

The Constructivist Social Studies Classroom

Educational curricula and teaching methods are changing. One component of the current redevelopment of all subject area curricula is the change in focus of instruction from the transmission curriculum to a transactional curriculum. In a traditional curriculum, a teacher transmits information to students who passively listen and acquire facts. In a transactional curriculum, students are actively involved in their learning to reach new understandings.

Constructivist teaching fosters critical thinking and creates active and motivated learners. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1993) tell us that learning in all subject areas involves inventing and constructing new ideas. They suggest that constructivist theory be incorporated into the curriculum, and advocate that teachers create environments in which children can construct their own understandings. Twomey Fosnot (1989) recommends that a constructivist approach be used to create learners who are autonomous, inquisitive thinkers who question, investigate, and reason. A constructivist approach frees teachers to make decisions that will enhance and enrich students' development" in these areas. These are goals that are consistent with those stated by Saskatchewan Education in the 1984 government report, *Directions*, that launched the restructuring of Saskatchewan's curricula. This demonstrates that constructivism is evident in current educational change.

A constructivist teacher and a constructivist classroom exhibit a number of discernable qualities markedly different from a traditional or direct instruction classroom. A constructivist teacher is able to flexibly and creatively incorporate ongoing experiences in the classroom into the negotiation and construction of lessons with small groups and individuals. The environment is democratic, the activities are interactive and student centered, and the students are empowered by a teacher who operates as a facilitator/consultant.

Constructivist classrooms are structured so that learners are immersed in experiences within which they may engage in meaning-making inquiry, action, imagination, invention, interaction, hypothesizing and personal reflection. Teachers need to recognize how people use their own experiences, prior knowledge and perceptions, as well as their physical and interpersonal environments to construct knowledge and meaning. The goal is to produce a democratic classroom environment that provides meaningful learning experiences for autonomous learners.

This perspective of learning presents an alternative view of what is regarded as knowledge, suggesting that there may be many ways of interpreting or understanding the world. No longer is the teacher seen as an expert, who knows the answers to the

questions she or he has constructed, while the students are asked to identify their teacher's constructions rather than to construct their own meanings. In a constructivist classroom, students are encouraged to use prior experiences to help them form and reform interpretations. This may be illustrated by reference to a personal response approach to literature, a constructivist strategy first articulated by Rosenblatt (1938). Rosenblatt (1978) argues for a personal and constructive response to literature whereby students' own experiences and perceptions are brought to the reading task so that in transacting with that text, the realities and interpretations which the students construct are their own. A reader response approach to literature rejects the idea that all students should necessarily come to the same interpretation of a selection of literature, that single interpretation being the teacher's or someone else's. A reader response approach allows students to explore variant interpretations, the teacher's own interpretation being only one possible interpretation in the classroom.

In a traditional classroom, an invisible and imposing, at times, impenetrable, barrier between student and teacher exists through power and practice. In a constructivist classroom, by contrast, the teacher and the student share responsibility and decision making and demonstrate mutual respect. The democratic and interactive process of a constructivist classroom allows students to be active and autonomous learners. Using constructivist strategies, teachers are more effective. They are able to promote communication and create flexibility so that the needs of all students can be met. The learning relationship in a constructivist classroom is mutually beneficial to both students and teachers.

A Constructivist Classroom is a Student-Centered Classroom. The student-centeredness of a constructivist classroom is clearly apparent in a reader response approach to literature. Recognizing the significance of the unique experiences that each reader brings to the reading of a selection of literature, the teacher in a response-centered approach seeks to explore the transaction between the student and the text to promote or extract a meaningful response (Rosenblatt, 1978). This places the student in a central position in the classroom since exploring this transaction seems unlikely to occur unless the teacher is willing to relinquish the traditional position of sole authority, thereby legitimating the unique experiences that all members of the class bring to the reading rather than just those experiences the teacher brings. The resulting perception and effect in the classroom is evident in students' recognition that the discussion is a legitimate one involving questions to which nobody knows the answer. It isn't a treasure hunting game where they are trying to guess what is in their teacher's head, but a process that creates meaning and knowledge.

From a constructivist perspective, where the student is perceived as meaning-maker, teacher-centered, text-centered and skills-oriented approaches to literature instruction are replaced by more student-centered approaches where processes of understanding are emphasized. In a discussion of language arts instruction based on constructivist theories of language use and language development, Applebee (1993) suggests that

[r]ather than treating the subject of Social Studies as subject matter to be memorized, a constructivist approach treats it as a body of knowledge, skills, and strategies that must be constructed by the learner out of experiences and interactions within the social context of the classroom. In such a tradition, understanding a period of history does not mean memorizing someone else's interpretations, but constructing and elaborating upon one's own within the constraints of the text and the conventions of the classroom discourse community.

