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Constructivist Versus Traditional Methods in Language Education

Emma Agola

Introduction

My experience as a teacher in a British oriented system of education equipped me with the skills needed to approach teaching from what is called the traditional classroom curriculum. I was introduced to constructivism as an alternate method of teaching through a course in Improved Teaching of Secondary School Language Arts. At first I thought this was a great idea and felt that we ought to toss all traces of the traditional approach out the window and fully adopt the constructivist approach. However, this was before I was faced with the practicality of applying all that I had learned in a real life classroom.

In the traditional system that I am accustomed to, the curriculum is prescribed. Grammar lessons focus on grammar, mechanics, spelling and vocabulary lists. Students practice their writing skills by writing essays on assigned topics, in prescribed formats. For literature, students study choices picked from a prescribed set of books such as Romeo and Juliet, The Great Gatsby and To Kill a Mockingbird.

Teaching

The teacher in the traditional classroom is the holder of knowledge, the transmitter of information. The teacher keeps order in the classroom, and delivers the knowledge by way of lectures and textbooks.

Learning

The students in this type of classroom sit still and concentrate on instruction. They are to be seen and not heard unless called upon to speak. The students sit in classrooms where the desks are mostly arranged in rows facing the blackboard. They learn the material through rote memorization and display the evidence of their learning through regurgitation of the material in tests.

Assessment

Students are primarily assessed through tests with a specific number of questions, each of which has one correct answer.

Constructivism in Language Arts Education Curriculum

The material learned by students is not prescribed. It is generated by the joint effort of the teacher and students through inquiry. Grammar and mechanics skills are not taught as separate units in themselves, but are learned in context, as a result of reading and writing. There are no set textbooks and students have the liberty to pick reading material based on their taste and experience.

Teaching

The teacher is primarily a facilitator, rather than the guru on a stage. All student responses are respected and there is neither right nor wrong answers.
Learning

Students play an active role in their learning. They are not only free to speak but are encouraged to actively engage in their own learning. The desks in the classroom are arranged in ways that give the aura of a less rigid environment, so as to facilitate the stimulation of the learners mind.

Assessment

Tests are not used as the sole central basis of evaluating student learning. Assessment is a continuous process in which teachers observe students and focus on what they can do, rather than what they cannot do.

Methods and Application

I was hired as a long-term substitute teacher at a local high school. Excited at the opportunity to implement my newly acquired constructivist skills, I prepared all my lessons with this approach in mind. By the end of the semester, my stance regarding which approach was ideal had changed. I still felt that constructivism was a great idea, but one that needed to be applied alongside the traditional approach in order to strike a healthy balance. We must keep in mind however, that my conclusions are based on the experience of a long-term substitute teacher. A regular teacher may have been faced by a different set of realities.

Classroom Design

The teacher for whom I was substituting must have been familiar with transactional teaching, as her classroom was arranged in a non-traditional way. The student's desks were divided in two groups, which were arranged to face one another and away from the walls. There was just enough space along the middle for the teacher to walk up to the board. At first I thought this was a great semi-casual arrangement, perfect for the establishment and mental stimulation of the community of learners of which I was to facilitate. However, for a class that had had two or three substitute teachers before me, this would not work. The students were already in a 'vacationing' mood and the casual arrangement of desks only served to encourage this attitude. For the students to start learning and for myself to begin teaching, I had to establish some degree of order and authority in the classroom. I decided to rearrange the desks in the old fashioned, traditional, military-like model where all students sat facing the board in straight rows and columns. Indeed, when they came to class the next day, their playful attitude was toned down. In this case, I concluded that, the transactional approach would only have befitted a class of well disciplined ready to learn children, which probably would have been the case had I began teaching at the beginning of the semester.

Objectives

I formulated my objectives in such a manner as to ensure that both reading and writing were practiced and learned in context, as opposed to teaching them as separate units. In deed, I tried to teach some lessons on punctuation by having the students do exercises in their workbooks. I also had them do vocabulary exercises from their textbooks. When asked to write sentences using the same vocabulary, most of the students couldn't. It was also obvious from the grammatical errors in their first essay assignment that they were unable to apply the mechanics they had learned from their punctuation exercises. I then decided to try the constructivist approach where I would
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teach grammar and vocabulary in the context of reading and writing, and this produced better results.

**Materials and Equipment**

In all the class exercises I provided the students with large sheets of blank paper from the library and colored pencils. They seemed to enjoy the change from the drab routine of paper and pen. The large blank sheets were meant to stimulate their minds during the writing and sketching exercises and indeed, judging from their drawing and extensive writing, this was the case.

**Reading**

I asked the students to read aloud, which they enjoyed. I also read for them during each lesson, so as to demonstrate that which I was asking them to do. I introduced each literature lesson with a word web exercise, which jogged the student's minds by having them reach into their minds and put their schema on paper. Once they had their story schema on paper, it was easy for them to build on this and understand the literature they were about to read. We discussed the meanings of any words they didn't understand in the story and in this way; they enriched their vocabulary in context.

**Exercises**

At the end of each poetry lesson, the students composed their own poems based on the same topics. We engaged in fun writing activities and games such as the ‘writers’ roulette’. Being psychomotor in nature, these activities were a welcome change from the monotony of sitting at desks. Since they knew that they wouldn't be penalized for this kind of free writing, the students wrote more imaginatively and enjoyed their writing. However, for the few students who were used to guidance by structure and not facilitation, this freedom served as a flag to be disruptive. They seemed to perform better when an exercise was prescribed. I therefore concluded that student characteristics are a major factor in the approach to teaching and learning.

Some people learn best when given the free hand to lead their own learning while others are by nature, traditional and perform best in heavily structured situations.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

The opportunity to assess grammar in meaningful contexts was great. However, I was left with questions as to if this gave the students enough practice with the skills. During discussions, I could assess understanding through oral responses. This worked for half the class, but was a problem for the other half that didn't want to participate. The constructivist approach offers students the freedom to be voluntary members of the community of learners. I realized however, that not all students want to be members of a community of learners. Some students must be called upon or given cues.
Conclusion
So am I ready to toss the traditional approach to teaching language arts out the window? Not quite. I feel that the transactional approach is highly practical and meaningful, and I have definitely adopted 99% of the ideas I learned. However, in attempting to implement these ideas, I have also developed a fresh respect for the role that the traditional method plays in the classroom. While constructivist learning allows us to explore experiences freely, giving us the free hand to move in whichever direction we want to, the traditional method reminds us that we live in a world that will always have certain expectations of us; a world with competition, laws and yes, even tests.

Emma Agola is a graduate student at Columbus State University. She was formerly an English Teacher in Kenya, East Africa and is now certified to teach in the state of Georgia.