Social Constructivism & Social Studies

By: Ryan Teague
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Introduction

The goal of social studies educators is to foster the development of effective citizens (Brown, 1999). To properly approach this goal, there needs to be a shift from what Dewey called the “traditional” structure of education (Dewey, 1938). In the current or traditional method, social studies is taught through teacher-centered activities that emphasize the memorization of facts and concepts. One proposed method to change this process is the application of the theory of social constructivism. Social constructivism focuses on the role that social interaction plays in creating knowledge. According to this model knowledge is formed based on social interaction and social consensus. It is from this perspective that social studies could be effectively addressed. “Social studies teachers must encourage their students to engage in collaborative learning, use high-order thinking skills, construct their own knowledge about social studies concepts, and relate classroom lessons to their lives and experiences” (Rice & Wilson, 1999, p.32). This can be achieved through the use of social constructivism in social studies classrooms which would change the way that the classrooms are managed and the role of the teacher and learner. It would create a learning community in the classroom that is not just focused on improving achievement and learning skills, but also helps students to grow mentally (Nuthall, 2000). If social constructivism is applied properly in the social studies classroom the ultimate goal that all educators should strive toward will be accomplished, to benefit the students.

Social Constructivism

Overview of theory

Social constructivism is one of the three main schools of thought in the constructivist theory of education. This theory has been developed and supported by many educational
Social Constructivism & Social Studies

Theorists like Kenneth Gergen and John Dewey. The basic principal behind social constructivism is that the knowledge is constructed through social interaction, and is the result of social processes (Gergen, 1995). In the model of social constructivism reality, is formed by a social consensus and is based on social interaction. For the knowledge to be “truthful”, it must match the social consensus and be functional. This knowledge is only viable if the knowledge works.

Social constructivism requires one primary element, two or more participants. These participants must be involved in some form of interaction for knowledge to be constructed (Gergen, 1995). The participants must come together in some form of interaction with some knowledge of prior social experience. The participants then engage in some form of interaction, generally by use of language and/or actions. The use of language can be very flexible in determining the exact meaning of the participants’ actions. The participants’ actions can greatly influence the course of the interaction also. In the interaction between the participants’ prior knowledge is exchanged in a transaction. In the transaction the participants negotiate a meaning. This meaning does not have to be strictly language based, but can be a product of actions. Knowledge is created as a result of this transaction. After this transaction occurs both parties leave the interaction with some form of knowledge gained.

There are various factors that can influence a social interaction other than language. One factor is culture. Cultures can influence social interaction by placing differing values and belief on the participants (Gergen, 1995). Another factor that can influence the situation is a participant’s perspective. Perspective is the point of view form which a participant sees the interaction. In social interactions knowledge is created between the participants, not in their minds.
A primary factor in the social constructivist model is the use of language. In social constructivism language is achieved through the before mentioned interactions. In the interaction a negotiated meaning occurs between two or more participants causing the language make sense. Language is context dependent. How language is used and perceived is determined by where the interaction occurs. The primary function of language in social interactions is to serve a communal function (Gergen, 1995). Language helps the participants to function with in a community and interact with others.

**Gergen’s View**

Kenneth Gergen is one of the leading supporters and developers of the social constructivist school of thought. It is essential understanding the social constructivist theory that you understand Gergen’s view of the subject. Gergen supports a form of social constructivism referred to as social constructionism. This theory is very similar to the social constructivist theory on how people create knowledge

