

# **Combining Constructivist and Empowerment Theories in the Preparation of Educational Leaders**

**M. Alannah Fitzgerald  
St. Lawrence University**

## **Abstract**

The author combines two educational theories to structure pedagogy in St. Lawrence University's Graduate Program in Educational Leadership – empowerment theory and constructivist theory. Empowerment Theory deals with the dimension of multi-disciplinary participatory competence as originally defined by Kieffer (1984). Constructivist Theory deals with 1) critical engagement with subject matter, 2) participatory modes of assessment and evaluation, and 3) attention to affective dimensions of learning (Flynn, Mesibov, Vermette, & Smith, 2004). While students in the program continually report satisfaction with this combination of theoretical approaches to pedagogy, further research is being designed to investigate its impacts on program outcomes.

## **Introduction**

This paper illustrates the ways in which Empowerment and Constructivist Theory converge in the Educational Leadership Program at St. Lawrence University, where the author serves as program coordinator. It will also illustrate the importance of these two interlocking theoretical frameworks and how they can be employed by educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Precise examples of the meaning and implementation of practices based on both theoretical paradigms are explored. The author proposes that more attention should be given to these practices as they relate to the preparation of educational leaders.

## **Constructivist Theory in the Educational Leadership Program**

As a theory of learning first described by Dewey (1916) and subsequently underscored by theorists and researchers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, constructivism is not a vehicle for allowing students to decide what is to be taught, but rather it enables them to participate in the production of knowledge in the classroom (Flynn, Vermette,

Mesibov, & Smith, 2004). A social cognition learning model emphasizes that culture is a primary determinant in individual human development. A student learns through interaction with problems and develops what Vygotskians call the tools of intellectual interpretations, which consequently become an essential part the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978).

The St. Lawrence University Graduate Program in Educational Leadership is structured on the constructivist belief that students gain knowledge when they are actively engaged in the learning process. Upon becoming attuned to this process of engagement, students develop the tools to draw their own conclusions and take effective actions. Material must be internalized before it becomes knowledge. An ever-expanding body of research suggests that preparation for educational leadership positions must be responsive to current problems in public education (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Marzano, 2005; Fullan, 2005). Development of such leadership skills and practices can be greatly enhanced by constructivist approaches.

There are two factors used in constructivist settings: the extent to which the social is recognized as a critical factor in cognitive development, and the way in which students are engaged with specific subject matter (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001). Some advantages of a constructivist approach are the creation of enriched environments, more interactive settings, the encouraged use of deepened inquiry and differentiated instruction, and enhanced experimentation and investigative approaches (Wolffe & McMullen, 1996). In a constructivist classroom, students examine real-life problems that connect to their prior knowledge and experience. In order to challenge students' thinking, instructors must challenge students to refine their thinking in ways to make school-related issues really come alive.

### **Constructivist Practices in Leadership Education at St. Lawrence**

In order to address the two factors of engagement with subject matter and focus on affective/social learning in my own classes, the author uses a combination of

traditional techniques such as open dialogue with invited practicing school leaders, and candid discussion of selected readings on current theory and issues, augmented by other metacognitive practices not commonly found in more traditional classrooms. As a consequence, the kinds of assessment are also adjusted. Finally, the program in leadership education at St. Lawrence University is greatly enhanced by a *Constructivist Design Conference* held each summer at the University. Each of these components of the instructional program is described below.

### **Engagement with Subject Matter**

From the constructivist standpoint, the more commonly used approaches such as discussions with practicing educators and discussions of research engage the students with the subject matter. These practices promote integration of new facts and material with pre-existing knowledge while they also help the students to make connections to the broader educational community they will eventually serve. The key to these strategies is engaging students in self-reflection and metacognition. Open-ended questioning/discussion techniques are used to prompt these activities. Journaling, visualizations, and meditations to activate engagement with new information, as described below, are also incorporated.

### **Affective/Social Aspects of Instruction**

In order to promote the social aspect of learning, students are engaged in metacognition through a combination of journaling, visualization, and meditation. These practices can help students to internalize and transform subject-specific information.

**Journaling.** This is an essential component in all of the author's theory classes as well as many of the specialization courses offered in the program. Students are asked to record a weekly log which reflects the week's research, discussions, and self-assessments. Students are required to monitor their active learning experiences, question certain theories that they have explored, and record any particular difficulties they may have encountered. Although this is a personal approach for the students, they are asked to share their thoughts with the entire

class if they are comfortable doing so. Most students welcome this opportunity and find the peer feed-back to be valuable to their learning process. The metacognitive work associated with this combination of journaling and discussion enables students to apply critical thinking skills to their own work and to the work of other students.

