Constructivist Perspectives for Online Education

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the real online classroom experiences of one instructor and instructional designer, and attempts to articulate how a constructivist perspective can go hand-in-hand with a competency based model to make education more meaningful and relevant for students and educators. The paper offers a concept map for how learning takes place within this model, and examines the behaviors and practices of students and educators that best facilitate learning in a constructivist environment. In conclusion, this paper encourages all educators and instructional designers to keep finding new ways to actively encourage constructivist learning habits for our online students. This paper inspires us all to think beyond the banking theory of education, and to continue to help construct new meaning and knowledge for our educational institutions.

Introduction

It is hardly possible to imagine a world without online education, since it has become such an integral part of the curriculum offerings in even the smallest of schools. And yet, online education is just in its infancy. It is still a new frontier, and we online educators and instructional designers are the quiet pioneers who are exploring the possibilities on a daily basis, along with our students. This paper reflects on the real online experiences of one instructor and instructional designer, and attempts to articulate how a constructivist perspective can go hand-in-hand with a competency based model to make education more meaningful and relevant for both students and educators.

Western Governors University

I came to Western Governors University (2015) with a doctorate in Higher Educational Administration, and a post-doctoral certification in Instructional Technology and Online Learning. I also have years of coaching experience, so the role of mentor felt like a natural fit for me, and I also had set a personal goal to find a position where I could work from my home, for a number of reasons. The WGU model is a new one in higher education, so I did my research before applying. I was intrigued by the possibilities, and the rest is history. I am currently a Course Mentor for the College of Information Technology, and I support students in graduate-level Technical Writing, IT Management, Globalization, and Leadership courses for the MSITM program (Master of Science in IT Management).

When I saw an EdMedia Conference category highlighting new roles for instructor and learner, I knew I wanted to attempt to articulate this very new model, and how it might serve as a model even in more traditional teaching/learning environments. You see, at WGU I am here to support a student who reaches out to me, or who responds to my queries. But students are not required to interact with Course Mentors. They can be entirely independent learners if they so choose; and many students do move through their degree plan in a determinedly independent way.

Competency-based learning at WGU means that each course has a set of competencies that must be met by the student in order to ‘pass’ that course. These can be objective assessments, which are more traditional exams, but at the graduate level much of what is required of students is in the form of deliverables, which are scenario-based writing assignments that mimic tasks they might encounter in the marketplace. They have a set of course-specific learning resources available to them, which they can engage in to gain competency. But they are not required to use
the learning resources. They are required to demonstrate competency. And they have Course Mentors available to them, who are the 'subject-matter experts' for that course.

The Course Mentor, when consulted, points the student in the right direction, just as a good teacher in a traditional classroom might do. The difference is that the WGU Course Mentor model is not just a competency-based educational model, but a constructivist one. The student is in the driver’s seat, and constructs meaning while demonstrating competency, each at an individual pace, and in an individual way. There are no Discussion Forum requirements, no time-based engagement requirements, and no collaborative learning or peer-review requirements; in other words, the only time-based structure students have is the required six-month term, and the requirement to talk to a Student Mentor each week to document academic progress, per federal guidelines. The Student Mentor role is to help students pace themselves so they can complete their enrolled courses within each six-month term. The Course Mentor is the active teaching role, and the Course Mentor is available to any student who wants that extra support; but again, it is not required.

This is a pretty radical model for those of us who are entrenched in the banking theory of education; the belief that it is the instructor’s job to ‘give’ the information to students, to help them understand, to shape and to mold students’ minds (Freire, 1970). Constructivist learning theory has long been the voice in the wilderness that points out that the banking theory of education is completely false. In other words, knowledge isn’t discrete bits of information that need to be forced into students minds, like a knowledge-based piggy bank. Knowledge and meaning are individually constructed in relationship to ideas, to teachers, to other students, to life in general, and to technology. And relationship with any one of these is how learning takes place. Ask any mother of a two year old (Piaget, 1973).

Constructivist Models in Traditional Online Settings

So how can this very unique model offer constructivist ideas to more traditional models? Whenever we work with a student on a one-on-one basis, we are engaging in a potentially constructivist relationship. The problem is that we have been so conditioned with a false sense of our own importance that we miss these opportunities, and fall back on the old banking model. Truly constructivist learning relationships consist of practicing and modeling self-inquiry, and continuing to ask deeper questions. In place of the old model of one who knows and one who doesn’t know, there is a collaborative relationship of questioning with an open mind. Even when I think I already know something, I learn new things when I engage with students in this way.

Let’s look at an example. A student makes an appointment to go over the Technical Writing Outline and Sample Instructional Guide task. They also have questions about a PowerPoint they are required to submit that discusses the role of logic and ethics in Technical Writing. Now I could just point them to readings and leave it at that. But instead, I can ask questions. What is your experience with outlining? Were the readings in the course materials interesting, and did they give you some ideas to start with? What do you think this task requires?

It’s amazing to me that just a few simple questions like these seem to have the magical ability to start students on a path to constructivist learning. Where they felt ‘stuck’ and in need of guidance, ideas begin to flow. Of course, if they ask me a direct question about where to find something, I will give them a direct answer. But questions are the path to learning! And we both end up having a good time, with less stress involved. I never fail to leave these sessions with new ideas of my own.

