

Constructivism and English Language Arts: Creating Inclusive and Relevant Curricula

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## **Introduction**

In *Philosophy of Education*, Nel Noddings notes that the philosophy of constructivism “currently dominates mathematics and science education” (Noddings 126). With its emphasis on the construction of knowledge and active engagement in learning, constructivism’s popularity in mathematics and science education is understandable (Noddings 127). However, there is significant evidence that suggests constructivism can be a valuable philosophy for the teaching of English Language Arts (ELA). This paper will examine the ways in which constructivist-based ELA teaching methods create a curriculum that is both relevant to and inclusive of all students. The paper will begin with a brief summary of constructivism, followed by a discussion of how constructivist philosophies have changed the teaching of the traditional elements of ELA — literature, writing, and grammar — and have made ELA curricula more inclusive and relevant to students.

## **Constructivism**

According to Noddings, constructivism is described by various groups as not just a philosophy, but an epistemology, a cognitive position, and a pedagogical orientation (Noddings 126). Despite how it is categorized, constructivism’s basic premise is that “all knowledge is constructed; knowledge is not the result of passive reception” (Noddings 127).

Educational constructivists trace their roots to Jean Piaget, who “sought to identify the structures of mind underlying cognitive behaviors characteristic of each stage of mental development” (Noddings 127). Noddings notes that many critics of Piaget believe his theories place too much emphasis on the individual learner (Noddings 128). These critics, called social constructivists, emphasize the social aspects of learning and are influenced by the work of Lev

Vygotsky (Noddings 128). Radical constructivists, according to Noddings, also critique Piaget's constructivism and believe that knowledge is constructed individually (Noddings 128).

Noddings concludes her discussion of constructivism by pointing out that much of John Dewey's work focuses on active learning and can be beneficial to constructivists (Noddings 130). Noddings also notes that educators can adopt certain constructivist practices and theories without having to accept all aspects of the philosophy (Noddings 131). The research included in this paper on constructivism and ELA demonstrates the many ways in which elements of constructivist philosophy can be applied in the classroom.

In their article "Authentic Intellectual Achievement in Writing," Kendra Sisserson, et al. describe the educational application of constructivism:

Constructivism...argues that students learn best when they acquire strategies to construct new knowledge from interactions between what they already know and information they encounter in new social contexts. Constructivism challenges views of the learning process as transmission of information to passive receivers. (Sisserson, et al. 63)

Jeannine St. Pierre Hirtle, in her article "Social Constructivism," elaborates on Sisserson, et al.'s vision of how constructivist theories can be used in the classroom:

One of the primary goals of constructivism is to provide a democratic and critical learning experience for students. It serves to open boundaries through inquiry, not through unquestioned acceptance of prevailing knowledge. It is the realization that knowledge is never neutral, that the ways in which knowledge is mediated and created are as dynamic and important as the knowledge itself. (Hirtle 91)

The following discussion of constructivism and the ELA curriculum will further demonstrate how many educators and education scholars envision the educational application of various aspects of constructivism.

### **Constructivism and English Language Arts**

While Noddings notes that constructivism “currently dominates mathematics and science education,” a significant amount of research shows that constructivist philosophies are influencing the teaching of ELA (Noddings 126). In “Autonomy and Obligation in the Teaching of Literature: Teachers’ Classroom Curriculum and Departmental Consensus,” Newell and Holt, writing in 1997, discuss the growing presence of constructivist philosophy in ELA education.

The authors elaborate on constructivist influence in ELA curriculum:

A thoughtful curriculum recognizes that although an English program may suggest a topic, issue, theme or question for exploration, the domains of conversations have to be enacted by students as well as by teachers, as they come together in meaningful communication, that is, to talk, write, read books, collaborate, disagree and interpret what they say and do. In the course of this ‘doing,’ decisions are made and the experienced curriculum constructed. (Newell and Holt 22)

According to Newell and Holt, constructivist philosophies allow students and teachers of ELA the opportunity to construct their own curriculum within the classroom. By tapping in to their prior knowledge on a topic or theme, students and teachers can transform an existing curriculum into a unique learning experience that relates directly to their own lives.

In 2005, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) specifically called attention to constructivist approaches to ELA education. NCTE adopted the position statement “Supporting Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners in Education.” In the statement, NCTE put forth the following beliefs: “Teachers and teacher educators must respect all learners and themselves as individuals with culturally defined identities. Students bring funds of knowledge to their learning communities, and, recognizing this, teachers and teacher educators must incorporate this knowledge and experience into classroom practice.” (NCTE, “Supporting Linguistically”) These beliefs - that students’ cultural identities, knowledge and experience deserve respect, recognition and inclusion in the classroom - are inherently constructivist. As the foremost American professional organization for ELA teachers, NCTE calls attention to the necessity for constructivist approaches to teaching in order to acknowledge and include all students.