A constructivist student-centered approach places more focus on students learning than on teachers teaching. A traditional perspective focuses more on teaching. From a constructivist view, knowing occurs by a process of construction by the knower. Lindfors (1984) advises that how we teach should originate from how students learn.

What is essentially involved in constructivist strategies and activities is a process approach to learning. Applebee (1993) remarks that "rather than emphasizing characteristics of the final products, process-oriented instruction focuses on the language and problem-solving strategies that students need to learn in order to generate those products" (p. 5). And as students interact with their teacher and with each other as part of either whole class activities, small group activities, or individual activities, they practice using language in a variety of contexts developing and honing many different skills as they do so.

In a process approach, Langer and Applebee (1987) explain, a context is created within which students are able to explore new ideas and experiences. Within this context, a teacher's role in providing information decreases and is replaced by a "strengthened role in eliciting and supporting students' own thinking" (p. 77) and meaning-making abilities. In a process approach to learning,

ideas are allowed to develop in the learner's own mind through a series of related, supportive activities; where taking risks and generating hypotheses are encouraged by postponing evaluation; and where new skills are learned in supportive instructional contexts. (Langer and Applebee, 1987, p. 69)

Applebee and Langer argue that in such contexts "students have the best chance to focus on the ideas they are writing about and to develop more complex thinking and reasoning skills as they defend their ideas for themselves" (p. 69).

Constructivist activities in any subject area can range from very simple to sophisticated and complex depending on the teacher's learning objectives. If a teacher were to devise a constructivist activity, the first thing that she or he would have to do is establish an educational objective. The teacher would then need to think of a meaningful activity which would, at the same time, help students to reach the objective and to explore and construct knowledge based on what they're reading and what they already bring to the

activity. The teacher would also need to reexamine the mechanics of how to run a class and would have to entrust a lot to the students.

Another quality of a constructivist class is its interactive nature. Authentic student-student and student-teacher dialogue is very important in a constructivist classroom. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) inform us that constructivists distinguish didactic talk, when participants report experiences but no new understanding occurs, from real talk where careful listening creates an environment within which emerging ideas can grow. Perhaps this defines the difference between teacher talk in a direct instruction classroom, and purposeful talk by students in a student-centered constructivist classroom where meaningful discussion occurs and meanings emerge. Belenky et al (1986) explain that in "real talk", domination is absent, while reciprocity, cooperation, and collaborative involvement are prominent. Consequently, constructivist activities in the classroom that focus on speaking and listening promote not only constructivist thought but also important connections between teacher and students.

Student empowerment is, in fact, at the center of a constructivist teacher's philosophy. Like parents who, from the moment their child is born, do everything possible to ensure that their child has the skills and abilities to live independently of them, so a constructivist teacher, from the moment a new set of students enters his or her classroom, does everything he or she can to provide those students with the skills and abilities to be confident and autonomous learners and citizens. And like parents who take pride in their children's accomplishments but not credit, a constructivist teacher doesn't take the glory for the accomplishments of his or her students, but rather empowers them with a feeling of competence and success.

Student empowerment and autonomy may be aided by encouraging students to ask questions and by making them active learners. Calkins (1986) laments that in most classrooms, we neither teach students to ask questions in schools nor allow students to ask questions, but simply require them to answer our questions, although asking questions is a challenging and important part of thinking and learning, especially if students are continually encouraged to ask more probing, more appropriate, and more effective questions. By asking their own questions, students acquire more consciousness of and control over their thinking.

Students having "control over their thinking" is an important matter in a constructivist classroom. The lack of opportunity for students to ask their own questions is a very real concern in many classrooms, and so exploring ways of getting students to ask questions, rather than the teacher asking all the questions, may make a significant contribution to making students independent as language learners. The person who has the questions not only has the answers but also the power. Power is a key element in a constructivist classroom. Power is not wielded by a constructivist teacher, and control is not imposed on students. Instead, a constructivist teacher uses an indirect form of

control and empowers students by involving them, by giving them responsibility, and by encouraging them to be self-controlling and autonomous. While the teacher relinquishes power and control to empower the students, neither the teacher nor the classroom is out of control. A constructivist classroom is, in fact, highly organized. Students are given a lot of choices within the classroom, but those choices may be contained within parameters. Students are able to negotiate themes, but must abide by the range of literature that their curriculum prescribes. Students may design their own assignments, but the assignments must accommodate curriculum variables.