One problem that Gergen identifies is the problem of knowing other minds (1995). This is essential to his theory, because like social constructivism, social constructionism requires two separate actors. Gergen (1995) suggest, “that the contents of these minds are expressed in words and actions, how are we to determine what internal states these words and actions are attempting to express? The problem is especially perplexing because we are confronted only by word and actions” (Gergen, 1995, p21). Being unaware of what the other party brings to an interaction is what allows for knowledge to be generated during the course of the interaction. This is due to the fact that others’ prior knowledge, as well as your own, allow one to construct a new meaning, or knowledge, after an interaction occurs. Gergen (1995) further argues that the meaning of words and actions “is not derived by comparing them against the subjectivity of their authors, but
Gergen focuses on language as being the primary method by which knowledge is constructed. To emphasize this he posits three main points. First Gergen (1995) first claims that an understanding of language is a product of social interdependence. In this view methods of negotiation, cooperation, conflict, and other social settings are of primary interest. Next Gergen asserts, “meaning in language is context dependent” (Gergen, 1995). This suggests that the language used in a social interaction is only relevant to that particular interaction. Finally, he mentions language primarily serves a communal function (Gergen, 1995). Language is used in community settings and serves the needs of that community. Out of this use of language, knowledge is constructed in the form of a social consensus.

Dewey’s Role

Social constructivism is commonly thought of as an educational theory that has been of recent development. However, the modern foundations for this theory were laid in the early 1900s by the work of John Dewey and his colleges at his “laboratory school” in Chicago (Dewey, 1938). Dewey did not call his educational theories “constructivist,” but he referred to them as “progressive.” One of Dewey’s (1938) works Experience and Education deals with issues that are at the very foundation of social constructivism.

Dewey was concerned with the conditions of what he called the “traditional” view of education. His goal was to provide a solution to the educational problem. “The solution of this problem requires a well thought-out philosophy of the social factors that operate in the constitution of individual experience” (Dewey, 1938). A primary focus of his theory is the role of individual experience. A key component of this “experience” is the role of social factors. The
two main social factors that Dewey considers are situations and interactions. Situations can best be referred to as the surroundings in which an experience takes place. Dewey defines interaction as a “chief principal for interpreting an experience in its educational force” (Dewey, 1938). This stresses the importance that Dewey felt that interaction played in the role of education and knowledge construction. To illustrate this belief, Dewey used an example of children teaching each other how to play a new game. He did this to show how children can very easily develop new knowledge by interaction among themselves. The goal of his “progressive” education was to emphasis methods like this in an effort to educate the children more effectively. His work was very instrumental in laying the foundation for the social constructivist theory.

Social Studies

In order to understand how social constructivism can be applied in the social studies classroom it is important to understand the concept of social studies. The fundamental purpose of social studies is to educate students on how to become effective citizens (Brown, 1999). The President of the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS), Richard Theisen, further enforces this, “We have a mission, the education of children and young adult for citizenship” (Theisen, 2000). The NCSS is a professional organization that ran and supported by social studies educators nation wide. The NCSS supports the use of constructivist methods in the classrooms (NCSS, 1994).

The discipline of social studies is very complex and dynamic. The social studies content requires the educator to have a broad educational background. The subject areas commonly associated with social studies are history, geography, political science, and economics. However, social studies teachers often have to cover other subject areas such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and many others (Martorella, 1997). This diverse subject
matter places a social studies teacher in a position where they must be well trained in a variety of disciplines.

Currently, in many classrooms, social studies are taught through teacher-centered activities. This involves techniques like memorization of facts, lectures, and a heavy reliance on textbooks (Rice & Wilson, 1999). This style of teaching is what Dewey and many others have referred to as the “traditional” model of education. This “traditional” view of communicating information in social studies classrooms is paradoxical when one thinks of the way that the material, facts, and processes, are determined. The material that students in social studies classroom are exposed to is socially constructed. For example the facts and concepts in textbooks are decided upon by a group of authors and editors. They come to a consensus and deem that this material is essential for the students to understand. There needs to be an effort to teach the materials they same way that are constructed, socially.

Social Constructivism in the Social Studies Classroom

When the educational philosophy of social constructivism is applied to a classroom environment, it impacts every facet of the class. Social constructivism affects the way a classroom is managed and the role the teacher plays in its operation. Social studies can be implemented in a variety of ways using the social constructivist position of education. Some methods that social constructivism can appear in the classroom are cooperative learning activities and the use of technology. Regardless of its application, social constructivism is a means of breaking away from the “traditional” educational model.