**Role-playing, visualization, and meditation.** Leadership as an expression of the creative process has interested the author in prior research. The concepts of spirituality in education and holistic education have also influenced the author's teaching style. These concepts place value on physical, mental and spiritual skills and knowledge, providing a setting where students can be more imaginative and creative. They also place an emphasis on inter-relationships and inter- connectedness. Miller (1997) describes holistic education as distinct from other forms of education in its goals, its attention to experimental learning, and the significance it places on relationships and primary human values. The roots of holistic education can be traced historically through its major contributors including Steiner, Montessori, Dewey, Gardner, Jung, Maslow, Rogers, and Friere. The connection is that holistic education aims at empowering students – empowerment as self-actualization – and as such, strategies for role-playing, visualizations, and meditation can help to impact student learning in ways that are compatible both with constructivist and empowerment theories.

A combination of role-playing, visualizations, and meditative strategies are employed whereby the students utilize these techniques to examine and formulate social and emotional responses to the material. These are particularly useful in reviewing leadership as an "art." Visualization exercises are introduced by the author's reading of particular case studies developed for this purpose. Students get into a comfortable position, close their eyes, and listen as these case studies are read aloud to them. Case studies are developed around a particular concept or philosophy pertaining to leadership development. At the conclusion of the reading they are instructed to remain relaxed with their eyes

closed and to reflect on the reading, paying attention to any emotional reactions that might come up as a result of the activity. After this process, the entire class then moves on to process the visualization experience verbally. During these activities, many students report a heightened sense of belonging and communication with the class as a whole, and they are able to describe how their own internalization processes make their learning more personal and meaningful.

These kinds of learner-centered teaching and learning strategies appear to promote ownership and enhanced retention of the material being explored. Students' journals often indicate that the internalization process engendered by visualizations and meditation has occurred. It is again evident in some of the assigned class projects which require incorporation of learning from a wide array of techniques employed in classes. Projects are usually launched in the theory courses by the use of inquiry questions in order to tease out more personal student responses to the material.

### **Constructivist Assessment and Evaluation**

In a constructivist classroom, traditional assessments (paper and pencil tests and papers) are often insufficient and more specific strategies must be used. This can be a challenge to the instructor because s/he must construct appropriate and often unusual assessments. Assessing students in this manner can produce unique and insightful data that can then be used to further constructivist inquiry (Cannella & Reiff, 1994). The author incorporates qualitative evaluation processes in many of the classroom experiences in which students are engaged, not only utilizing writing and speaking assignments, but also utilizing self-assessment and peer assessment. Such approaches allow students to describe and assess their own learning experiences in ways that capture the nuances of each unique experience.

Student self-assessment is of great value to the instructor and for the student learner. It provides students a metacognitive recognition of their learning experiences that can be both empowering and constructivist in nature. It also promotes internalization of the learning experience. Self-assessments are introduced at the

beginning, midpoint, and end of each semester. These activities are carried out in order to track the progression of their experience and to reveal what was most helpful in the process. Such self-assessments can provide feedback and learning on what is working and what is not, and they can also provide a developmentally effective use for the data.

The author has also found student peer evaluations to be of great value, both to the instructor and to the students. These qualitative self-assessments and peer evaluations provide rich data on the intellectual and emotional outcomes of each strategy employed. An example of peer evaluations is to have students grade each other's presentations. In these cases, students are asked to complete a rubric, provide a numerical grade, and describe qualitatively how they reached their conclusion. Student responses to the use of peer-assessment have been generally positive.

### **Annual Summer Constructivist Conference at St. Lawrence**

Each summer, St. Lawrence University hosts a Constructivist Design Conference, which provides opportunities for active engagement of approximately 300 teachers and school administrators in a five-day conference model. Using this Constructivist Design Model<sup>®</sup> (Flynn and Shuman, 2006), teams from school districts and universities work on a self-designed task involving group work, collaboration, and empowering practices that create a model learning environment. The conference provides each team with a trained facilitator to help it identify its goal for the week, practice shared decision-making to create a work plan, design rubrics to assess the team's effectiveness, accomplish its task, plan next steps, and self-reflect in journals. These participants experience what it is like to be completely immersed in an empowering, constructivist-oriented learning setting. The week-long agenda is embedded with seminars, workshops and activities centered on constructivist approaches to leadership, teaching and learning. The conference structure employs elements that support each team in accomplishing its task, and each team constructs a portfolio to document its process and final product. As such, participation in the conference is a creative process that aligns well with the constructivist and empowerment paradigms being discussed in this article.

Many graduate students in the educational leadership program at St. Lawrence enroll in a leadership course taught in collaboration with this annual summer conference. In the course, students shadow a selected team throughout the week-long conference, and they also meet daily with the instructor to accomplish their own tasks and to reflect on their experience of the conference. This allows the students to experience the full impact of the conference, which is then discussed during the conference-based course, in subsequent papers assigned about it, and also throughout the following academic year. The most significant value of conference participation for these students is to experience constructivism fully so that they can foresee how they could apply the principles of constructivism in their own work as school leaders on the job. Students continually express both enjoyment and appreciation for their learning in this summer conference course.

