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Constructivism, Meaning Making, and Breaking News

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Abstract

Constructivism and authenticity can be achieved in online classes through the use of current events, including breaking news stories. Used in communications courses, including media and society, intercultural communication, and public relations, this practice is also relevant to social studies, education, psychology, and management courses. Learning through real-world events engages students and faculty alike because they are applying concepts and theories to real topics requiring real solutions, decision-making skills, and ethical and critical thinking. Embedding this practice into pedagogical theory enhances the authenticity of the practice itself.

Introduction

A grassroots revolution unfolded in Egypt, captivating people worldwide through social media as the region faced continued unrest. A nuclear crisis engulfed Japan in addition to the material, human, and economic devastation caused by a 9.0-magnitude earthquake and massive tsunami waves. A 7.0-magnitude earthquake ravaged Haiti. Consumer complaints spurred massive recalls of Toyota vehicles. Plumes of volcanic ash from an Icelandic eruption disrupted air travel, stranding passengers worldwide for days. These topical breaking news events engage students to apply the concepts they are learning in the academic environment to real-life events and controversies. Enhancing critical thinking and civic and social involvement, the incorporation of current news events into the adult learning environment promotes constructivist learning in an authentic way.

Shifting course content to accommodate breaking news events brings contextual relevance into the learning environment. This "event-based learning" is notably appropriate for adult learners. As defined by scholar Sebastian de la Chica (2003), "event-based learning refers to teaching activities that employ either historical or emerging events from the real world to achieve a pre-defined set of learning objectives" (Introduction section, para. 2). However, breaking news and emerging events require nimbleness on the part of both instructor and students to apply knowledge now. This shifting and impromptu analysis of course concepts through breaking news aligns with constructivist learning theory and real-world authentic learning opportunities. In addition it enhances global connections to course content and increases student participation due to topical interest and relevance.

Constructivism and Education

Constructivism, as a theory of knowledge and of learning, is also a teaching practice. A broad term with several strands of thought, constructivism has been viewed as psychological and sociological, although "there has been a trend towards a synthe-sis of the two, with advocates believing that knowledge is constructed individually but mediated socially" (Felix, 2005, p. 86). Scholars John R. Savery and Thomas M. Duffy (1995) summarize three key tenets of constructivism: "Understanding is in our interactions with the environment;" "Cognitive conflict or puzzlement is the stimulus for learning and determines the organization and nature of what is learned;" and "Knowledge evolves through social negotiation and through the evaluation of the viability of individual understandings" (pp. 31-32, emphasis in original). Thus, constructivism is both a theory and process of knowing, where students are active in meaning making, as noted by educators M. Gail Jones and Laura Brader-Araje (2002). According to Jones and Brader-Araje (2002):

> It is through checking out our understandings and perspectives with others that we develop a sense of the viability of ideas. This process of idea testing can be seen in the classrooms of teachers who value students' ideas and promote the process of critical thinking. (Defining Constructivism section, para. 7)

In sum, the main components of constructivism include meaning making, critical thinking, and the active role of the student.

Vygotsky's social theory of learning contributed to the constructivist philosophy that encompasses interaction between the individual and personal knowledge and experiences and others (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Jaramillo, 1996). Vygotsky's learning theory was directed at children, but the basic principles can be extrapolated to higher education instructional practices. Vygotsky's approach would support experiential learning as well as the instructor facilitating learning in a social environment where students construct meaning, and learning builds on the thinking of others (Jaramillo, 1996). Addressing constructivism at the university level, Lisa Schweitzer and Max Stephenson (2008), both with university professional programs, explained:

> For constructivists, learners are not passive receptors of knowledge provided by an instructor. Instead, students

construct meanings for concepts. These are filtered through the "lens" of their expectations and values. As a result learning is best undertaken in "real-world" contexts in which students may acquire and test concepts. Constructivists argue that instructors teach best by posing meaningful questions—or better still, supporting learners as they discover relevant issues to address. (p. 585)

Many online educators have embraced constructivism as a philosophy for quality online learning and learner-centered focus (Gulati, 2008).