Classroom Management

A social constructivist classroom provides the students multiple methods from which the students can acquire new knowledge. If a teacher is successfully applying the methods of social
constructivism it is necessary that they reevaluate and reconstruct their methods of classroom management. Social studies educators must remember that the purpose of social studies is to create effective citizens and that these methods may require more “behind the scenes” time than the “traditional” methods.

One aspect of the class that must be changed is the way lessons are planned. The teacher must realize that the world is very complex and that multiple perspectives exist on nearly every issue (Rice & Wilson, 1999). This will stray away from typical factual America centered information that social studies students receive under then “traditional” system. To assert the social constructivist method the teacher needs to provide the students with lessons that they can employ in real world situations (Jonassen, 1991). If the teacher addresses this effectively then they will be able to present the material in complex learning environments that will foster authentic experiences (Driscoll, 1994). It is essential that the content and skills that the students develop are made relevant to the students (Doolittle & Hicks, 2001). This will allow for the learning to become interesting to the student and in turn it will cause the students to become more attentive and eager (Ediger, 2000). Aside from causing the students to become more attentive it will also make the learning experience more personal to the students, because it will allow the to feel some ownership and value to the knowledge that they acquired. One method for illustrating this is for teachers to organize the student learning and instruction around specific important events (Borich, 1997). This is especially effective when teaching a lesson on a controversial issue. When a major controversy is involved it can provide the multiple perspectives required to form a wider understanding of an issue. A final result of this is that student will begin to process what they have learned on multiple levels, which leads to higher-level thinking and strays away from strict factual information (Rice & Wilson, 1999).
Along with providing the students with complex issues and multiple perspectives the
teacher should also offer a variety of formats in which the information can be presented (Nuthall,
1999). According Ediger (2000), “Social studies need to use a variety of methods and
procedures to assist each pupil to achieve as optimally as possible. Learners individually possess
diverse learning styles and intelligences” (Ediger, 2000, p35). The key element here is that not
every student learns in the same way, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to determine the
best way that his or her students learn. Social constructivism provides various ways to access the
students’ multiple intelligences. Problem solving activities provide the student with an
opportunity be exposed to an authentic learning experience (Cole & Wilson, 1991).

Not only do teaching methods need to be varied, but also assessment measures should not
always follow the same format. Brooks and Brooks (1993) suggest, “Assessment is interwoven
with teaching and occurs through student exhibits and portfolios” (Brook & Brooks, 1993, p96).
This is essential since students learn in a variety of ways; then they should be assessed in a
variety of ways. Social constructivism also allows for a majority of the activities and lessons to
be student-centered. Researchers place heavy emphasis on student-centered instruction in the
constructivist pedagogy (Driscoll, 1994). If student-centered actives are employed the student
will begin to develop a greater confidence in his or her knowledge and feel more connected to
the work. When this happens a teacher can then turn the classroom environment into a “learning
community” (Eggen & Kauchak, 1997). A “learning community” creates an atmosphere that is
more interactive than that of the “traditional” class. One of its key functions of a learning
community is that the students turn to each other and try to negotiate a solution when conflict in
learning occurs.

**The Role of the Teacher in a Social Constructivist Classroom**
One primary function of the teacher in a social constructivist classroom is that they take the role of a guide and a facilitator, or in simpler terms a coach. Doolittle and Hicks (2001) state, “Constructivism requires that teachers become facilitators of knowledge not conduits. The teacher’s role is to create experiences within which students will learn and then guide the students through those experiences, a form of scaffolding” (p.11). In this model the teacher is responsible for guiding the students through the specific experiences or activities. This allows for the students to construct their own knowledge through exploration, rather than the “traditional” educational model that simply provide the students with the correct answer or fact (Rice & Wilson, 1999).

Another role of the teacher in this knowledge exploration is that they redirect the focus and rationale of the lesson. Brown (1999) contends that it will “promote thinking in classrooms and in the evaluation process” (p. 328). A key factor in the teacher playing the role of the facilitator and guide is to perform “in an interactive manner, mediating the environment for the students” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). The teacher will provide the structure and example for the way classroom activities are conducted.

