

Stepping Inside the Classroom: A look into Virtual Field Trips and the Constructivist Educator

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Abstract

Constructivist views assert that learning is the active process of constructing rather than passively acquiring knowledge. Field trips help bridge formal and informal knowledge, and prepare students for lifelong learning. For an educator, the point of going on a field trip is to make learning come alive for students in a way that textbooks cannot. For inner city students or students of need, this constructivist tool can be prohibitive. Virtual field trips can take one wherever one wants from right inside the classroom. What was prohibitive in the past is now at one's fingertips. This article discusses the complementary relationship that exists between virtual field trips and constructivism, the implementation of each benefiting the other.

Introduction

...The closer they came to the ugly puffy blue- skinned fish with the enormous red fins, the more excited the children became. Frankie wanted to reach out and touch one before they swam away. If only he could swim here forever... At this depth, the ocean came alive with the sight of different species of fish and plant life. Ms. Persichini wanted her students to get the feel of these wonders up close. She wanted her students to experience different creatures living together in harmony. Her intentions were to guide these children from this reality and apply it to the different cultures living back home in their school community. At this moment though, she was mesmerized by their minds being part of this reality..... As the bell rang and the students helped Frankie maneuver his wheelchair to the next class, Ms. Persichini smiled as her students talked about their adventure. She knew they had just experienced an important moment in their lives...

Constructivist views assert that learning is the active process of constructing rather than passively acquiring knowledge. Instruction is the process of

supporting the knowledge constructed by the learners rather than the mere communication of knowledge (Nanjappa and Grant, 2005). Constructivism can and should be applied to the development of learning environments of our students. Constructivist educators present real-world environments that employ the context in which learning is relevant. They then focus on realistic approaches to solving real-world problems. Constructivist educators are coaches who encourage proper strategies to solve problems. They stress conceptual interrelatedness providing multiple representations or perspectives on the content being taught and provide tools and environments that help learners to interpret the multiple perspectives of the world (Murphy, 97).

Learning needs to involve the real world. Therefore, teachers need to provide “living avenues” to help their students interpret multiple perspectives or ideas that may exist. Unfortunately, in many classrooms, the textbook remains, as it has since the beginning of the common school movement, the main source for knowledge. This form of passive learning needs to be revisited. Students need to experience rather than read and answer questions. One way to allow students to step outside this textbook world is to take them on field trips.

Field trips are constructivist tools that help to give students a better understanding of the material they are learning and the trips allow teachers to add experience into the curriculum. Field trips help bridge formal and informal learning, and prepare students for lifelong learning (Tuthill and Klemm, 2002).

In today's world, it is not always easy for a teacher to take his/her students on a field trip. There are times when a field trip is too costly or it is just too difficult to take one's students to a specific location. On a traditional field trip, permission slips must be sent out and collected to cover liability problems such as accidents, injuries, etc. Funds to cover the costs of transportation, entrance fees, and meals must also be collected and deposited. It is not that it isn't worth it, but now there is another way to offer similar experiences to students without traveling (Stevenson, 2001).

Experience Matters

...It wasn't that she didn't want her students to go on the trip, it was that she knew that a lot of them were living in poor conditions, where putting food on the table was more of a concern than coming up with the fee for a field trip. Still she knew she had to do something. She wanted desperately to have these children experience the joy of learning.....she wanted education to come alive.....

A complementary relationship exists between technology and constructivism, and the implementation of each benefits the other. Constructivism is a doctrine couched in the belief that learning takes place in contexts, while technology refers to the designs and environments that engage learners. Recent attempts to integrate technology in the classroom have been within the context of a constructivist framework (Nanjappa and Grant, 2005). One method that brings both technology and constructivism together is the virtual field trip. Virtual field trips are explorations through the Web, typically an organized set of links with a

particular theme. Some trips simply consist of a list of links on a Web page, while other trips use some type of navigator (or buttons) to move through the tour. In its best implementation, it is a guided and annotated tour of pages, on the Web, that have been selected by educators and arranged in a “thread” that students can follow from page to page, or site to site (Foley, 2003). These “field trips” can be anything from taking a trip to the White House, traveling through the Sahara Desert or walking along the Great Wall of China. These trips can be anything one can imagine but never reach by foot, bus, train, or plane because of logistical problems.