The apparent paradox in this 'constrained freedom' is highlighted by Daniel Sheridan (1993), who comments on the use of structure in a constructivist classroom:

Structure is one of the conditions of freedom. Yet we cannot leave it at that, for paradoxically there can be no freedom without some element of constraint. Thus within the structure of a learning situation there are always some constraints--yes, even in the most apparently "free" classroom, [S]tudents are constantly making language choices. Still, they are not "free" in any radical or idealized sense . . . there is a lot of structure . . . (p.116).

What Sheridan is saying here is exemplified in a constructivist class. Unless kids are provided with behavioral parameters, nothing gets accomplished because they don't know what it is they're really supposed to do. But once these behavioral parameters are established, there can be a lot of choices within.

The paradox about student centered instruction is the more control you turn over to the students the less you need to worry about control, and, in fact, the students are quite able to look after themselves and, even more, look after each other. In a constructivist classroom, control comes from students' involvement in responsibility rather than external imposition, freeing the teacher to focus on students learning, a profitable situation for both students and teachers.

Actively and interactively involved students, negotiated curriculum, and redistribution of power, control, and responsibility all contribute to a relationship between students and teacher that promotes a situation where learning thrives. With the development of a constructivist philosophy, a teacher of any discipline is able to create a classroom environment within which students are able to become autonomous learners.

Constructivist classes reveal a shift in thinking in which the underlying assumptions about what knowledge is, about how people learn, and about what is important are different. One can grow from a traditional view of teaching in which one seeks to control one's subject area and students to becoming comfortable with a subject area that is less predictable and more ambiguous. This enables one to make the shift in thinking that may be necessary to be a constructivist teacher. The idea that our beliefs about teaching and learning affect our classroom practice, as well as our ability to

change our practice, is explained by Lester and Onore (1990). Support for this idea comes from Kelly's (1991) personal construct theory.

Lester and Onore (1990) indicate that teachers' personal beliefs about teaching (their construct systems) account for the kinds and extents of change that teachers are able to make. We view our situation through the lens of our personal construct system. Our beliefs about teaching and learning account for how we think and act as teachers. Specifically, teachers' definitions of what knowledge is, how people acquire it, and how we determine whether knowledge has been acquired account for the degree and kind of change teachers will experience.

Personal construct theory was devised by Kelly in 1955. The theory proposes that, like scientists, we continually hypothesize about experience, formulating expectations based on a template of reality we have created through experience and reflection. We come to believe something through accumulated experience about it and then interpret experience according to those beliefs. These hypotheses, or personal constructs, may be modified with new experiences, but some are continually reinforced and confirmed, until, over time, they may actually shape experiences whereas when they were developing, experience molded them. It is for this reason, Lester and Onore (1990) believe, that beliefs and practices about schooling are so difficult to change. They suggest that we need to examine the constructs or beliefs that influence our decisions about teaching and learning in order for change to occur. They believe that by changing our beliefs about teaching and learning, we are able to change our practice.

Lester and Onore (1990) suggest that the main construct affecting a teacher's ability to teach in a transactional, constructivist way is the belief that knowledge is constructed by human beings. And so teachers would need to make a shift in thinking and change what they believe about knowledge in order to really change their teaching.

Lester and Onore (1990) propose that genuine learning or change comes not from disregarding all prior learning in order to relearn, but "from questioning or reassessing our existing beliefs about the world."

Change can occur through having experiences that present and represent alternative systems of beliefs and trying to find a place for new experiences to fit into already held beliefs.

Reflecting on one's teaching practice contributes to one's ability to cross the bridge in terms of the way one thinks and believes about teaching. This enables him or her to move, for example, from a transmissional instructional practice to a constructivist and transactional one.

Reflection, Mezirow (1990) explains, involves a critique of the assumptions on which our beliefs have been built, and through reflection, our perspectives are transformed.

Giroux (1986) notes that teachers are often trained to use various models of teaching and evaluation, yet are not taught to be critical of the assumptions that underlie these models. He advises that teachers must be more than technicians but transformative intellectuals engaging in a critical dialogue among themselves.

The underlying assumptions about teaching and learning of a constructivist and a non-constructivist teacher are quite different. Changing the gimmicks we use to teach in the classroom without changing the way we think about teaching and learning is, according to Lester and Onore (1993), insufficient to change our practice. A complete rethinking of what teaching and learning are is necessary if we are to really change what happens in the classroom.

