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Imparting Student Centered Pedagogy through Constructivist Development Theory in Art Education

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Abstract

Genuine learning occurs when individuals are able to transform existing knowledge into higher-order modes of thinking that resolve the conflict and contradictions engendered by the experience of novel events. The constructivist approach has important implications for teaching and learning. If individuals construct their understanding of the world through action, then there is no way to simply teach or give students knowledge. Student or learner-centered education has its origins in constructivist developmental theory and in the progressive education movement in the early part of the 20th century. Constructivism refers to the idea that individuals construct their understanding of the world as a product of their actions on the world. Modular art teaching perhaps shall give a teacher the opportunity to share all possible subjects touching creativity, imagination and appreciating art experience and plan his lessons according to the class potential and need of the students and to make him a life-long leaner.

Keywords: Visual Arts, Assignments, Teaching, Experiential Learning

1. Introduction

In recent decades, student centered pedagogy has provided serious challenges to traditional "lecture-and-test" modes of education in colleges and universities. Advocates of student- centered pedagogy generally proceed from the constructivist position that maintains that learners construct their understandings through their actions and experiences on the world.

Student-centered thinking has spawned a burgeoning interest in the use of a variety of different active learning methods in and out of the classroom. These include collaborative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and a variety of other pedagogical methods. Student centered learning is often defined in contradistinction to teacher-centered pedagogy. The idea that students must be active in the construction of knowledge is often understood to imply a diminishing role for the teacher in the learning process. Teachers are called upon to relinquish singular claims to authority or power in the classroom. As a result, the role of the teacher becomes recast as one of coach or facilitator.

The student/teacher-centered dichotomy is built upon a false premise -- namely that it is possible to parse off the active role of the student from the socio-cultural activities of which the student and teacher

are a part. An alternative approach is based upon the socio- cultural-constructivist idea that learning is a form of guided participation in socio-cultural activity. From this view, knowledge in any given discipline is the historical product of socio-cultural processes that have evolved over long periods of time. Such knowledge is preserved and communicated through the cultural vehicle of language. It follows that learning within any given discipline requires mastery of the language-based meanings that define disciplinary knowledge and practice. Such knowledge can only be acquired through active participation in language-mediated learning activities that are structured by more expert individuals. All learning is thus viewed as a form of doing. Pedagogy becomes a task of articulating learning goals and identifying the forms of doing that promote development toward those goals.

2. Rational

Traditional teacher-centered pedagogy is generally defined as a style in which the teacher assumes primary responsibility for the communication of knowledge to students. From this view, because teachers command greater expertise about the subject matter, they are in the best position to decide the structure and content of any given classroom experience. Teacher-centered pedagogy is usually understood to involve the use of the lecture and in art colleges, live demonstrations or presentations, as a primary means of communication in the classroom. The goal of the class room involves the dissemination of a relatively fixed body of knowledge that is determined by the teacher. The lecture format is generally assumed to proceed in a unilateral fashion; the teacher elaborates upon a given body of knowledge from his or her own expert perspective rather than building the content of classroom communication around questions that students might have.

Drawing upon Cicchelli (1983), Hancock, Bray and Nason (2003) define teacher-centered instruction as follows: The teacher (a) is the dominant leader who establishes and enforces rules in the classroom; (b) structures learning tasks and establishes the time and method for task completion; (c) states, explains and models the lesson objectives and actively maintains student on-task involvement; (d) responds to students through direct, right/wrong feedback, provides correct answers; (e) asks primarily direct, recall-recognition questions and few inferential questions; (f) summaries frequently during and at the conclusion of a lesson; and(g) signals transitions between lesson points and topic areas. Teacher-centered pedagogy is often described as being based upon a model of an active teacher and a passive student. In contrast, learner-centered education is based upon the idea of an active student. From this view, the teacher does not function as the primary source of knowledge in the classroom. Instead, the professor is viewed as a facilitator or coach who assists students who are seen as the primary architects of their learning.