### **Empowerment Theory in the Educational Leadership Program**

Empowerment theory is deeply embedded in the University's approach to teaching about educational leadership. The subject of empowerment has a long history incorporating the fields of psychology, sociology, and education. Friere (1968) describes it as an intentional, ongoing process, centered in the local community, and involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group-participation/decision-making. Through such actions people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to, and control over, those resources. Rappaport (1977) discusses it as a mechanism for the generation and distribution of social power in the form of access to and control of resources. Rogers (1979) moves the concept of empowerment squarely into the realm of human meaning-making, stressing the "perceived" sense of power within a synergistic paradigm. Rappaport's (1981) exploration of the subject emphasizes the long-term processes of learning and development of individuals' rights and abilities, indicating that empowerment is directly related to social structure, and that social development and personal development are connected. Subsequently, Rappaport (1984) describes empowerment as a mechanism by which people gain

mastery over their own lives together, both in terms of process and outcome mastery (pp. 1-7), and in the same edited volume Kieffer (1984) describes empowerment as “the continuing construction of a multi-dimensional participatory competence” (p. 9) combining both cognitive and behavioral change. In essence, these authors acknowledge the distinctiveness and complexity of the learner in empowerment but also emphasize the relationship between the broader social system and the individual.

Since the mid-1980’s this multi-disciplinary viewpoint about empowerment has been fully embraced, as echoed by the Cornell Empowerment Group’s meta-study (1989) and by many subsequent authors. For example, Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) describe the practices of collaborative problem-solving and open communication as necessary components for empowerment. They add that the manifestation of competence requires resources for personal and professional learning, and that continuous assessment must occur. Because change unfolds in non-linear ways, one must interpret and use data, develop an inquiry habit of mind, become data-literate, and create an ongoing culture of inquiry (Earl, 1995). Competence here can be understood as an individual’s capacity to bring about social (or in this case educational) change, and that such change is itself a necessary element for the development of empowerment. In short, empowerment is a process in which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their own lives.

In this light, if we define empowerment as a “continuous construction of a multi-dimensional participatory competence that encompasses both cognitive and behavioral changes” (Fitzgerald, 2008), we begin to see the relationship between empowerment and constructivist theory. That is, by the use of strategies such as engagement with subject matter, affective/ social learning strategies, and constructivist assessment and evaluation, learners can develop competence to bring about desired intellectual and life changes which can influence their particular learning communities. If learners control their educational process by being more fully embedded in it, they will possess deeper ownership over its mastery. Thus the use of constructivist learning strategies can help

students to develop the competence (and empowerment) they need to engage with their own learning communities fully.

Kieffer (1984) constructed a three-stage developmental model to describe the nature of involvement in the process of empowerment which can be paraphrased as:

1. Development of a more potent sense of self-in-relation to the world
2. Active construction of a more critical comprehension of social and political forces in one's world
3. Cultivation of functional strategies and resources for attainment of personal or collective socio-political roles.

The author directly employs Kieffer's developmental model for empowerment at St. Lawrence in its educational leadership program. The three steps are discussed in the following section.

### **Empowerment Practices in Leadership Education at St. Lawrence**

#### **Step 1 – Development of a more potent sense of self-in-relation to the world**

In the empowerment process, students in St. Lawrence University's Educational Leadership Program are exposed to active (rather than passive) engagement, inquiry and problem solving. This approach is very different from a reductionist approach to teaching and learning that has historically dominated the field. Instead, it builds on the student's strengths and interests. Recognition is given for existing competences and students are encouraged to explore, inquiring without risks in order to formulate possible ways to proceed. Collaboration is actively encouraged through group assignments, so that students feel more comfortable to question and challenge existing data. Questioning techniques are utilized to probe students' beliefs and encourage the examination and testing of these beliefs. The entire process promotes ownership of both the material and the experience, developing the sense of self-in-relation to the world suggested in Kieffer's model. In short, replication of an idea is not generation of an idea, (Vermette, 2009). Instead, students create or construct their understanding and knowledge through interaction with subject content and dialogue with others.

## **Step 2 – Active construction of a more critical comprehension of social and political forces in one’s world**

This is an essential component in the program at St. Lawrence. Today’s educational leaders need to be fully aware of social and political forces affecting day-to-day operations in schools. Social issues ranging from child abuse to parental involvement and from student discipline to substance abuse pose major challenges. Political issues involve substantial budget concerns, job losses in the community, policy issues, and testing issues. This combination of social and political issues contributes to administrative disillusionment and burn out. Schools are socio-cultural settings, shaped by dominant cultural assumptions. At St. Lawrence, these cultural assumptions, power relationships, historical influences, and social/political issues must be exposed and examined. Education for social transformation reflects a theory of human development that places the person within a socio-cultural context that requires social interactions.

