

Why, as a Professor of this Class, Have You Not Taught Us at All?

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of constructivist teaching in a teacher education program. It is framed as a dialogue between a professor and a student at the close of an introductory course in a teacher education program, using the actual words of the student and commentary by the instructor. The article examines the professor's reasoning for employing strategies including student engagement, collaborative groups, authentic assessment, and student-run classes – all of which are utilized for the purpose of helping students construct meaning about effective educational practice.

Introduction

The Professor: The following question, posed by four students certainly got me thinking: “Why, as a professor of this class, have you not taught us at all?”

Ouch!!! That really set me back. Did they mean they didn't think they had learned anything over the past 13 weeks? Or, did they think they had learned a lot but *in spite of rather than because of* anything I had done? Or, did they think that because I didn't spend long periods of time preaching that I wasn't teaching? Did they not realize that when a teacher sets up an activity that has students teaching each other, the teacher is teaching just as much as if he were standing in front of the class talking?

Background (very briefly)

Near the end of the fall, 2008 semester, I put my class of 24 university students, mostly sophomores, into groups of four. I asked each group to agree on one question they had

about my reasoning regarding anything I had done in class during the entire semester. Since this is a class directed toward future teachers I wanted to focus the students on how I teach as much as on what I teach.

I asked each group of students to put one question in writing and hand it to me on their way out of class. I promised to provide them with written responses to every question.

Here are the questions I was handed:

- **Why, as a professor of this class, have you not taught us at all? Everyday was presentations by our groups.**
- **What are the benefits to the amount of presentations? Was this repetition really beneficial?**
- **Why is Constructivism the only theory we learned about and why was there such a focus on constructivism?**
- **Why is the class completely student-run? When trying to cover certain material in their presentation couldn't they have missed specific material the teacher wanted them to teach?**
- **Why didn't we learn more education issues?**
- **Why didn't you give us your definition of constructivism in the very first class?**

I knew some of these questions were on their minds because they get asked every semester when I open the door to student inquiries about my strategies. But never before has a question been phrased quite as indelicately as the first one. My mind raced ahead with all the explanations this would afford me the opportunity to offer my students – one more chance to challenge them to think about things relevant to teaching strategies before they disappeared into the sunset of winter vacation, most never to have their minds in my hands ever again.

However, I also realized that if I simply sent out my responses via e-mail, only the really conscientious and dedicated (or curious) would take the time to read them. I pondered how I could motivate them to give serious thought to my responses. I decided to send out an e-mail offering extra credit to any student who wanted to try to answer the questions the way they thought I would. I said I would wait a few days before sharing my own responses to allow them to submit their thoughts.

Not unexpectedly, one of the most responsible and competent students in the class – the student who probably least needed the extra credit to ensure her “4” for the semester, sent her responses within 24 hours. For me, it was that rare moment for a teacher when you see concrete evidence that what you set out to teach was learned, understood and being applied.

Here are the responses from junior Tara Askull who has aspirations of becoming a math teacher and is also a leader on the women’s hockey team at St. Lawrence University. Tara’s responses have been edited only to eliminate redundancies which occurred because some of the questions lent themselves to using the same information in response to different questions. The words are all Tara’s. Where I had something to add it is placed after Tara’s response.

**Question 1: Why, as a professor of this class have you not taught us at all?
Every day was presentations by our groups.**

Tara's Response: I believe that you have taught us, but in a non traditional approach. I believe you have "not taught us at all" because you wanted us to teach, and learn how to teach because after all this is an education class. I believe you went about it in this manner because the best way to learn something is to figure it out on your own. Statistics also show that teaching others is the best way to learn (first day of class handout). Everyday was presentations by our groups so we would get many opportunities to be able to teach and be able to figure out things on our own. Also, by putting us in groups we were able to work as a team and develop a skill that many jobs and careers look at as one of their primary reasons for hiring a person (being able to work as a team).

Question 2: What are the benefits to the amount of presentations? Was this repetition really beneficial?

Tara's Response: The benefits to the amount of presentations is to, again, hammer home the most important concept from this course, constructivism. Most, if not all, of our presentations followed the constructivist theory of teaching. We were able to work as a team to get the class engaged and create an interactive environment. The repetition was really beneficial because it made us continue to think of creative ideas and activities for our presentations. By having more than one presentation you were able to have a variety of activities and incorporate all or most of the different constructivist teaching techniques (jigsaw, carousel, think pair share, etc.).

By teaching the class during our presentations numerous times we also were able to develop our presentation skills (i.e. eye contact, projecting voice). Everyone seemed very comfortable by the end of the semester to talk in class and no one appeared to be as nervous when presenting even though they may have been shy about the idea at the start of the semester.

