

Teaching constructivism: Day one of a course on teaching

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[Editor's Note: Comments about the ideas presented in this article are encouraged. If considerable commentary is received, the editors will include it in a subsequent issue of *JPACTe*.]

Abstract

The author proposes describes three constructivist strategies he uses in his first class for General Teaching Methods in a teacher education program. Tenets that underlie the strategies are explained, and the author asks readers to reply about their reactions to the strategies.

Introduction

Having taught Secondary Teaching Methods since 1985, I wish to take this space to describe 3 activities that I use in the very first class in the course and ask that you consider just how “constructivist” they are. I urge you to carefully identify pieces of each that you like and pieces that you question or challenge: that would be an active, constructivist way to read them! Each of these has been shortened and clarified to allow an examination of their structure.

Activity 1

At the exact moment that the first class is scheduled to begin, I shut the door and ask the students to take out a piece of paper. They are told to write down some ideas about how a teacher can deal with the students who will be late. I, of course, must deal with them in real life and ask for advice as to how to proceed. At this point there are already some students pulling on the door, asking to enter.

After some discussion, I let the late students in and ask them to stand with me at the front while the rest of class is creating lists of possible reasons (excuses ?) that they may offer. Needless to say, eventually each student finishes developing his or her own late policy and we continue the class. But the real-life example, the important problem to be solved, the collaborative nature, the student ownership of the content of the task, and the emotional involvement all work to make this a powerful way to introduce first impression theory and student centered instruction.

Like?

Dislike?

Activity 2

Later in class, students do a simple activity to create randomized pairs. (Half of the time there is one threesome). In each pair, one is assigned to be the teacher and given a written description of the GRONK (a fictitious creature I made up – see appendix). The other is the learner-drawer and gets a blank piece of paper (and is ordered NOT to see the written description). After introductions that emphasize the expectation of working together (“I don’t have to like you, I just have to work with you and show you respect,” the paired teachings commence. The “teachers” teach the learner-drawers about the GRONK. After 3½ minutes, the learner-drawers come to the front and can have the partners join them (note: they almost always do because they want the support!). Without the ability to look at their drawings, the learner-drawers are each asked to describe the GRONK orally to the whole class. (Gasp! Public Speaking!).

Of course, the poor, isolated anxious individuals do the oral report perfectly because the situation was set up for them to actually do the drawing, engage in meaningful conversation with a (respected) peer, and to use multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983) channels, all increasing the probability of understanding and remembering.

By the way, it is this activity that makes many of the students get a deeper understanding of “constructivist practice,” perhaps because they actually construct the visual and they “see the learning take form.”

Like ?

Dislike ?

Activity 3

Later in the class, students are given a “pop quiz,” an attempt to validate a high grade for their first piece of class work AND give them a chance to reflect on and make meaning from the very experience that they are now completing. (At Niagara, the College of Education is committed to constructivist practice and the Strategic Plan of the University is committed to “active and integrated learning,” so this activity also demonstrates how the course is in compliance with that plan.)

While each student must complete and be ready to explain his or her answers, student-student collaboration is frequently allowed to promote deeper personal reflection. The quiz takes the form of statement completions and is collected and read carefully by me (and almost always receives a high mark). This approach may also take the form of an at-home journal entry, which technically is a fourth

constructivist strategy tied to the first class. Here are some of the completion stems:

1. I really was engaged during the part of class when
2. I hope that I remember _____ when I become a teacher.....
3. The reason that we did the GRONK in pairs was.....
4. Vermette must think that we are building community when.....
5. Each activity we did made.....
6. My own late policy will include.....
7. Teenagers (who will be my students) would like.....
8. I still wonder about.....

As you can see from the stems offered, this activity:

- calls for the students to make their own meanings (which I can comment on and/or use to drive the next lesson),
- respects the diversity of each individual's prior knowledge, experience and culture,
- connects deeply with the conceptual content of the course,
- builds a prior experience base for the rest of the course,
- forces meta-cognitive awareness, and
- starts the students on building their own "theory of teaching."

It also gives me FEEDBACK, which can help me plan the next session more productively, and with my actual students in mind.

Like ?

Dislike ?

The THEORY behind the PRACTICE

A sampling of constructivist principles with which these 3 activities align includes:

1. The best teacher explanation comes AFTER student activity (Schwartz and Bransford, 1999). Lecture can be constructivist, but it is best conceptualized as a teacher's answer to questions that students really have, or to things they have actually done.
2. All learning resides inside the learner's mind, not in the teacher's message. Schema change comes from (student) thinking. The students learn when they think. A teacher's job is to get them to think productively about important content.
3. "Understanding" is what is sought by school instruction; "remembering" is a by-product of developing understanding. Anything learned by rote and not used in powerful context is usually lost. Real learning comes through the activities that require thinking (such as solving problems, making evidence-based decisions, creating new products, etc.).
4. Peer exchanges about important conceptual content (usually in face-to-face conversation) are almost always "upper-level Bloom," and therefore require constructivist-style thinking that causes learning. As virtually everyone knows, cooperative learning is a powerful technique. (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1991)
5. When learning efforts are audible and visible, the teacher (and peers) can offer immediate and powerful feedback and encouraging support. (Flynn, Mesibov, Vermette, & Smith, 2004 & 2007) I want to be in a position to

know as much as I can about the actual thinking of my students, so that is my focus. My content is THEIR THINKING about the intended concepts (not the concepts themselves). This is a tricky point, but a good one to consider deeply.

Summary

The three activities presented in this paper are shared with others in teacher education with the hope that you will 1) reply to the author or to the JPACTe Editors with your reactions to them, 2) try them out yourself, and/or 3) invent your own similar kinds of activities to help students learn about constructivism.

References Cited

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