Student or learner-centered education has its origins in constructivist developmental theory (DeVries, & Kohlberg, 1997; Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Piaget, 1948/1973) and in the progressive education movement in the early part of the 20th century (Dewey, 1938). Constructivism refers to the idea that individuals construct their understanding of the world as a product of their actions on the world. Piaget's theory of cognitive development is perhaps the best known of constructivist approaches to development. Piaget's theory of knowledge construction stands in opposition to both rationalist and empiricist approaches to the acquisition of knowledge. Rationalist approaches maintain that knowledge is either innate property or a logical product of the mind (Chomsky, 1980; Descartes, 1641/1993; Fodor,

1975).vEmpiricist approaches hold that knowledge is acquired from sensory experience (Hume,1777/1993; Locke, 1689/1996). In contrast to rationalist approaches, Piaget held that knowledge is constructed over time by acting on the world. In contrast to empiricism, Piaget argued against the idea that knowledge and perception constitute mere copies of things seen or experienced. For Piaget, to know the world is to be able to organise it in terms of existing knowledge. One cannot learn anything a contextually; to know an object is to be able to assimilate it to some existing way of knowing. Without the capacity to assimilate objects with existing knowledge, there would simply be no way to make sense of the world.

The possibility of learning occurs when a person encounters novel experiences which cannot be readily understood in terms of existing knowledge structures. The resulting cognitive conflict (or disequilibrium) motivates the learner to rebuild existing knowledge structures in order to accommodate the novel experience. Genuine learning occurs when individuals are able to transform existing knowledge into higher-order modes of thinking that resolve the conflict and contradictions engendered by the experience of novel events. The constructivist approach has important implications for teaching and learning. If individuals construct their understanding of the world through action, then there is no way to simply teach or give students knowledge. All new knowledge is constructed on the basis of existing knowledge. As a result, any attempt to teach a novel concept must take into consideration the student's existing ways of understanding the domain in question. A good teacher is one who is able to engage the student's existing ways of knowing and introduce novelty in such a way as to prompt transformation in the structure and content of a student's knowledge and skills.

Further, if students construct knowledge through action, then it becomes important to provide students with an opportunity to engage in the types of action that will allow them to construct for themselves the knowledge at hand. From this view, to learn is to invent; if students are to engage in genuine learning, they will have to perform the actions that will lead to deep understanding of the concepts in question. Because students will always assimilate novel experience according to their existing knowledge and developmental level, a teacher can never directly teach new concepts. The best that a teacher can do is to provide students with learning opportunities and direction. The constructivist teacher thus relinquishes his role as the expert or focal point in the classroom. Instead, he operates as a facilitator or coach who designs learning activities through which students will create organised structures of knowledge.

3. Methodology

The Role of the Teacher

Mascolo (2005) described a series of different forms and levels of social scaffolding that more expert partners typically use in supporting a learner's development. There is a broad range of processes by which more expert individuals can support the learning and development of less accomplished social partners. The lowest levels of scaffolding occur when more expert individuals simply prompt or remind a child to perform an already mastered action; provide emotional encouragement or frustration management for ongoing activity; or use language to restate or expand a child's utterance. A particularly effective form of scaffolding involves distancing (Sigel et al., 1993). Using distancing strategies, a more

accomplished partner asks questions or makes statements that prompt constructive activity on the part of the learning in a particular direction.

An important goal of student-centered learning is to promote active, self-directed and life-long learners. Student-centered approaches often work to actualise this goal by creating conditions in which students are granted a higher degree of autonomy in the classroom. For example, Sharan and Shaulov (1990) write, "minimising opportunities for pupils to influence the learning process and to exercise personal control over their own work. Self-regulation, the power to make decisions affecting one's own work...are considered to be critical components of high level motivation in respect to carrying out learning tasks" (p. 175). Rice (2006) writes, "it is now widely acknowledged that faculty no longer have full responsibility for the transfer of knowledge" (p. 19). In a review of high school students' access to student-centered pedagogy in science, Smerdon, Burkam and Lee (1999) identified student-centered programs as those that involve making their own choice of science topics to study, designing and conducting their own experiments, and making up methods to solve science problems" (p.7). Warren holds that "students should take on primary responsibility for learning factual information so that class time can be liberated for other issues".