Professor's Additional Thought: Reading Tara's last sentence is quite reinforcing to me. Knowing that "public speaking" is one of the biggest fears of most people and seeing how college students are often reluctant to present in front of their own peers, much less anyone else, I believe that creating a non threatening environment in which it becomes second nature for every student to speak at least a few times in every class, in front of the entire class, is extremely important. Therefore, I am pleased that Tara's own assessment of her peers is that this process is working.

Question 3: Why was "constructivism" the only theory we learned about? (i.e., why was there such a focus on constructivism?)

Tara's Response: The Constructivist theory is the only theory we learned about because it is gaining support among educators and is more beneficial to students in the long run. By getting away from the traditional way of teaching which involves learning through lecturing and memorization, students will be able to actually understand the material more. The constructivist theory allows for students to ask questions, be understood, share their point of view, become involved in class, be engaged, and much more. Students will be able to remember material in the long run because they are just not memorizing for a test or quiz, but they are able to actually understanding the material.

When teaching is consistent with constructivist theory students are able to apply or think of ways that material applies to real life situations which will help them understand and relate to the material and curriculum. By focusing on constructivism throughout the semester we were able to have an interactive and engaging class every class. Since we had an interactive class it ultimately allowed us to learn to the best of our ability. Every class had different activities or presentations where you had to participate, whether it be in the exploratory, discovery, or closure phase of a lesson, during a guest presentation, or discussion there wasn't a day when you were not actively involved in class. By primarily focusing on constructivism we were able to interact and express our opinions. If we were not focused on constructivism then many of the students in class may have just been another face in the crowd, not participating, not learning to their full potential, being overlooked, and not getting their point of views and opinions heard.

Professor's Additional Thought: I don't think it's necessary, in a beginning course in education, to harp on theories that lead to traditional teaching practices. The students have experienced these practices through most of their 13 years in school and are experiencing them in many off their college classes. They know traditional teaching practices from their own experiences. They've had little exposure to constructivist-based practices.

Question 4: Why is the class completely student-run? When trying to cover certain material in their presentation couldn't they have missed specific material the teacher wanted them to teach (present)?

Tara's Response: The class is completely student run regarding the presentations, so students can really understand the material to the best of their ability. By being able to teach to other students or have other students teaching to them, the students are able to become more involved and understand the material better. The presentations are student run without guidance of specific material to include from the teacher because if they are left the task to teach a topic on their own then they will choose to teach the material that they believe is the most significant and most relevant. By going through the material and choosing what they believe is more important to present to the class they have already taught themselves a lot. Then, they get to present what they believe is the most important material to the class, which is again, ultimately teaching themselves.

Professor's Additional Thoughts: I agree with everything Tara said, and there is more. As Tara knows, I require a detailed outline ten days in advance of student presentations. I send point-by-point feedback, often request a meeting with a team to discuss its outline and always make it known that I am available to meet with them at their request. (In brief, I scaffold appropriately.) I think much of my effective teaching occurs when I can react to a lesson plan they have designed and we can use that common experience to discuss theories and practices. Also, I offer either verbal and/or written feedback to the presenting team following its presentation.

Further, the students have many options in terms of topics for presentations, guests to select and issues to present, but I select the options and make sure they are relevant to class content and I provide a rubric that spells out the criteria for each presentation, or I negotiate the rubric with the students.

With regard to misconceptions or misinformation or information that should be but is not included in a presentation, the opportunity to observe the students presenting and their peers reacting enables me to see what they have and have not grasped. (When a teacher teaches from the front of the room it doesn't mean that students don't develop misconceptions. The teacher simply doesn't have the opportunity to know how the students are receiving, or misconceiving, what the teacher intends them to learn.)

The lesson in my class doesn't end when a team has completed a presentation. Recently, following a presentation, I lectured for twenty minutes on the purpose of an opening activity because it was clear to me that a number of students were not grasping the importance of launching a lesson in a manner that is non-threatening, grabs attention, creates a nurturing environment and presages the topic of the lesson.

Question # 5: Why didn't we learn more education issues?

Tara's Response: I believe we did learn a lot of education issues. It was proved just last week (or two weeks ago) when we did an activity where we were all in a circle and you have to name one contemporary issue that we covered or that you learned about this semester. Everyone in class was able to think of an issue – there were 24 we

identified off the tops of our heads in less than a minute. Plus, we had two issue papers where if you wanted to know or learn more about a specific issue then you were able to research about it from a list of 40 topics offered by the professor. We didn't learn about more education issues then we did because we only learned about the ones that we (or the professor) thought were most significant and the most relevant or important. In most cases we came up with or picked the issue that we wanted to learn about. By choosing the issues we wanted to learn about we were all more engaged in the material and must more interested and engrossed in learning.