A textbook provides the basic information that is needed to understand a specific topic. Examine the War of 1812 for example. When students read the textbook, they can read about the battles and the soldiers who fought in the war, but they cannot see the forts or see the men dressed in their uniforms. A teacher could take the students on a field trip to a local fort, perhaps Fort Niagara, that may have been involved in the War of 1812. But what if they do not live near this fort. The solution to this is easy if a teacher has a constructivist’s viewpoint and access to computer technology. Simply take the students on a virtual field trip to Fort Niagara in Youngstown, New York. By going to the “Old Fort Niagara” Web site, the students can explore the fort and obtain a broader perspective of history without ever having to leave the classroom.

With virtual field trips the possibilities are endless. Students can select a topic, take a virtual tour, research it, and explore it further. By using this constructivist tool, students can visit places they could never imagine visiting, and they can do it without cost. Inner city children living in poverty now have an opportunity to enhance their experiential learning, and in doing so, increase their understanding of the larger world. This is a great solution to the problems associated with costly field trips. What seemed impossible in the past is now available to all students regardless of their socio-economic status. Students can now, at a click of a button, have the ocean right at their fingertips. They can swim with fish, or dive with the dolphins. They can even take a journey from one part of the world to another with a group of turtles.

Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners

...As Frankie and Kenny were busy climbing the Mayan ruins, Susan and Mary were deciding what clothes they would choose for the celebration... Ms. Persichini's class was alive with learning...

This constructivist tool can also be applied to students with handicaps or educational exceptionalities. Students, *such as Frankie in Ms. Persichini's class*, may be in wheelchairs, which could limit or prohibit them from experiencing the full benefits of a conventional field trip. With virtual field trips, the students can control the pace of the presentation and complete it at and during a time that accounts for their exceptionality. Virtual tours can incorporate multiple modes of learning and can be designed so that a variety of stimuli (audio, visual, and text) can meet the needs of the different learners (Tuthill and Klemm, 2002). This

multiple modality approach allows the students to receive additional motivational support for their learning needs.

Another advantage of computer assisted constructivist instruction through virtual field trips is that it increases learner centeredness. It allows them to spend more time in one place and easily return to that specific place on their own if they missed something or did not understand it. Students with exceptionalities often feel left out from the educational experiences that many other students are able to enjoy. By using virtual field trips they have a greater opportunity to experience the same as others.

Engagement in Learning

...Parent- teacher night was awesome...Ms. Persichini's students were busy showing their parents how they swam with fish to learn about differences....how they climbed Mayan ruins, traveled the African Jungles and walked the Great Wall of China to learn about cultures They had a love of learning. And it showed in their eyes and the eyes of their proud parents.... This was why she had got into teaching... to mold young hearts and minds...

For some educators, the use of computers is mainly for word processing. For others, field trips are a waste of time. These are not constructivist classrooms. Ask students in these classrooms to describe the revolutions that took place in Europe in the 1700s or any other topic that they may be studying. Then ask that same question to students who are in a constructivist class that took a virtual field trip to Europe and were able to experience the revolutions through a computer. Both groups of students should be able to describe the revolutions, but

the group that took the virtual field trip will probably be able to give more detail and should have a better understanding of the material. One is passive. The other is active. Students who learn by experience and are able to see what is happening, as opposed to just reading a textbook, will understand the material better. Educators who supplement their course using this constructivist tool add to the students' relevancy of understanding real world events through experiential learning.

Conclusion

Constructivist educators need to employ the use of virtual field trips. These trips will help their students gain a better understanding of what they are learning.

There is no more worrying about the financial aspect of the trip, who will chaperone the trip, or who will even be able to go. Teachers can now take their students on a journey that is unimaginable to the average student or even the average teacher. They can go to the Mayan Ruins, the peaks of Mount Everest, or even experience outer space.

As constructivists, we need to remember that technology is growing every day. By allowing our students to use technology as much as possible in the classroom, we are preparing them for the world they will live in. Regardless of socio-economic level, geographic location, or exceptionality; virtual field trips reduce these differences and allow for the greater equality of educational opportunity.

As constructivist educators, we are here to provide our students with the best education possible. By using virtual field trips we enhance the learning process and give them an active, enjoyable, 'constructivist worthy' education.

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