

A Truly Constructivist Conference on Constructivism¹

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With no doubt, constructivism is one of the leading streams of innovation in education today. However, there are not as many constructivist conferences and meetings as we would expect or wish for. One of the regular events in this regard is the annual conference of the American Association for Constructivist Teaching (ACT). This year constructivist teachers, educators and enthusiasts from all over the United States (with a few international guests) gathered in Charleston, SC on 5th to 6th December to discuss research, theory, and practice of constructivism; constructivist teaching practices, their perspectives and possible implementations of constructivism into the educational process under current policies and developments in education.

This year's dominating topic was the American Common Core standards that define what students in all grades must learn in English and math, and that have brought controversy into the debate about education in the US. The proponents of the plan say that it moved away from gaps created by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which, among other requirements, wanted students in all states participate in annual testing. On the other hand, the opponents say that it has stripped teachers of the possibility to use alternative methods and forms of work and also tightened up the content without any possibility of enrichment – as Marion Brady, a teacher, wrote, the Common Core kills innovation and standardizes not only the content the students are taught but also their minds and the way they think, which is “about as far out of sync with deep-seated American values as it's possible to get”². Therefore a great part of the discussions among participants at the conference was the position of constructivism within the Common Core. Mostly they have agreed that the standards have made it more difficult for teachers to apply any kind of alternative approaches, including constructivism.

Despite the fact that the current situation is not favourably inclined to implementation of constructivism in schools, the participants of the conference agreed that it is necessary to continue in the effort as they expressed a clear conviction that constructivism is the way the educational innovations should be going as it respects the mind-set and natural thinking processes of a child. Moreover, it gives the learners

¹ The report has been supported by the grant project UNCE 204001/2012 Centrum výzkumu základního vzdělávání [Centre for basic education research].

² http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/eight-problems-with-common-core-standards/2012/08/21/821b300a-e4e7-11e1-8f62-58260e3940a0_blog.html. [cit. 2014-12-08].

146 autonomy and responsibility for their learning, which brings higher motivation than in the traditional school setting.

Before the conference, the participants had the opportunity to visit two schools, one elementary school with a beginning IB program, and one kindergarten which uses a very open-to-nature approach. Certain constructivist practices could be observed.

As we would expect, a conference on constructivism is not a typical one. The sessions are not 15-minute presentations in the form of a monologue delivered by the presenter, but they are 60-minute workshops where the audience is actively involved either in a directed dialogue or discussion or even practical activities. The presenters are therefore asked to adapt a real hands-on approach as the theory of constructivism prescribes. Speakers from universities, colleges and lower schools – from university professors to elementary school teachers – from all over the United States and also abroad presented their papers on theory and practice of constructivism in education.

Among these workshops, there were also keynote sessions. The first keynote speaker Dr. Gloria Boutte from the University of South Carolina introduced the areas of Critical Race Theory, African American Emancipatory Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and stressed the necessity for schools to create environments that would support pupils with diverse racial, social and gender identities. She primarily focused on pupils from various ethnic backgrounds, especially looking at the problem of Afro-American children in current US schools and in the current US school system. Especially with regards to the topical events in the United States (the last several cases of police violence towards Afro-Americans), this is a strong message.

The second speaker Dr. Satomi Izumi-Taylor from the University of Memphis spoke about education and its perception in Japan. While early childhood education in Japan is greatly supported and it is an open space for innovations, secondary education stays rather on the edge of interest, and is dominantly being looked at from the point of view of factual knowledge rather than developing skills or students' personalities. This, of course, leads to a very traditional and competitive teaching approach at secondary schools.

The special guest at the conference was Dr. Constance Kamii, Professor at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Piaget's student in Geneva. The ACT decided to award her for her long-life excellent work which has influenced mathematics education in the United States, including the national curriculum. In her talk she stressed (as already many times) that the traditional methods of teaching in Grades 1 to 4 are harmful, and "make pupils stupid" as they tell pupils to give up their own thinking. "We're paying tax dollars to make our children stupid!" she exclaimed. She also demonstrated several constructivist approaches, and warned the audience not to wait for her maths textbook for the 4th grade as she said she was not able to finish it because parents teach their children the traditional algorithms and by doing so destroy their children's mathematical thinking.

The overall message of the conference was the one that has been mentioned in many of the participants' conversations, and was voiced at a session given by tutors and their students, future teachers, from Ferrum College from Ferrum, VA. In reaction to the enthusiasm for innovation and constructivism of the teachers-to-be, one of the speakers from the audience warned them that in about four years they would become the same traditional teachers who they at that time did not want to be if they did not have the courage to speak up. "You must have the courage, the voice, the arguments. For the parents, the principal, the school board, the authorities. The arguments on why you are doing things the way you are doing them. Why you are approaching things differently. Because if you don't know why you're doing it that way, the old traditionalists will always get you." It is self-evident that these strong words were rewarded by applause, and were further discussed long after the session finished.

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