**Cooperative Learning**

There are some specific activities that blend in quite well with the social constructivist school of thought. It is important that you “Embed learning in social experience” (Honebein, 1996). After all, for social constructivism to work there is a great need for some form of social interaction. One example of this is through cooperative learning. Cooperative learning allows for learning and development to become social collaborative activities (Rice & Wilson, 1999). This type of activity requires that students work primarily in groups (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). The groups do not have to be of any certain size, large or small. To establish group size a social
A studies teacher should take into account the size of the class and the complexity of the activity that is being performed. Cooperative learning activities should not be simple activities that are called “group work” and that require the students to just search for answers to fill out a worksheet. The activities need to focus on complex issues that have multiple perspectives. Cooperative learning should require the students to collaborate and critically analyze the issue at hand; this will cause them to develop higher-level thinking skills. Some sample cooperative learning activities are group problem solving, group inquiry, simulations, and debates. The activities encourage creativity, value, and foster higher-level thinking (Brown, 1999).

**Technology and its Emerging Role**

Today we live in a society that is becoming increasingly dependent on the use of technology, specifically computers. One sector of society that technology is gaining importance in is education. This holds true in social constructivist classrooms as well. Rice and Wilson (1999) state, “in the social studies classroom, technology can be incorporated to support many aspects of social constructivism” (Rice & Wilson, 1999). Computer technologies provide many tools that can be employed in a social constructivist social studies classroom. Some various types include simulation and strategy software, multimedia presentations, databases, and telecommunications (Rice & Wilson, 1999). By using technology to assist in the classroom it will provide the students with a more dynamic and interactive environment.

Implementing the use of technology also aids the social studies teacher in his or her education of future citizens. One primary way that technology aids teachers is through the use of the Internet. With today’s expansive Internet resources teachers are able to go and view primary sources, photographs, transcripts, audiovisual clips, and other sources from the convenience of a computer (Rice & Wilson, 1999). This will allow the teacher to present virtual experiences that
in other times would require taking the students place that would be inaccessible to them under normal conditions.

The use of technology in the classroom needs to meet certain criteria to coincide with the constructivist perspective. Teachers who desire to implement the use of technology in the classroom should have some guiding principals that apply to their methods. “Learning and instruction are facilitated when teachers and students are prepared to use technology as a tool for inquiry” (Doolittle & Hicks, 2001, p12). The technology of today provides teachers and students with an excellent tool to assist in inquiry. “Learning is enhanced when technology is use to create authenticity within the classroom” (Doolittle & Hicks, 2001, p13). The variety of uses of technology allow for the students to construct knowledge that they have developed. Since technology has such a wide range of uses it will allow the students to pursue topics that are of personal interest to them (Doolittle & Hicks, 2001). The use of these technologies will allow the students to continue to construct meaning in their knowledge, because the use of technology in the classroom builds on their prior knowledge. It is import for teachers who employ the constructivist role of technology in the classroom to view “technology-as-partner” and not as a substitute for instruction.

Conclusions

Social constructivism is a theory on how people develop and acquire knowledge. Its main premise is that knowledge and reality are based upon social consensus. This is a theory that challenges the “traditional” model that a majority of social studies programs institute. This “traditional” model places emphasis on the memorization of facts and concepts. There needs to be a reform in the way social studies is delivered to the students. The social constructivist theory needs to play a crucial role in the way the content of social studies is presented to the students.
A social constructivist approach would call for a number of changes to occur in the social studies classroom. Classroom management and the role of the teacher would have to change from their traditional roles. A key aspect of this would be to start presenting material in a fashion that shows the complexity and multiple perspectives of real world situations. The teacher’s role would shift to that of a guide and facilitator. The classroom environment would begin to take the shape of a “learning community” where interaction is key. In order for changes of this nature to occur in the classroom the teachers need to be well versed in theory and understand its implications (Brown, 2000). Once the theory and its applications are understood educator will be able to effectively teach social studies to their students.

References


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