Even in a typical online course in the traditional higher education model, this can bear much fruit. One of my favorite course designs (I designed and implemented this prior to my time at WGU) was a course on Software Applications for Students. It was designed as a graduate level course for teachers pursuing their Masters in Education. Most of these teachers had little or no online experience and little knowledge of technology for themselves, let alone for their students. So I had to decide how to create a constructivist environment, where they could begin to question their own pre-conceptions, and explore the possibilities.

Of course, since this was designed for a traditional university model, I had to have a syllabus and schedule. But my goal was to create a learning environment where students discovered meaning and constructed uses for this new knowledge, rather than being told what to think and what to do with it. I wanted to create a learning environment with instructor support, but with minimal instructor impact.

An Experimental Constructivist Environment
I started with student blogs. Rather than assign readings and give quizzes, I assigned readings with weekly blogs required by each student to demonstrate knowledge and competency. There were specific due dates for postings, but other than that, the rubric requirements allowed for a great deal of creativity and flexibility. Students also felt liberated in knowing that no one but the instructor would ever look at their writing. It was fascinating to see how the blogs transformed over the course of the term.

I needed to use weekly Discussion Forums, but wanted to make them more engaging and less of a chore for students, who too often view them as just another weekly requirement to get out of the way. So I made the weekly assignments for the forum research and activity based. For some of the weekly forums, students had to discover and post about a new online software application for students, how they might use such an application in a classroom setting, and each one had to be unique. So there was benefit in not being the last one to post! There was also the benefit of discovering new tools through collective research, and discussing them with fellow educators. They loved it!

The other effective assignments involved viewing brief, thought-provoking videos of famous educators (like Arne Duncan) talking about the new role of online tools and software applications in education. This really stirred the students, and made for some lively discussions. These formative assessments were point-based, since it was for a traditional university.

The summative assessment involved creating a unit, complete with lesson plans, which utilized at least two of the online software applications they had discovered in the class. These lesson plans were to be usable in their current classroom settings, and were definitely assessed for competency, with a detailed rubric available to the students to help them complete the final project. The added bonus was that the students were able to share their final projects through peer review and through final reflections, so all students benefited from each other.

**Discomfort with Changing Roles**

It was particularly interesting that at first, students were very uncomfortable with such minimal contact with the instructor, and out of habit many students were looking for constant direction. I tended to keep a very low profile, and only answered direct questions, or commented discreetly on misconceptions. So students basically discussed and made inferences and drew conclusions individually and as a group. And by the end of the term every single student wrote a reflective blog on how much they had learned and how much they had loved the course. I believe this was because each had engaged and constructed meaning and knowledge both individually and collectively, which is how we truly learn and find meaning in the world.

The final piece to this course design is that it was intentionally competency based. The rubrics were geared toward competency, and not grades (although I was required to assign grades at end of term). And because the students all reached competency, there were no failures in this class. 75% of the students made an ‘A’, and 25% achieved a genuinely competent ‘B.’

**How Does It Look?**

In order to help us all brainstorm about possibilities in our own instructional settings, I created a concept map that can help us picture how constructivist learning takes place in an asynchronous, online learning environment.

First, we provide asynchronous experiences for students that encourage questions and the opportunity to explore many possible answers. This allows students the freedom to try out ideas, ask deeper questions, and construct new meaning and knowledge. Finally, we create formative assessments that help students demonstrate competency in real world type scenarios, so their new knowledge has practical meaning in their lives.

The following diagram/concept map graphically depicts this flow of ideas and construction of meaning, beginning with a loosely structured, asynchronous learning environment.
Re-Thinking the Role of Instructor

So what are the characteristics of this new model for teaching within a constructivist, competency based online model? What behaviors and practices must be present to encourage student-centered, constructivist competency within our online classrooms?

Some of the important characteristics are:

- Instructor available and present, but with small footprint.
- Strong silent presence, with low instructor input, to encourage student-to-student interaction and construction of knowledge and experience individually and collectively.
- Focus on content and competency, rather than memorization or parroting of information.
- Focus on rubric with learning objectives to demonstrate competency, like synthesis of reading materials in blog posts.

Re-Thinking the Role of Student

Now let’s look at the role of students within this new model. What behaviors and practices do we need to encourage, and how?

As instructors and instructional designers, we need to find new ways to:

- Encourage students to ask questions, without always giving definitive answers.
- Encourage students to ask deeper questions.
- Encourage the awareness that learning is not black and white… help them know it’s O.K. to construct meaning and knowledge by synthesizing course materials to gain competency in their own unique way.
- Focus on the rubric competencies and help students find innovative ways to fulfill them.
- Encourage students to think about real world applications for these competencies.
Looking to the Future

These are exciting times for educators and for instructional designers. We are truly quiet pioneers. Finding new ways to actively encourage constructivist learning habits for our online students will challenge us to think beyond the banking theory of education, and will help us construct new meaning and knowledge for ourselves as educators, and for our educational institutions. We can help construct a bright future for education. It is up to us!

References