Lectures and tests, cooperative learning, experiential learning, apprenticeships, and independent reading are all culturally organized activities in which students participate. A person does not start off life as an individual and then come to be part of a culture; instead, persons step into and act within already existing socio-cultural process. Their participation in these activities provides the conditions for learning. A student's participation in disciplinary activities is guided by more accomplished others. The concept of guidance is understood here in its broad sense to involve the full range of instruction, scaffolding and support that more expert individuals provide for less expert individuals. Rogoff (1993) invokes the concept of participatory appropriation to refer to the processes by which individual learners construct skills and understandings from their actions in social contexts. Appropriation can be defined as a process of taking and making one's own. Participatory appropriation therefore refers to the process of taking control of meanings and skills that have their origins in an individual's active participation in cultural activities. The concept of participation is a thoroughly interactive one; the student does not take information from the teacher, the lecture, her peers or a book. Instead, she appropriates elements of meaning and skill from what she does with the teacher, the lecture, her peers or a book. The concept of participatory appropriation eliminates the barrier? between the teacher and the student. There is not the teacher and then the student; there is only the dynamic teacher-object-student relation as it evolves over time within cultural contexts. One cannot separate the learner from the social, cultural or disciplinary process of which she is a part.

All Learning is Learning by Doing

All learning occurs by doing; all doing is a form of acting. The concept of action is an integrative one; any given action on the world necessarily involves the coming together of the various psychological processes that we, as psychologists, tend to study as apart from each other – sensing, perceiving, motor action, thinking, feeling, emoting, motivation, etc. To speak of action as the main unit of understanding human functioning renders other psychological processes either as forms of action (e.g., thinking is a form of internalised action) or as aspects of action (e.g., feeling involves the experience of ongoing

activity). The idea that action can function as a fundamental unit of psychological analysis has the capacity to transform our thinking about teaching and learning. If all learning is a form of doing or acting, we can then ask: What types of actions are students and professors engaged in? What types of knowledge and skills (doings) do we want to promote in our students? If all learning occurs by doing, what types of actions will best promote the development of such understandings and skills?

It is easy to think of the lecture-and-test approach to teaching as "passive" and activity-based learning as "active". Perhaps a more illuminating way to think of the active-passive distinction is in terms of the degree of organismic involvement (Sarbin & Allen, 1968) any given activity requires. Although any given action necessarily involves the coordination of multiple subsystems of action, different activities require different degrees of involvement of an organism's subsystems. The tasks of "running up a hill" and "imagining I am running up a hill" both involve the coordination of multiple subsystems; however, running up a hill involves greater involvement of motor, cardiovascular and metabolic systems than imagining running up a hill; whereas imagining running up a hill involves greater participation of visual-imaginative systems than actually running up a hill. Attending to a lecture is also an active process that involves the coordination of multiple subsystems. Learning from a lecture, say, on moral development, is a form of effortful skilled activity. It requires the active coordination of attention to the professor's utterances; the capacity to differentiate what is is less important; skill in organising the professor's commentary on the page in form of meaningful note taking; monitoring and identifying when one is understanding or not understanding the lecture; relating new ideas raised in class to existing knowledge; asking meaningful questions, and so forth. Learning about moral development from a lecture is different from learning about moral development by performing a small study interviewing individuals at different ages about their experience with various moral issues. Each activity is distinct and requires different patterns of organismic involvement.

4. Conclusion

The nature of learning activities in Arts Education includes the creating of art, as well as reflecting on the appreciation, observation, interpretation, critique and philosophising about creative arts. Effective teaching entails identifying what student's gain by doing tasks, and using content. There is a need to look, think, and observe both from an artistic and pedagogical perspective. Modular art teaching perhaps shall give a teacher the opportunity to share all possible subjects touching creativity, imagination and appreciating art experience and plan his lessons according to the class potential and need of the students and to make him a life-long leaner.

As per Rob Roy Kelly, an appropriate definition of pedagogy is systematised instruction or principles that promote student learning. Caleb Gattegno argued that for pedagogical actions to be effective, teaching should be subordinated to learning, which requires that as an absolute prerequisite teachers must understand how people learn. Rather than present facts for memorisation, teachers construct challenges for students to conquer. If the student cannot conquer the challenge easily, the teacher does not tell the answer, but observes and asks questions to determine where the confusion lies, and what awareness needs to be triggered in the student.

Long ago Bernard Shaw critically commented on teachers - “If you can, do; if you can’t, teach.” It is necessary to remember this as a caution because the trend today is almost proving him right. Good designers, creative professionals shy away from teaching, asthey do full time practice because design practice pays several times more than art teaching. An ideal situation would be to make it mandatory for every art and design teacher to practise and motivate every practising designer to impart knowledge through active participation through on-spot demonstration, field trip, industrial visits etc along with regular lectures to impart and motivate students at art and design school. This ensures continuing relevance of education to realities of the society.

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