an opportunity for students to engage in dialogue with one another, both in and out of class, students are placed in groups of 5 to 6 people. They are responsible for posting their unit plan outlines and ideas on an online discussion

board, and then responding to their group members' postings. Students analyze each others' ideas, provide feedback and suggestions, and then reflect on their own ideas. The students act as teachers to each other. Students learn from each other and are active participants in the meaning making process.

The online venue provides students with the opportunity to take time to reflect before responding, as well as giving equal opportunity to students who tend to be quiet during class discussions. The same online groups also meet in class to respond face to face to further this dialogue. During in-class discussions, students have the chance to ask clarifying questions, and delve deeper into ideas that may have been too complex for online chat.

Both online and in-class collaboration encourages students to evaluate, clarify, and expand their thinking. Providing both opportunities allows for differences in learning styles, while accomplishing the same outcome of cooperative learning. Students have responded positively to one or both forms of communication, and often mention the benefit of sharing ideas with others. The final unit plans of students who have had a rich dialogue among peers tend to be more thoughtfully developed than those from less engaged groups.

Continual Learning

The constructivist practices of activating background knowledge, examining personal experiences, and collaborative/cooperative learning are examples of the constructivist learning environment I have developed since coming to Niagara University to assist my pre-service teachers in understanding language arts concepts through the use of constructivist strategies. My hope is that knowledge constructed in my

classroom is not the end of learning, but rather the beginning of a dynamic cycle of thinking about teaching and practices. This process of learning and constructing knowledge does not end when the “bell rings” at the end of class, or even at the end of the semester, but rather is an ongoing process throughout the teacher candidates’ careers, just as it has been, and continues to be, in mine. My understanding of constructivism is still evolving, and I am excited to see how my practices will change and improve as I continue learning to teach in a constructivist environment.

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