

Sydney Redigan

Dr. Jones

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Teaching and Learning Statement

Part I

My teaching philosophy is based on the theoretical framework of constructivism. Constructivism is the belief that people construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world through experience and reflection. When a person learns something new, they must reconcile how this new information aligns with what they already know or believe to be true. When applied to education, constructivists hold the belief that students are not blank slates or passive receivers of knowledge. Instead, constructivists believe that each student brings a unique worldview and cache of knowledge to the classroom, from which both the teacher and other students can learn. Constructivists believe that student interest and curiosity should play an important role in the curriculum.

Constructivism is present in both my teaching and classroom organization and management. In terms of classroom organization and management, my future classroom will be organized so that it is student centered, and there is respect for both individuals and the entire class community. Some strategies for organizing a classroom in this way are to get student input on classroom rules or behavior standards, to have students complete interest surveys and adapt the curriculum to reflect these interests, and to have students share their experiences and viewpoints whenever appropriate to foster an appreciation for diversity.

The theoretical framework of constructivism is also evident in my role as a teacher. A constructivist teacher sees herself more as a facilitator who guides students through an active learning process than as a transmitter of knowledge. This is achieved by providing problem solving and inquiry-based learning activities for students and by asking good, thought provoking questions that force students to really think. In an English classroom, this often means encouraging students to create their own opinions about literature. Rather than insisting that a literary text has a certain meaning, a constructivist teacher encourages students to find their own meaning in the text and to use textual and supplementary evidence to support their claim for meaning. This approach focuses on critical thinking and inquiry over being “correct.” I believe that this approach ultimately provides students with a more authentic learning experience than traditional approaches of information transmission.

Under the framework of constructivism, students learn in an active and reflective manner. In my future classroom, I want my students to understand that knowledge is dynamic and subjective. By acknowledging their prior knowledge and experiences, students can begin to see how this prior knowledge and experience makes their learning process different from their peers. In order to do this, active and student-centered learning must take place. Students’ opinions and input should be valued and there should be an understanding among students and the teacher that there is not necessarily a “correct” answer or viewpoint on a subject. Under a constructivist framework, student learning is also reflective. Through discussion and writing assignments, students can reflect upon how their understanding of a concept is changing and look back on how they have progressed as learners. In my future constructivist classroom, students will often work collaboratively in groups, so that they can observe the different ways in which people learn and can utilize the group member’s respective strengths and weaknesses.

In a classroom based on more traditional philosophies of learning, students may be assessed through testing for accuracy or mastery of information. Because of my constructivist approach to teaching, student learning will be assessed through students' work (such as research papers and creative writing assignments) and observations. An English class has a natural advantage, as writing assignments are often a better indicator of students' understanding of material than traditional tests. Because these types of assessment do not require there to be a correct answer, students will be assessed based on criteria such as providing a sound argument or thesis, demonstrating critical thinking skills, or successfully incorporating themes or topics into a writing assignment. This type of assessment is rigorous, as it requires more from students than just memorization, but it is also highly rewarding, as it requires students to truly engage with classroom material and to be active in the learning process.

Part II

An effective urban educator is one who is reflective. The importance of reflecting on one's teaching has been reinforced throughout my time in the Master of Arts in Teaching program. From my first education class, I was required to write reflective essays and journals on my developing philosophy and approach to education. This has been helpful not only for tracking my progress during the program, but also for initiating a routine in which I regularly journal about my experiences in the program. When I began my pre-student teaching experience, I was able to continue this reflection routine and see how my philosophy and approaches to education work in a real classroom.