The following sections will elaborate on how constructivist philosophies have changed the teaching of the traditional elements of ELA — literature, writing, and grammar — and have made ELA curricula more inclusive and relevant to students.

### ***Literature***

As the NCTE position statement on supporting linguistically and culturally diverse students noted, ELA classrooms must acknowledge and incorporate students’ cultures and identities in the classroom. One way to do this is through the selection of literature. Hirtle discusses how a constructivist model of education can allow for acknowledgement of home cultures and various aspects of identity in a literature classroom. She writes, “In honoring a multiplicity of cultures and ways of knowing, teachers have the opportunity to help their students cross boundaries of culture, gender, politics, and ways of knowing in order to construct

knowledge which helps them participate in the social consciousness of humanity” (Hirtle 92).

Hirtle also discusses how social constructivism can be applied in ELA classrooms to “revise by reseeing the old.” She writes, “We can revise the canon of works that we read, the place of oral texts coming from the community, the role of language study, and the place of writing. We can revise the curriculum we create for our classrooms with each new group of students” (Hirtle 92).

The importance of adapting curriculum to fit each group of students is indeed constructivist and is essential to the academic and personal success of students. In talking to ELA teachers of various ages and experiences, Newell and Holt note, “Even the most traditional teachers were in one way or another concerned about the hegemonic hold that the traditional literary canon has on their department’s curriculum” (Newell and Holt 34). Arlene L. Barry also notes that the curriculums teachers and schools choose to use can have a large impact on how students from various cultures perceive themselves. She writes, “The knowledge passed on through the curriculum determines which groups are valued or devalued. Valuing one’s ethnicity allows one to value oneself, an important step in success anywhere” (Barry 630). In other words, if students do not see themselves and their cultures represented in school in a positive way, they will not only suffer academically, but personally. Adopting constructivist approaches to teaching can help ensure that students not only see themselves represented in literature and school texts, but that they see their own role in the interpretation of literature and the construction of knowledge.

In “Book Walk: Works That Move Our Teachers Forward: ‘Speaking’ the Walk, ‘Speaking’ the Talk: Embodying Critical Pedagogy to Teach Young Adult Literature,” SJ Miller furthers this idea as she discusses the application and discussion of constructivist philosophies in a young adult literature teacher education course. In the course, Miller had the students, some of

whom were already practicing teachers, utilize constructivist teaching methods in group projects. Miller notes that her students “observed each other draw from their own experiences in order to convey meaning in their groups and, based on sociocultural backgrounds, were able to build some form of communication with one another” (Miller 150). She continues, “Most felt more capable of creating agency and empowering students to become part of the class...Most important to most of the class was that no one ever said, ‘This is what the passage means,’ in a monological way; rather, students were consistently encouraged to discover meaning through highly creative and hands-on self developed activities” (Miller 153).

Newell and Holt also acknowledge the growing trend of literature classrooms in which students discover their own textual meaning: “The English teaching profession begins to look beyond transmittal of ‘facts’ about literature toward assisting in participating in cultural conversations about texts” (Newell and Holt 22-3). This trend is both constructivist and inclusive, ensuring that all students are engaged and participating in the construction of knowledge.

### ***Writing***

Another way that ELA curricula can acknowledge and incorporate students’ cultures and identities in the classroom is through a constructivist approach to writing. In “Writing to Heal, Understand, and Cope,” Vasiliki Antzoulis discusses her experience student teaching in a Manhattan school on September 11, 2001. Faced with grieving and confused students, Antzoulis overhauled her lesson plans for the semester to address the fears, concerns and experiences of her students. “Almost all of my students feared poetry” so she “selected poems with themes of relevance for the students...throughout the unit I saw students embrace poetry and take risks in their own writing. Many wrote in their reflections how their feelings about poetry had changed

and they realized it wasn't only about figuring out a meaning but also about feeling poetry and thinking about different issues" (Antzoulis 50). By using constructivist methods of adapting the curriculum to address the current concerns and experiences of her students, Antzoulis was able to not only get them interested in poetry, but to elicit quality writing from her students. She observes, "The writing students produced was thoughtful and imaginative. They had more invested in it because it mattered to them" (Antzoulis 51).

Sissersson, et al. elaborate on ways to use constructivist methods to teach writing. In the article, the authors discuss Authentic Intellectual Achievement (AIA) in writing, a set of criteria the authors developed to describe what the nature and quality of the authentic intellectual demands of teachers' writing assignments and student work. Sissersson, et al. explain that their AIA theory is heavily influenced by constructivist philosophy, noting that pedagogy influenced by constructivism is particularly successful in eliciting quality writing from students. They write:

Many consider the writing process essentially constructivist, as it advocates such practices as discovering one's own voice, writing on topics of personal interest, and encouraging feedback from real audiences...Students should be given assignments that hold some meaning for them beyond earning grades and proving their competence. In other words, when students conduct disciplined inquiry in the pursuit of constructing new knowledge concerning a topic, issue, or situation that has personal meaning, then they are preparing for the intellectual demands of adult society" (Sissersson, et al. 64).

