

What Constructivist Theory and Brain Research May Offer Social Studies

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During the 1990s, brain research exploded and educators began to explore the implications of the research for teaching and learning (Caine and Caine, 1991.) Constructivist theories have a long tradition in disciplines such as psychology. Constructivism has also influence education through recent paradigm shifts in assessment (Allenman and Brophy, 1998) and in curriculum and teaching in science and mathematics (Shifter, 1996). It is only very recently, however, that constructivism is appearing in the social studies literature (Schuerman and Yell, 1998). We believe that there is unrealized potential for constructivist theory in social studies.

While other core subjects have moved toward student-centered, experiential, hands-on learning and constructivist learning strategies, social studies had remained largely teacher centered (Hope, 1998.) Much of social studies teaching and learning is geared to the transmission of information through the use of a single textbook, the lecture method and teacher-controlled questions and answers strategies. However, a more student-centered, constructivist approach in social studies would incorporate multiple and varied sources of information, increase emphasis on group processes, and encourage student generated questions to guide inquiry. By engaging with citizenship concepts in this way, students would learn to view issues and problems from different angles and identify multiple perspectives, as well as develop their own viewpoints. In this way, the application of constructivist theory to social studies would result in the development of deeper understandings.

Constructivism is a theory about the nature of knowledge. While there are different interpretations of constructivism, their common denominator seems to be a belief that knowledge is created by people (Phillips, 1995). Knowledge is individually constructed and the teacher's role as facilitator is to pose problems that challenge student's conceptions of reality. The teacher's role is to be a collaborator who participates with the students in constructing reality by engaging in open-ended inquiry that elicits and addresses student misconceptions. Constructivist theory focuses on the individual as an active constructor of meaning rather than a passive recipient of knowledge. Learning is viewed as a complex process involving the interaction of past experiences and new experiences.

We now know a great deal more about the connection between the brain and learning; it is these connections that we believe can inform curriculum and instruction. Exposing students to a variety of problem solving approaches acknowledges the complexity of the brain. Constructivist views DO have implications for teaching and learning in social studies. While the reflective inquiry method is not new in social studies, it seems to be more of a theoretical stance than a practical application in many social studies classrooms (McKay, 1998).

We contend that constructivist theory, supported by brain research necessitates radical change in the design and implementation of social studies curricula. Such curriculum change would recognize and celebrate the student as an active constructor of his or her own meanings within a community of others who provide a forum for the social negotiation of shared meanings.

Instruction approaches utilized today that are called "inquiry" must be closely examined to determine if they do in fact incorporate the constructivist elements of the reflective inquiry approach. Social studies from a reflective inquiry orientation is grounded in the belief that students must interact with ideas and things in order to make knowledge for themselves. In a traditional classroom an invisible and imposing, at times, impenetrable barrier between student and teacher exists through power and practice. In a constructivist classroom, by contrast, the teacher and the student share responsibility and decision making. The environment is democratic, the activities are student-centered, and the students are empowered by the teacher who operates as a consultant. No longer is the teacher seen as an expert who knows the answers to the questions he or she has created. The goal is to produce a democratic classroom that provides meaningful learning for autonomous learners.

While the reflective inquiry tradition of social studies is a powerful model, we contend that it remains an unfulfilled possibility in many social studies classrooms. We believe that constructivist theory offers social studies educators a renewed opportunity to make inquiry teaching and learning in social studies a reality.