Question # 6: Why didn't you give us your definition of constructivism in the very first class?

Tara's Response: You did not give us your definition of constructivism the very first day of class so we were able to come up with our own definition. I still do not know if there is a specific, set in stone definition of constructivism because it includes so many different things. I believe you also didn't give us the definition of constructivism on the first class session because if you had then you would not be teaching in a constructivist fashion. One of the most important attributes of constructivist theory is that engagement proceeds explanation. By having us use and incorporate different qualities of the constructivist theory throughout the semester with out actually telling us we were completely able to understand it because we have already used it ourselves.

Professor's Additional Thoughts: Actually, early in the semester I did put the class in groups and ask them to propose a definition of constructivism. After we shared responses, I wrote on the board six criteria for assessing whether a classroom practice

is constructivist-based. I doubt many, if any, of the 24 students remember this and that is just my point. You don't learn a complex concept by memorizing a definition. It has little meaning and you have no hooks to hang your thoughts until you gain experience applying it. Definitions of constructivism are available with a quick *Google* search. I offer a definition or direct a student to one anytime I am asked.

Actually, during the last class of the semester, a group will make a major presentation on "constructivism" and that will be the focus of the class. I submit that student understanding will be much higher than from any definition shared at the start of the semester because students, by the end of the semester, have common and frequent experiences to relate to as they discuss and learn more about "constructivism". If you had never seen a baseball game, of how much value would a verbal or written explanation be? If you could be taught as you watched a game or if you could discuss it after watching a game, wouldn't that be of far more value?

As long as we're with a baseball analogy, one might say: you create a task, provide options and do everything possible to motivate students to undertake the task; you make sure the task cannot be accomplished without students understanding whatever your learning objectives are. The task is the ball field. Build it well and the student will come to you for the information they need to succeed with the task. Doesn't every teacher want students to come to them seeking the information we usually try to impart through a lecture?

Additional Background

As an adjunct professor at St. Lawrence University I teach two sections of the same course, "Issues in Education," every semester. Most of my non-university career involves workshops for teachers, administrators and parents on the practical application of constructivist theory so the classes at SLU challenge me to practice what I preach.

The title of the course implies a focus on "issues in education" and I consider teaching strategies to be a major issue along with issues such as vouchers, school funding and respect for diversity.

Approximately 80 percent of each of my classes consists of a series of student planned and led presentations by groups of two, three or four students. Presentations last from 30 to 70 minutes each. Every student plans and presents at least four times a semester, as part of a group, and every student has occasion to speak in front of everyone at least two to seven times every class even if it's just to give a 15 second response to a question during an activity at the start or end of class.

Topics for student presentations include issues from charter schools to zero tolerance policies to understanding the school community and whether schools should be allowed to sell vending machine space as a way of raising funds. There are also lengthy presentations on multiple intelligences, critical thinking and Bloom's Taxonomy, No Child Left Behind, standardized testing, cooperative learning, and constructivist theory.

Each Tuesday (the class meets Tuesdays and Thursdays for 90 minutes) every student is required to come to class having read a chapter in a text about teaching strategies. Two students have the task of taking half an hour to do an assessment/learning activity that is intended to teach the major concepts of the assigned chapter while also enabling them to assess which of their classmates have read and understood the material prior to coming to class. Usually, they begin with a five minute quiz and then proceed to an activity in small groups while the two students conducting the assessment/learning activity work the room with a class roster in hand making notes of who is demonstrating understanding. A few hours after class, they know they will receive the names of three of their class mates in an e-mail from me with a request that, for each of the three, they let me know 1) whether he/she had read and understood the chapter and 2) what the evidence is. The “evidence” needs to be gleaned from the quiz results and their notes of what was said or done during the activity that followed the quiz.

My purpose is to teach my students the difference between a learning activity and what I call an assessment/learning activity.

(Note: In a learning activity there are opportunities for the teacher to assess what some students know, understand or can apply, but the primary purpose of the lesson is for students to learn, rather than for the teacher to be able to assess the learning of every student. In an assessment/learning activity, a goal of the teacher is to assess whether each student has met at least a minimum standard with regard to the major objective or objectives that the teacher had for that lesson. In other words, the lesson is designed so

that the teacher can be confident that when the lesson is over s/he knows how much every single student understands and the extent to which each student can apply the major skills and concepts embodied in the objectives of the lesson. For an assessment/learning activity, the teacher must design that lesson so that the evidence needed for assessment will be available. To do this the lesson must be designed so students are engaged in performance tasks that the teacher can observe and assess. It is also my intent that my students learn the difference between paper and pencil tests and performance assessments. I try to accomplish this by challenging them to identify what constitutes “evidence” that students understand and can apply the skills and/or concepts that are the main focus of a lesson.)