

11.124 Introduction to Education: Looking Forward and Looking Back on Education, Fall 2011

Transcript: Applying a Constructivist Approach

SLATE: Enabling learning through experience

I try to practice what I preach in my class, or practice what I teach in my class, which is that learning happens not from me telling things to students, but from them experiencing things. And I want them to be able to enable that with their own students, and I'm trying to do that in my own class with my students. So, on the first day of class, I might give a lecture for 20 minutes about what the class is about, and that's pretty much it for lecturing for me for the rest of the semester. So, we do a lot of stuff that's discussion-based and activity-based.

I do try to have, I don't think constructivism - From my perspective, I'm not a radical constructivist who says, "Everything needs to be learned by the students on their own." But it's a matter of having, figuring out what those experiences are, how to design them, and then how to engage in conversation and reflection based on those experiences to have students learn about what it means to teach and what it means to learn. So it's about constructing those right situations that I think hopefully foster learning, and we do change that year after year after we realize, "Well, this didn't work so well this year. Maybe we'll change it for next year. Maybe we'll get rid of this and replace it with something else." And then it's a matter of figuring out, for any particular group of students, where I interject myself into the conversation - where I have to sort of ask a critical question, or where I have to offer an opinion, or where I kind of just let the conversation go where it may."

SLATE: Facilitating participation in classroom discussions

Some people really like to talk, and some people really don't like to talk. So sometimes I just let that naturally evolve, and try to be able to gauge whether there's some people who are not talking who would like to be talking, or who could benefit from talking.

One of the reasons why we sort of rotate the responsibilities is that it makes sure that at least at some point for each activity you're up at the front of the room. You're in charge of a Current Events. You're in charge of a Chapter Reading. You're in charge of teaching a lesson. So there are a lot of opportunities where you're required to sort of be engaged at the front of the room, or centrally in the room, even if you're not at the front. And I think that that tries to break down some of the barriers in terms of why some people don't participate in the class, why they sit in the back and are quiet. Once they sort of have that opportunity to come to the front, some of those barriers are broken down and they're more willing to participate.

I don't typically cold-call on people, but we do break up into groups, so sometimes when students are reluctant to talk in a group of 25, they're much more willing when everybody in the group needs to talk with each other.

SLATE: Learning about teaching modalities through a student teaching assignment

The Modes of Teaching activity allows us to do student teaching but in a way that gets everybody engaged and thinking about this. And I think one of the things that students come into the class thinking is that, "Well, the most efficient way to teach is to get up at the front of the room and talk to people. And I'll tell them that, and I can cover so much in an hour. It's really great." And then it's a matter of having them think about, well, what are the benefits of using other activities? What are the benefits of having people do things hands-on? What are the benefits of using other media and hands-on activities that you might do with even a small group of students at the front of the room? And how those fit together.

It's not to say that one of them is better than the other, but it's to think about, what are the ways they fit together, and what are the ways they engage you in different ways? So, it gets people thinking about, what are the merits of these different things? And then also, how do they fit together in ways that may not be obvious? Because it's... sometimes people think about the lecture as the thing that should go first: "I should tell them the stuff, and then they should rehearse it in a lab or an activity." And the way we mix it up, sometimes that comes first. Sometimes the lecture comes first, and sometimes the activity or lab comes first. And it's about understanding, "Wow, that really... diving right into it really gave me some context for this. And then when I went to the lecture the next class period, it actually made a lot more sense because I had already done this activity where the... that lecture was put into some sort of context."

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