Role expectations for educational leaders have undergone great changes in recent years. If we view empowerment as a continuing construction of a multi-dimensional participatory competence, the relevance of empowerment in educational leadership roles is critical (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989). Role expectations are examined critically throughout the leadership curriculum at St. Lawrence, prompting students to construct their own evolving understanding of their relationship to the school environment and the social/political conditions in which it must exist.

## **Step 3 – Cultivation of functional strategies and resources for attainment of personal or collective socio-political roles**

Constructivist elements like active engagement, inquiry, reflection analysis, problem solving, and collaboration are intrinsic to the instructional model at St. Lawrence. Functional strategies for attainment of socio-political roles are addressed in a variety of experiences for students. Each course in the program prerequisite to the administrative internship requires a 10-hour field experience whereby each student must engage with a public school to conduct research and gain practical experience

related to the particular leadership subject topic being examined. Students are mentored by a practicing school official in these field experiences, and the students must complete reflective journal entries to examine how the field experience enhances their overall understanding of educational leadership.

In addition, the Educational Leadership Internship – the culminating experience for the program – is conducted at an area public school. Students are directly mentored in this process with at least one school administrator who acts as the overall manager, facilitator, and leadership example for each student. Internships are rigorous and extensive, assuring that students meet both the state/national standards and the University's expectations for competence. The Educational Leadership Internship incorporates a comprehensive evaluation process including a performance rubric, portfolio requirements, and evidence of successful socio-political roles that the student has developed as a result of the internship experience. It is an individualized and learner-centered approach that recognizes that educational leaders must possess the knowledge, skills and behaviors needed to work collaboratively with staff, students, parents, the community, higher education and outside organizations to promote success for all school-age students. An essential component of the program is the University's sustained partnership with public schools, providing students of educational leadership with carefully constructed professional development and field-based experiences.

Throughout the program, specific questioning techniques probe student beliefs, encourage testing of such beliefs, and scaffold important construction of learning. Such an approach is clearly empowering because it can build on the student's strengths and foster self-esteem and well-being. Because students usually undertake the internship in the same school where they have been a teacher for years, their role in the school as an intern is changed and enhanced due to the expectations for behavior and performance for particular roles within the school. How a person is treated has a distinct impact on the student's role. If through empowerment, people gain mastery over their own lives, both process and outcome are affected in the internship.

## **Combining Constructivism and Empowerment at St. Lawrence**

Because St. Lawrence University's Educational Leadership Program adheres to empowerment and constructivist theories, its approach is individualized and learner-centered. By recognizing that educational leaders must possess knowledge, skills and behaviors that can be fostered by a combination of empowerment and constructivist approaches, we enable our students to meet success in the school and other educational settings. We work with students on a one-on-one basis to achieve this outcome.

Empowerment theory implies that many competences are already present and that for people to better control their own lives, they must be supported and given access to resources for success. Because constructivist learning is intensely learner-centered, students actively modify their own processes, which is empowering and personal. To assist students of leadership in their construction of knowledge, the author's role is to guide, facilitate, and encourage students to use their special talents and strengths. The approach is both a psychological and philosophical process that combines constructivism and empowerment in its application.

Graduate students continually report a high degree of satisfaction with the overall graduate program in Educational Leadership at St. Lawrence University. This information is validated by student surveys and course evaluations, as well as annual department reports. They appear to find that the embedded perspectives of constructivism and empowerment are especially stimulating and invigorating. The seminar-style format of their classes is highly participatory in nature, which allows both for collaboration and effective communication. The presence of the summer Constructivist Design Conference at St. Lawrence also helps the program to infuse both theoretical aspects into the program. A more comprehensive study examining student outcomes in the evolution of these theory-based practices is being developed for the program.

## Conclusion

St. Lawrence University's Education Department has chosen to implement a constructivist paradigm because this type of educational structure capitalizes on the unique experiences, knowledge and learning styles of both teachers and students. Students are viewed as partners and can function as instructors, advocates, and decision makers creating highly productive social networks.

Constructivism and empowerment share the theory that knowledge is not imparted, but constructed personally. Construction of knowledge must develop in a social context of communities and collaboration. Since all learners enter the process with different knowledge, backgrounds, experiences and cultural practices, a learning environment based on a combination of these two theoretical approaches can help to assure that each student can relate new concepts to existing knowledge in meaningful ways. This combination helps to prepare students to put these theories into practice as they assume administrative positions throughout their respective careers. Furthermore, these practices prepare students as active participants in their own lifelong learning process.

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