Vygotsky, whose pioneering work took place in the 1920s and 1930s, lived in an era when online learning, let alone the computer, did not exist. Today online classrooms can provide as rich a social interaction as traditional face-to-face classrooms, even with asynchronous discussion forums. Current and breaking news events prompt students to construct new knowledge by incorporating or connecting previous knowledge and/or experience into the analysis and evaluation of social, political, or economic issues and information. This illustrates constructivist teaching and supports constructivist philosophy. Susan Hanley (1994) of the Maryland Collaborative for Teacher Preparation explained:

> The goal [in constructivist teaching] is for the learner to play an active role in assimilating knowledge onto his/her existing mental framework. The ability of students to apply their school-learned knowledge to the real world is valued over memorizing bits and pieces of knowledge that may seem unrelated to them. (pp. 8-9)

The value of using mass media in constructivist teaching is that it relies on student interpretation based on prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs to construct meaning. This aligns with each individual's own practice of information processing during media exposure. According to communications scholar W. James Potter (2009), when a person is confronted with media messages, s/he filters out some messages and pays attention to messages that capture one's attention through key words, sounds, or concepts that

trigger one's interest or concern. The individual matches meanings to previously learned or encountered symbols. When the individual has a personal, educational, or professional information goal to "transform messages they take in and create meanings for themselves" (Potter, 2009, p.110), meaning is constructed using one's knowledge, experiences, and beliefs to interpret and evaluate the message. This manner of coping with the deluge of media messages is expanded from the individual's information-processing practice into the constructivist learning environment of meaning making.

Authenticity

Authentic learning is a feature of constructivist tenets. Associated with real-life scenarios and practices, authentic learning also consists of activities and topics that have impacts past the classroom and into the real world (Petraglia, 1998). As active participants in learning, students use their knowledge to engage with real-world problems. According to Australian academic course developers (Stein, Isaacs, & Andrews, 2004) in a case study of authenticity in a university classroom:

> We use the word "authentic" in association with student learning in general, with classroom environments (face-to-face, online, distance, and so on), with learning opportunities, with activities, in relation to the nature of the "real" world beyond the classroom, as well as in relation to student personal meaning making…Authentic classroom practice is, therefore, that which reflects, for the students, a combination of personal meaning and purposefulness within an appropriate social and disciplinary framework. (p. 241)

Authentic Problems, Current Events

Incorporating current events and breaking news into curricular practice supports both constructivist theory and authentic

learning. Arguably, the twenty-first century can be characterized as media driven. Students use computers to research and write, and they interact socially via interactive Web tools. Information flows in global networks, and news events are broadcast locally, nationally, and globally immediately, with commentary flying from diverse directions. As a result of the globalization and flow of media, events—from crimes to celebrity follies—are dissected, analyzed, and discussed in-depth in diverse ways and without regard to geography or personal investment.

Examples of current events and breaking news are used to advance critical thinking by applying concepts from the discipline as well as by making connections to issues and experiences outside the classroom. The mass media contribution to constructing social realities, values, and identities makes the articles and broadcasts it produces relevant to exercises in meaning making and problem solving. Using these media texts to develop discussions on the course Discussion Board, as well as topics of journal or blog entries, promotes constructivist meaning making, critical thinking, student involvement, and real-world value.

Although using current events or emerging news stories to facilitate learning communications, business, psychology, or social studies concepts does reflect constructivist learning, reflecting and commenting on current events or emerging news stories through blogs and/or journals cements its position in constructivist practice. In effect, this is event-based learning since real-world events are used to achieve learning objectives and key concepts.

When the Virginia Tech massacre occurred in spring 2007, the instructor of a media and society class shifted content to look at the coverage of the event. Students took the breaking news story of the college shootings and discussed news vis à vis construction, context, balance, and perspective. When radio personality Don Imus used racially derogatory comments about the Rutgers women's basketball team in spring 2007, students engaged in discussions about racial and gender stereotypes, emotional intelligence, free speech, and knowledge structures. These stories required shifting the discussions and applying concepts to current topics. The discussions met course learning objectives, including the need to apply skills to critically analyze media construction and content, and to analyze and recognize diverse subject positions interpreting media representations as well as those reflected in media representations. At the end of the course, a student commented, "As unfortunate as the events were, I feel that the Imus and Virginia Tech stories were perfectly timed and great for this class. To me I learned more from attaching our readings to these than I did the rest of the questions" (personal communication, June 15, 2007). Another student wrote, "Modifying the course structure to incorporate breaking news events that helped learning was fun" (personal communication, June 15, 2007).

An introductory anthropology class looked at the unfolding Haiti earthquake in January 2010 and addressed the following anthropological queries: How do power and wealth impact disaster recovery? How do cultures remember natural disasters? What are the effects of displacement from one's space, place, home, and community (all that help define one's identity)? What cultural attitudes and beliefs do relief agencies need to take into account as they provide aid? What are the coping mechanisms supported by a culture? What is the traditional knowledge of the environment and medicine? With these questions students were encouraged to think critically about their own and other cultures' beliefs and practices and to examine and explore cultural differences, all of which are course learning objectives.

