

**Stop me if you've Heard This One Before: A Constructivist and a Traditionalist Walk
into a Classroom. . .**

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The educational system is under attack more than ever before. A revolution is occurring, a cognitive revolution. At the heart of this revolution lies the constructivist model of education (Brown, 1999). Teachers and administrators are looking for new ways to teach; states are implementing standardized tests to increase accountability; a new breed of teacher is being produced, teachers with more of a constructivist approach. Like other areas of education, the social studies are being affected by the current turmoil.

School children today are being taught with methods that do not facilitate the construction of knowledge (Jadallah, 2000). Most teachers are using methods that would qualify as "traditional." The traditional model is based on a teacher-centered classroom, where the students are viewed as open containers waiting to be filled by teachers. Educating students within the traditional model mainly consists of direct instruction and criterion-referenced assessment through objective tests (White). The traditional model of education does not promote an environment that facilitates students' understanding.

The traditional perspective is a passive process in which students are simply viewed as knowledge receptacles. However, constructivists see the role of the teacher shifting from a source of knowledge to a guide (Grant, 1997). Students walk into the classroom with their own experiences and prior knowledge. It is important for teachers to facilitate an environment conducive for constructing knowledge using students' prior knowledge as the foundation. Copley (1992) views constructivist teachers as facilitators "whose main function is to help students become active participants in their learning and

make meaningful connections between prior knowledge, new knowledge, and the processes involved in learning" (Rice and Wilson, 1999).

Teachers wishing to use student's prior knowledge in order to create appropriate lessons can use prior knowledge interviews. This can be a short quiz prior to starting a new unit or just a class discussion. Whether you facilitate a traditional model classroom or a constructivist model, it is very important to know what your students already know. Students use prior knowledge to help make sense of the new knowledge being constructed. During this process, students learn to think critically and to make informed decisions. Rice and Wilson (1999) believe that only a constructivist classroom will foster a learning environment that will elicit these desired responses.

Constructivists believe that for knowledge construction to occur, a certain type of learning environment must be created. Strommen and Lincoln (1992) use the term "child-driven learning environment" (CDLE) to describe the ideal constructivist classroom. In a CDLE, children have the ability to create their own ideas and to collaborate with their peers, transforming the role of a peer from a competitor to a resource. CDLEs create a feeling of ownership within the realm of the classroom.

Technology and Constructivism

As we proceed into the 21st century, technology has become more of an educational tool than ever before. Technology can be used to create learning environments advantageous to students, such as CDLE's. Previously, educators had to rely exclusively on books for lesson plans and information. Now, teachers can search the World Wide Web for many of their educational needs. Teachers can provide opportunities for students to complete group projects based solely on primary sources,

allowing students to construct their own knowledge. The Internet makes accessible documents that were formerly unavailable to them.

Technology can be used to bridge the gap between traditionalists and constructivists by allowing both to flourish simultaneously. An example would be a teacher giving a direct instruction lesson dealing with slavery. The teacher would have an opportunity to introduce the subject matter in the traditional sense. Following the introduction, the use of student-centered activities could be used to help create meaning.

Students could look at primary sources and create their own understanding about slavery and the society that defended it so fiercely. Traditional and constructivists teaching models can be used simultaneously to create productive learning environments. Technology is just one of the many tools now available to educators.

Although technology is a great resource for teachers, it is not the fix-all solution. Riel (1990) states ". . .new tools alone do not create educational change. The power is not in the tool but in the community that can be brought together and the collective vision that they share for redefining classroom learning" (Strommen and Lincoln, 1992).

If there is going to be educational reform, educators must begin with how students learn and how teachers teach. Brooks and Brooks (1999) note that in learning environments that stress performance, students often come away feeling that techniques and memory are more important than understanding. Furthermore, students who see techniques and memory as more important often cannot recall what they have "learned" weeks or months later. This would indicate that a completely traditional classroom might not be the best learning environment.

Creating Meaning

The goal for constructivism is for students to take in information and to internalize it so as to create meaning. Constructivist teachers do not just want students to simply recite information, they want students have a deep understanding of the material. It is believed that through the traditional model, this cannot be accomplished. To help students construct deeper understandings, constructivist teachers will seek students' points of view in order to gain perspective of what knowledge the student's have already constructed.

All social studies teachers should teach students how to be historians. Bourdillion states:

"If pupils are to learn genuine history they will need to understand how the discipline works, about the basis of historical knowledge, and about what marks off the historical from the practical past. . . Without an understanding of what makes an account historical, there is nothing to distinguish it from the ability to recite sagas, legends, myths or poems"(Vermeulon, 2000).

Students need to begin to think like historians so they will not only learn about history, but also how to interpret history. Textbooks have the tendency to present information from only one perspective. It is important for teachers to help students learn how to ask the right questions and to never take information at face value.

Information learned in school should not be for the sole purpose of passing tests. The purpose for education is to teach individuals lessons that will help them throughout life; this is especially true for the social studies. Social studies has a unique role in education, not only do students need to know the past, they need to know how the past is going to affect the future. Being tested on specific dates and individual facts will not help students become better citizens. It is the role of teachers to give students the tools that will help them to function in society.

Educators should not argue over whose model of education is better. They should focus their attention on what benefits the students the most. Both the traditional and the constructivist models have their advantages and disadvantages. Students will learn information in a traditional classroom; however, they may not fully understand. Likewise, students who are taught in a completely constructivist classroom may easily become confused and/or lost. The ideal classroom takes from both teaching methods to provide the most effective learning environment. It is time for members of the educational system to place students' needs ahead their pride. Stop me if you've heard this one before: A constructivist and a traditionalist walk into a classroom. . .

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