Sissersson, et al. note that the constructivist emphasis on construction of knowledge plays a large role in their AIA theory: "Assignments that emphasize construction of knowledge ask students to move beyond reproducing information to apply one or more of these cognitive skills"



(Sissersson, et al. 65). Therefore, by adapting educational strategies that focus on the construction of knowledge in writing, ELA teachers can encourage students to engage in higher-level thinking skills.

Sissersson, et al. also describe the importance of connecting to students' lives and identities in the production of quality and meaningful student writing. "AIA requires the formation of significant connections between the work students do in school and their own lives: we believe such connections strengthen the process of meaning making" (Sissersson, et al. 66). As with literature that connects personally to students' culture, identity and experiences, students should also be writing about subjects that are relevant to their culture, identity and experiences. This constructivist approach to writing aligns with the NCTE statement on student diversity and culture as it acknowledges "students bring funds of knowledge to their learning communities" (NCTE, "Supporting Linguistically"). Further, the personal and individual nature of writing encourages the constructivist notions of "active engagement of students in establishing and pursuing their own learning objectives" (Noddings 127).

### ***Grammar***

In addition to literature and writing, grammar can also be taught with constructivist methods. In her article, "Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing," Constance Weaver advocates for a constructivist-based approach to the teaching of grammar as opposed to a behaviorist-based approach. She notes some drawbacks of a behaviorist-based approach

We have simply taken for granted the behaviorist ideas that practice makes perfect and that skills practiced in isolation will be learned that way and then applied as relevant. We have assumed that this is the way teaching and learning should work, despite the overwhelming evidence that it doesn't." (Weaver 17)

Weaver's description of behaviorist approaches to teaching grammar is similar to Noddings' descriptions of "rote learning" in which lecturing and telling take precedence over other forms of learning (Noddings 127). Weaver contrasts these behaviorist ideas with constructivist methods of teaching grammar:

Certain aspects of the constructivist theory of learning seem especially relevant for the teaching of grammar. One is that the learner must form hypotheses about concepts in the process of coming to understand them...Another significant implication is that errors are common and probably even necessary in the process of formulating more sophisticated hypotheses - or to put it more simply, errors are a necessary concomitant of growth" (Weaver 18).

Weaver provides examples of constructivist-based approaches to teaching grammar that include, creating mini-lessons on specific elements of grammar in response to student writing, using the senses to teach grammatical concepts such as adjectives, and using conferences to closely work with students and explore how grammatical changes can transform their writing.

Hirtle also discusses the application of social constructivism within ELA to problematize situations and concepts through "questioning, posing problems, holding something up for examination inquiry" (Hirtle 92). She writes, "A curriculum that asks students to gather examples of real language usage from family and friends problematizes the subject of usage rules, raising questions about what this term, represents and the value it implies" (Hirtle 92). This approach to grammar can be another way to make curricula more culturally inclusive.

In the NCTE's 1974 position statement, "Students' Right to Their Own Language," NCTE states:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of

language — the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style... The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (NCTE, “Students Right”)

As Hirtle notes, constructivist approaches to the teaching of grammar can problematize the idea of “correct” usage and can help students question and critique the relationships between language and culture and language and power. By teaching grammar in this way, teachers can do as NCTE recommends and uphold the rights of students to their own language.

### **Conclusion**

As the above research has shown, the application of constructivist philosophies to the teaching of ELA can help to better engage students in the study of literature, writing and grammar. Antzoulis reflects that students “are aware of what is going on around them. We cannot hide behind our books and poems, but instead we must utilize such materials to make sense of the world” (Antzoulis 52). The above research has also shown that the application of constructivist philosophies in ELA curricula can create classroom environments that are inclusive of students’ cultures and identities. The NCTE has made clear through position statements that valuing and upholding linguistic and cultural diversity is a key responsibility of ELA teachers. In their statement on supporting linguistically and culturally diverse learners, NCTE writes, “Students do not enter school as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge.

Rather, they bring with them rich and varied language and cultural experiences. All too often, these experiences remain unrecognized or undervalued as dominant mainstream discourses suppress students' cultural capital (NCTE "Supporting Linguistically"). By adopting constructivist methods that call upon students to employ their language and cultural experiences in the classroom, ELA teachers can ensure that students will participate in their own education that is both relevant and inclusive.

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