This reflection routine has allowed me to assess myself and observe both strengths and areas for improvement. At this moment, I would identify my lack of experience as my biggest weakness. I know this is something that will naturally improve with time, but it affects many

areas of my teaching. For example, I know I have much to learn in the area of classroom management. My education courses have taught me the techniques and approaches to successfully manage a classroom. However, in the classroom, I still find some difficulty with juggling the many responsibilities of a teacher, being consistent, and giving all students the time and attention they need. By continuing my reflective journaling process, I hope to improve in this area and to continue to track my progress as a teacher. My assessment has also allowed me to observe some of my strengths as a teacher. At this moment, I think my biggest strengths are a willingness to learn new things, a passion for my students and my subject matter, compassion and empathy for others, and a commitment to justice and equality both in and out of the classroom. I believe that these qualities, along with my belief in the importance of reflecting upon my growth as a teacher, will allow me to identify and improve upon any current and future weaknesses.

Another important key to being a reflective educator has been taking part in professional development experiences. I have been a member of the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) for two years now and have found their organization and their magazine, *English Journal*, to be an incredible resource for professional development. They provide resources, lesson ideas, current research, educator reflections and more. In the future, I hope to attend their annual conferences, which offer forums and workshops on various topics within English education and provide great networking opportunities. NCTE also has an active community on LinkedIn, where current educators discuss issues ranging from advice for new teachers, the relevancy of teaching the classics, how to integrate technology into an English curriculum, and how to prepare students for the ACT. Belonging to this community has been extremely beneficial for me, as the veteran teachers who participate have interesting, and often conflicting,

views on these issues. I believe that an important part of being a reflective educator is to interact with other educators and to expose oneself to new ideas and perspectives on teaching.

In addition to my membership in NCTE, I have found that there are many great opportunities for professional development online. I have a professional/education Twitter account where I follow other educators, professional organizations, education blogs, and subject-specific Twitter accounts, such as young adult literature review websites and writing advice blogs. As with the LinkedIn NCTE community, this has been a great way to communicate with educators with similar interests, to find personal and educational inspiration, and to continue to reflect on my journey in teaching. I have also have a Pinterest account for teaching and have created boards to organize resources and information. For example, I have boards for writing lesson ideas, reading lesson ideas, book recommendations, classroom management ideas, study tips, and more. There are other educators using Pinterest for the same purpose and this has allowed a sharing of ideas and perspectives. Another great online professional development tool has been my own eportfolio that I created for a course a few years ago. After the class ended, I kept my eportfolio and transformed it into a site where I post lesson and unit plans I have created for education courses, as well as teaching philosophies and other reflective pieces. I plan to continue to update the site as I begin teaching, showcasing student work and my own progress as an educator.

Lastly, Wayne State has offered some professional development opportunities, such as the seminar on classroom management held for pre-student teachers. I really appreciated how informative the seminar was and look forward to attending more opportunities like this.

Part III

An effective urban educator is also one who is innovative and uses creative learning strategies. As noted in Part I, constructivist-based teaching is naturally innovative and receptive to modification and adaptation. Because constructivist-based teaching asserts that teaching is student-centered, modification and adaptation are extremely important. For example, in my future English classroom, I will provide students with the opportunity to respond to literary texts in multiple ways, such as through creative writing, visual arts, audio arts, or physical/performance art. In an English classroom, there are also ways to adapt instruction to meet the needs of students, such as providing audio versions of literature; incorporating visual arts, such as film and illustrations; creating reading guides; and offering choices in reading materials. I plan to incorporate these multimodal approaches to instruction and demonstration of learning so that they are available to all students. Students with specific disabilities will undoubtedly benefit from these multimodal approaches to education, but students without disabilities will also benefit as these approaches might aid their understanding or better appeal to their interests.

My constructivist approach to learning also means being innovative and planning creative learning experiences. One of the great advantages of an English classroom is that there are limitless opportunities for creative learning experiences. Incorporating film, music, and all forms of art often helps students understand the content or themes of a piece of literature. For example, showing a film adaptation of a particularly difficult novel often helps students understand the text and can even increase interest in reading the novel. Performance of a play or poem can also increase student interest in a text and allows them to be creative. Similarly, there are also many ways to incorporate creative learning experiences as students demonstrate understanding. For

example, students can respond to a literary text through creative writing (such as a poem or a comic), through visual arts (such as a short film or photo essay), or audio arts (such as a song or podcast).