These topical, current events touched students' lives, and raising the topic in discussion forums prompted a high percentage of participation as well as in-depth discussion. Students in an intercultural communication class jumped at the opportunity to analyze civil disobedience, online activism, and government shuttering of Internet access in Egypt in early 2011 as well as the health, economic, technological, and cultural reactions to the triple disaster that hit Japan in March 2011. One student wrote in his journal, "I find it strangely appropriate that we're studying the interaction of media and technology with intercultural communication in the same week that the world is watching the disaster recovery efforts under way in Japan" (personal communication, March 12, 2011), and he proceeded to analyze the images and communications coming from the epicenter of the disaster. Another student wrote about this class discussion as well as class study of cultural

parenting and family structure based on a newly released controversial book about a self-proclaimed Chinese "Tiger Mom" with strict, authoritarian parenting behavior: "The Japanese earthquake and the cultural behaviors seem very relevant to our book knowledge we gained this quarter. The Tiger Mom discussion question was a good example of using a current event on the discussion board" (personal communication, March 15, 2011).

Other examples can include using the massive recall of Toyota vehicles in 2010 to evaluate public relations practices and utilizing articles regarding annual salary surveys in math and statistics courses. The 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland, which spread ash and disrupted air travel across western and northern Europe, can become an impromptu business and public relations case study. A hurricane's wrath, such as Hurricane Katrina, can be introduced into meteorology curriculum, and "while this event-based approach to teaching science may result in less curriculum coverage, students will be more likely to remember the scientific concepts addressed and to remember enjoying the study of science" (de la Chica, 2003, Event-based Science section, para. 1). De la Chica (2003) also discusses disaster coverage in event-based learning:

> These activities match the qualifications of *constructivism* because the student extends his/her knowledge through self-directed exploration and manipulation of the relevant disaster scientific data. This account makes explicit references to students not only achieving the level of comprehension of the natural disaster but also reaching the level of *evaluation* of media reports related to the studied natural disaster as an educational goal. (Idealized Science Education section, para. 1, italics in original)

Using current events to illustrate societal relevance of particular disciplines focuses "on learners becoming accomplished analysts of domain-specific articles in the news as a result of individual research and collaborative group discussion activities" (de la Chica, 2003, Archetype Characterization section, para. 3). Real-world events, illustrated through breaking news, can also "serve as entry points into specific curricu-lum topics and to stimulate learner's interest on the related subject matter" (de la Chica, 2003, Archetype Characterization section, para. 4).

Using social forms of media, such as blogs and journals, enhances student satisfaction and connection with course concepts. Both journals and blogs have been used in an intercultural communications class, where reflection on current events and life experiences is based on artifacts, including those addressing current events. Wrote a student after the course, "I viewed the journal as a personal journey to a better understanding of not only the world around me but of my own self and history as well" (personal communication, Sept. 15, 2010). In their journals and blogs, students pulled articles about the 2010 story of the trapped Chilean miners to think critically and reflexively about culture as well as discuss challenges in intercultural interaction. Project management students could focus on international cooperation and problem-solving skills, assessing risk, and leadership style.

According to instructional developer Joyce Seitzinger (2006), "one of the most obvious ways to use blogs in constructive learning is as an online learning journal in which students reflect on their perceptions of the learning materials and on their own learning process" (p. 6). Seitzinger (2006) wrote the following about blogs, but it can also apply to active discussion forums:

> It is almost impossible to be a passive learner when reading comments on your own posts and responding in comments to others' blog posts. It forces learners to engage higher cognitive skills. You cannot just browse; you need to ponder, formulate an opinion about what's read, and then effectively articulate those thoughts; in other words be an active learner. (p. 8)

Conclusion

Constructivism is applicable to adult education since its basic tenets involve flexibility, relevance, and learner ownership.

Meaning construction, as a basic information-processing task during media exposure, is relevant in constructivism as "the mass media allow[s] for and even demand[s] the divergence of meaning across audience members" (Potter, 2009, p. 176). Discussion forums, blogs, and journals used to respond to current events and breaking news by applying course concepts are tools for constructivist learning and meaning making. They are problem-based in real-world events, learner centered in a social context, and authentic learning activities due to the critical investigation of real-world cultural and social contexts in practice. The immediacy of information dissemination makes this a particularly successful practice in the online course. The online discussion forum, blogs, and journals enable an interactive, learner-centered approach since the formative activities inherent in the forums, blogs, and journals are readily and quickly adaptable to incorporating topical discussion opportunities. The challenge for instructors and students alike is the sudden shift from a scheduled set of discussion questions and possible reordering of topics. But the benefits of relevance and critical thinking outweigh the extra time required to rethink course organization while the course is in session.

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