

Philosophy of Education for David Chadwell

In a word, I am a constructivist. I believe that knowledge, not mere memorization, is created by individuals at the intersection of meaning and content. Learning is not one way, it is dynamic and, especially in the 21st century, ripples across all content areas. Through a constructivist perspective, learning is empowering and calls upon the engagement of the learner. As such, every child is capable of learning.

In schools, education is the development of understandings, skills, and processes which will enrich and empower the student. The educational process must respect the perspective of the student, their experiences, opinions, and desires. Misunderstandings are doors to learning, opportunities to raise awareness, or challenges to traditionally held beliefs. The teacher is the facilitator, one who creates the opportunities for learning to prepare students for future success in school and life.

As a constructivist educator, I believe in differentiated instruction, incorporation of choices within the classroom, extensive collaboration among learners, and overarching big ideas and essential questions to guide lesson and units. All students come with their own experiences and understandings, and these must be starting points for new learning. Students may begin units through their areas of interest or strengths, but through lessons extend their interests and develop weaknesses. Choices must be provided in the educational process in order for students to make sense of their learning, demonstrate their understandings and questions, and be able to challenge themselves through new skills. Collaboration comes from different students questioning the material throughout the lesson and unit. Big ideas or essential questions are key to ensure that teacher lessons and student questions are connected to a purpose and direction. Without big ideas or essential questions guiding lessons, the classroom could dissolve into disjointed lessons and confusion.

Seeing knowledge as constructed is more apparent as the media talks about the "flat world" and educators articulate 21st century skills. The immediacy with which people can access anyone, everyone, and any information from around the globe demonstrates the flatness of the world. It also shows the world in which we physically walk every day is really made up of and is affected by that which is beyond our horizon. Knowledge as we know it now is not something static. It is something which changes daily, is influenced by all demographic segments of society, and is accessible by everyone. Twenty-first century skills require people to be adaptive at the same time that they have something upon which to adapt. It can't be relative or nihilistic, in which nothing matters. Starting with the perspective of the learner, as a constructivist does, meaning is made by

questioning and connecting new content with old understandings. It is openness to possibilities.

Highlights from my educational career clearly demonstrate my working as a constructivist. As a librarian at the Plymouth Meeting Friends School, each class followed its own inquiry project. For example, third graders were fascinated with the Titanic and researched their own questions and built a scale model of the ship. Fifth- and sixth-graders actually took part in a philosophy unit through the analysis of *The Missing Piece*. While teaching in Tianjin, China I designed the world history course as an examination of history going backwards. Three key events, one of which was the transition of Hong Kong from the British to the Chinese, started our journey. Additional events were categorized into themes and connected to other events throughout the course and posted on our wall. As a sixth grade social studies teacher in South Carolina, students created their own civilizations by selecting items from ancient civilizations and then facing "disasters" and "opportunities" using these items. Students were able to experience, as best they could, the need for governments, religions, and social structures and how these still function today. Overall, as a teacher I structured learning opportunities for students to critically engage content and spur their knowledge.

Once out of the classroom, I continued the belief in constructing knowledge through the development of teachers. As lead teacher in a magnet program in South Carolina, I guided our staff with the belief that we were creating the best middle school experience possible. As such, everything we did needed to fit that expectation. Focusing on the whole child, incorporating an advisory period, and developing the first single-gender opportunity in public middle schools in the state were some of the initiatives taken. Moving into a state government position in the department of education challenged my ability to be a constructivist. Most educators look at state employees as assessors of programs under mandates or ones who provide technical assistance of a specific model. I never fell into either of these roles. As the only statewide coordinator for single-gender education in the United States, I work with educators across the state to better meet the needs of their students. I provide training, ideas, data, and information from multiple perspectives and design processing tasks in order for teachers to make their own meaning of the material and how it impacts their own teaching and their students' learning. Teachers are able to determine which strategies and practices will best meet their needs. Professional development without follow-up from administrators does not work. Constructivist professional development is as powerful as constructivism in the classroom. My book, *A Gendered Choice: Implementing and Creating Single-Sex Schools and Programs*, and my training sessions led throughout the country are guided by the belief that the educator has the skills

necessary to meet the needs of children. My job is to reveal, hone, and challenge these skills.

Constructivism is not easy to maintain within the intense high-stakes testing environment of the United States. More and more pressure is being placed upon educators to deliver a single passing score on the state achievement test. The pressure comes down to students through more mechanistic scope and sequence documents, unit plans from the district or central office, and multiple weeks spent preparing for and taking standardized tests. Students come to see school learning as detached from their lives and something which holds little meaning in the real world. Teachers complain that students just don't want to learn and consequently misbehave. Increased discipline referrals are the result, and the cycle continues.

Within this pressure, constructivism can exist. Teachers can have the freedom and responsibility to start with the students, to provide opportunities for connecting standards to students, to establish thought-provoking and meaningful questions from a student's perspective and to bring content alive for students. I believe the school leadership must create the culture where this can happen.

Within international schools, constructivism can thrive. Beginning with big ideas and essential questions, often within the framework of an International Baccalaureate curriculum framework, teachers can tap into the diverse experiences of their students. IB questions and related projects help connect content to student experiences and assist students with their construction of meaning. One narrow understanding is not predefined. Rather, multiple opportunities for application and expression are fostered.

I see the world as a creative process and students as an integral part of the educational process. My job as an educator is to bring these two together to better both the world and the student. Every day, I challenge teachers and principals across South Carolina and the United States to see their own teaching process in a new light.