The use of technology is important for these innovative strategies. Allowing students to utilize technology can greatly increase creativity as well as their interest in the curriculum. One strategy that I've utilized in my pre-student teaching field experience is an American History extension project that requires students to find some form of media that connects to a certain element of history. For World War II extension projects, students brought in film clips, songs, propaganda posters, family photos, and more. These media helped students better connect to this time period and required them to conduct research, finding authentic and meaningful ways to represent this period.

Another creative strategy that I would like to employ in my future classroom is the use of Twitter and group blogs. Some educators have begun using Twitter to enact works of literature, such as William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Students are assigned a character from the play and create a Twitter account for that character. Using a hashtag to organize the project, the student tweet as their characters, interacting with each other through Twitter and essentially performing the play through social media. I think this is a great way for students to connect with literature and to thoroughly study a character. Many educators also use group blogs in English classrooms. Students may receive a weekly writing prompt which they must respond to a post on the blog. Students can comment on each other's writing and build off of each other's responses. This type of project appeals to me for a few reasons. First, it allows students to use technology and to gain experience working with blogs. Second, through the act of publishing, students may take their writing more seriously and often turn out better work because they know they will

have an audience reading their work. Lastly, it allows students to see that writing has many purposes, such as self-expression and communication. Ideally, blogs help students see that there are many extra-curricular benefits to writing.

English education, particularly a constructivist English education, offers endless opportunities to employ innovative and creative strategies. As with all education, these strategies should respond to the needs and interests of the students in each individual classroom.

Part IV

Lastly, an effective urban educator is one who is committed to diversity. A constructivist approach to teaching necessitates a commitment to diversity. Because constructivist teaching is student-centered and values students' prior knowledge and experiences, it naturally values diversity. This approach to teaching acknowledges that a student's race, culture, religion, age, class, socioeconomic status, abilities and sexual orientation will affect how they see the world and, hence, how they interpret and respond to a text. For example, if a class is reading Chinua Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*, a student who was born in Nigeria will likely respond differently to the text than a student whose family members are American Christian missionaries, as the book portrays conflict between the two groups. Because of the gender roles portrayed in the novel, female students may react differently to the book than male students. A constructivist approach to teaching encourages students to not only explore their different interpretations and responses to literature, but requires students to examine why they have these specific interpretations and responses. This can help students better understand both the ways in which they learn and also understand the importance of identity in the construction of knowledge. Ultimately, by exploring diversity and knowledge, students can see that one perspective is not superior to others, simply different.

When teaching in a community, it is important to utilize the knowledge, experience and culture of the students and the community in the classroom. This can be achieved in an English classroom in a number of ways. The first is through the selection of literature that is read by the class. In order to engage students, it is important that the literature they read reflects their own experiences and identities. At the same time, it is important for students to learn about the lives of people who are different. Students from majority or privileged groups can gain empathy and understanding by reading about marginalized or less privileged groups.

Writing projects can also utilize the knowledge, experience and culture of the students and community in the classroom. For example, ethnography writing projects can help students of different races and cultures share their experiences with their classmates. Students can interview older relatives and explore family traditions and formative experiences. Cultural literacy projects can also be an effective for a class to learn about diversity. Students can examine characteristics of their own culture or another culture, such as language, beliefs, and traditions. Pairing this project with a literary work about this culture (written by a member of the culture) could create an interesting and in-depth look at the relationship between culture and literacy.

Creative writing assignments are another way that student diversity can be incorporated into a classroom. By allowing students to write about their own experiences and identity, these creative writing assignments allow students to be experts and to see the value of their experiences and identity. These types of assignments can also be a great way to get students to empathize and relate to students who possess different identities.

Strategies to incorporate students' cultures and identities into the curriculum are potentially endless for an English classroom. By focusing on the constructivist view that all

students have unique knowledge and experiences, my future classroom will embrace diversity and welcome the abundance of knowledge that it provides.