Considerations about "Pre-programming" – A Canadian Student's Reflections on Learning about Constructivism

L. Christopher McCafferty, Graduate Student, Niagara University

[Editor's Note: This is the first of two articles by Canadian graduate students in Niagara University's Teacher Education Program. They were asked by members of the *JPACTe* editorial board to reflect on the differences they have found between their former schooling and the constructivist approach to teacher education taken by Niagara University's faculty.]

Abstract

The author, a graduate student from Canada, reflects on his recent introduction to Niagara University's Teacher Education Program. The program's rationale is based on constructivism, which differs dramatically from the author's prior experience with schooling and teaching. The article describes some of the University's approaches to teacher education, along with the author's reactions to it based on his own background.

Introduction

In February of 2008, I was weighing my teacher's college options, trying to figure out which school best suited my goals and intentions. At this point, I had not even heard of NU, let alone considered it as an option for my studies. Towards the end of the month, I attended a presentation by NU's Director of Graduate Education, Evan Pierce, at a school near my hometown north of Toronto. The cohort program at Niagara seemed to fit what I wanted from an education degree. First, the amount of time spent in schools (150 hours as a teaching assistant, and 14 weeks of practicum) would facilitate guided opportunities for 'real-world' application; second, the intimate class settings create a forum where peer exchanges of ideas are easy, encouraged, and

enriching; and last, the 'non-competitive' approach, inherent in constructivist theory, helps to build one's confidence before heading into a new career.

Even with all this information beforehand, the program has not been what I expected it to be. My expectations were that classes were going to be run like a typical university program: lectures, notes, readings, essays, exams, and repeat until completion. This has hardly been the case. We have been fully submersed in a constructivist learning environment, which has been a fantastic model and experience for teachers-in-training. I knew nothing of constructivist teaching prior to beginning the program. I am hooked now, and I continually realize how much the cohort program at Niagara, and constructivist theory, are developing my thought process by reconstructing, and refining my 'pre-programming.'

Pre-programming as an example of difference

The concept of 'pre-programming' has been on my mind since the first day.   At orientation, my class participated in an exercise where we drew a character: 'Chris.' Seeing nearly the entire class label this fictitious individual as 'male,' put a spin on the concept of gender, and made me think about my inherent stereotypes and generalizations. Our upbringings, education, and life-experiences have all played a part in shaping our 'pre-programming;' they forge the frameworks that we work within, and are taught how to use. In essence, I like to think of 'pre-programming' as 'the ways in which we have been taught - or learned how - to approach challenges, and manage ourselves during 'unfamiliar' situations.' How we handle stress, work with people and situations, and teach ourselves are all aspects of our 'pre-programming.'

Many of us were raised in very rigid educational environments, which may not have necessarily allowed us to blossom in a direction that suited us – we simply forged ourselves in the methods of the day. Nonetheless, realizing, understanding, and being able to reconstruct our 'pre-programming' is a quality skill that few are taught how to do, or are able to do. I have felt that constructivism really aims to teach this skill. One of my professors always emphasized in class, "if I got you to think, then I've done my job – and when you're done reflecting on your thoughts and actions, it's time to leave the profession." It's a thought/comment I will never forget. I have not stopped thinking since beginning this program. By using considerable amounts of reflective practice, authentic assessments, choice, and cooperative learning strategies, amongst other constructivist strategies, our professors at NU uniquely deconstruct our 'pre-programmed' thoughts, and ask questions that consistently challenge what we know. These challenges, coupled with the support and assistance from faculty members and colleagues, create a new series of thoughts within each individual: the student(s).

Impacts of the Constructivist Approach

The simple act of discussing ideas in a newspaper article, or writing a test as a group, helps to develop a process of 'perpetual thought.' We are picking apart the qualities/knowledge each one of us possesses, openly receiving the ideas of others, and forming new thoughts/ideas, ultimately resulting in the development of individual and group learning. Our professors have gone to great lengths to create this thought-provoking environment by carefully planning group collaborations, encouraging reflective analysis of our own work, and thoroughly using positive reinforcement. These

three acts have helped each one of us develop our own thought processes – one that works best for us – and given us the confidence to thrive and be successful in our educational and professional ventures.

The constructivist approach to teaching and thinking is having a profound impact on me. It is reshaping my 'pre-programmed' notions of education and the paradigms of teaching. We experience on a daily basis how our class at NU evolves and grows together as a community that is filled with unique individualistic talents. We think, learn and grow from the support and guidance of our professors and colleagues. Being a student here is helping me to develop my thought processes, as well as playing a major part in the growth of my personal intellect. The whole process simply begs me to ask: "Is this not what we want of our students, a cooperative community of learners and thinkers?"

With that in mind, it becomes the duty of an educator, to get to thoroughly understand their students: what are their capabilities, different areas of strength, interests, preferred learning styles, and backgrounds? In effect, modelling the experience of being a constructivist student, and the success it has had on each of us. This individualized 'student-knowledge' creates a platform for community development that is tailored to the specific needs of each student: carefully designed cooperative learning groups, specifically designed engaging activities, allowing choice to meet individual preferences, and differentiated instruction to accommodate for the different types of intelligence and learning capabilities. Having these elements present in a classroom certainly has a profound effect on how a student can manipulate, and construct information – within their 'pre-programming' – to make it their own.