In a constructivist classroom, teachers create situations in which the students will question their own and each other's assumptions. In a similar way, a constructivist teacher creates situations in which he or she is able to challenge the assumptions upon which traditional teaching and learning are based. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) report that at the constructivist level of knowing and thinking, we continually reevaluate our assumptions about knowledge; our attitude towards "the expert" is transformed; we are not troubled by ambiguity but are enticed by complexity; and we take on a never-ending quest for truth and learning where truth is seen as a process of construction in which the knower participates. A constructivist teacher's perception of expertise in the classroom is based on the experience of his or her students in interaction with each other and with their teacher, and his or her ability to tolerate ambiguity is high as evidenced in the tendency to create complexity.

Holding a constructivist view of knowledge, Lester and Onore (1990) point out, enables a teacher to explore and form new ideas about teaching and learning. But the job of translating this belief into daily classroom practice is still present. This job is often made difficult with all that impinges on it, for example, the existing school system and its policies, and the school culture.

Teachers are individuals who are often drawn into teaching by a love of kids. Constructivist teachers develop skills and abilities to empower students and to make them feel competent and significant. Perhaps some of what a constructivist teacher does is intuitive. Constructivist teaching also requires intelligence, creativity, patience, responsiveness, and the ability to live with ambiguity permitting one to spontaneously abandon a plan in order to accommodate specific individual or classroom situations. And while the job of being a constructivist teacher is demanding, its value is evident in the impact on students' learning and personal development.

Research suggests that constructivist teaching is an effective way to teach. It encourages active and meaningful learning and promotes responsibility and autonomy. Because constructivist teaching is beneficial in achieving desirable educational goals for

students, it is important for teachers to grow professionally towards a constructivist practice.

My research and analysis of Pat Gray's life and career in "'The Road to Knowledge is Always Under Construction': A Life History Journey to Constructivist Teaching" reveal that for Pat, change to a constructivist approach to teaching was a developmental process that occurred over time and involved a complete paradigm shift. The development of Pat's constructivist practice was a very active process during which much of the time practice preceded theory. His story of teacher change, growth, and development underscores an aspect of teacher development that is often ignored: curriculum development occurs, not through imposition of new ideas on teachers, but through personal development.

These findings have implications for the way constructivist and transactional curricula are implemented. They confirm that the responsibility for the professional development of teachers falls largely on the teachers themselves. This concept is generally recognized by teachers; however, the incentive to pursue personal professional development over the course of one's career is frequently lacking in teachers. For example, the importance of collegial sharing and support is widely accepted yet infrequently practiced except informally. Similarly, teachers who are familiar with reflective practice resist it even though they recognize its importance in encouraging an awareness of how our students learn and, therefore, in how we need to teach. To encourage incentive, this research suggests that teachers need to be provided with opportunities, resources, support, encouragement and recognition in their professional development pursuits. They need to know that their efforts are being supported by their colleagues, administrators and school boards.

Considering the constructivist nature of many new curricula, it is important that the theory and concepts of transactional and constructivist teaching be communicated to administrators as well as teachers and student teachers of all grades and disciplines through on going, supportive professional development activities. The importance of administrative support for teachers attempting transactional and constructivist strategies needs to be communicated to school administrators through professional literature and professional in-service.

University instructors in colleges of education need to model constructivist practices and provide supportive assistance to pre-service and in-service teachers as they grapple with these practices in their practicums and internships.

Transactional and constructivist practices may be modeled, and constructivist activities and strategies may be presented to teachers in teacher in-services and workshops. A discussion of the implications of such practices for teachers and students needs to be included in these in-services. Issues and concerns of teachers as they begin to make their transition to constructivist teaching need to be acknowledged and addressed

through discussion, explanations of what to expect, practical suggestions, reassurance, and supportive understanding of teachers' concerns.

Resource information about constructivist philosophy and practices written in a non-threatening style that respects teachers' current personal and practical knowledge would perhaps make personal and professional development toward a constructivist practice appealing. Information presented in a friendly and creative style may encourage teachers to embark on their own professional development journeys and may encourage teachers to be less reticent about risking innovative practices, thus beginning a developmental process of change. Indeed, an outcome of my study is that change is a developmental process in which practice often precedes theory, and teachers, encouraged to attempt constructivist practices and to be self reflective, and inspired by the success of those practices, may, in time, acquire the philosophy that underpins that practice.

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