

Improving learning experiences by using Humanism and Constructivism teaching approaches in the classroom

By João Frias

Abstract

Learning, according to my teaching philosophy, is an active, evolving, engaging and constructive process aimed to address self-fulfillment needs, for both students and lecturers involved. The current research paper, more than a simple comparative literature review on educational theories, is also a reflection analysis that explores Humanism and Constructivism teaching approaches to the 21st century multicultural classroom. Engagement, encouragement and motivation are the key elements that will guide students to develop and/or improve their critical thinking skills while fostering a deeper understanding of a specific topic. The lecturer acts as a facilitator, providing tools and resources that allow the process of converting learning and reflections into understanding, using specific examples and exercises. As teaching strategies, I employ the use of visual examples using objects and/or learning materials about the topic being lectured, on-line interaction in the classroom using technology enhanced learning, provision of additional resources and tools on GMIT VLE Moodle page, peer-interaction, fieldtrips, peer discussion groups, problem-based learning sessions and personal reflection assignments. Such strategies motivate students to have a positive attitude towards their learning environment, while creating a sense of responsibility, awareness and respect towards their peers and lecturers, which are essential to promote a safe and relaxed learning environment. Humanism theories alongside with social and cognitive constructivism form the core of my teaching values and are the pillar of daily classroom interactions in a multicultural environment.

Keywords

Pedagogy, teaching strategies, educational theories, teaching philosophy, education system, multiculturalism

Introduction

The benefit of having a philosophical thinking approach to educational practice allows the educator and facilitator to be aware of their mentoring role within the classroom environment. Throughout my teaching experience, I employ humanist and constructivist approaches to improve teaching experiences, and to encourage and motivate student engagement. This research paper explores the aforementioned educational theories in order to serve as a basis for my own personal teaching philosophy, taking into consideration my personal values, beliefs and teaching attitudes. The conclusion of this paper summarises my philosophy of teaching.

Literature Analysis

Humanism and difference in education between the Eastern and the Western world

The Humanistic approach emphasises the student personal freedom, their choices, motivation, self-determination and personal goals (Woolfolk, 2008). In order for this approach to thrive, it is crucial that a safe learning environment is provided to the students, based on empathy warmth and acceptance of difference viewpoints by the teacher. In this approach, the teacher act as a facilitator while the student is in control of their learning (Bentham, 2002); learning either individually or by cooperation with other students. This theory enables face-to-face interactions, either in one-on-one interactions, or in small groups, and holds the student accountable for the learning process. This learning approach allows the students to acquire academic, personal and life skills through understanding and viewing the world in a holistic way.

In Europe, and in the Western World, the constructivist teaching and learning approach is favoured, where the student builds their own knowledge being facilitated by the teacher, while in the Eastern world a mix between a classic approach to education and a humanistic view is favoured (Levinsohn, 2007). Bilingual or multicultural students have the tendency to see beyond the classroom and incorporate wider values and personal choices into a broader holistic view of the world (Levinsohn, 2007). Maslow “hierarchy of needs”, is of particularly importance in the Eastern world, as the ultimate need of addressing the individual full potential is often mentioned as a standard in education (Makiguchi and Bethel, 1989). One criticism of this education theory is that not all individuals behave in an ordered way or need to have different motivations in several areas to feel motivated (Woolfolk, 2008).

Cognitive and Social Constructivism

Cognitive development refers to changes in thinking whereby thoughts gradually and orderly change over time to become more challenging and complex (Woolfolk, 2008). This approach, developed by Piaget, describes that thoughts are learned when a person interacts physically with the environment and/or observes peer behaviour within that environment (Bentham, 2002). Cognitive constructivism is defined as knowledge and skills learned by students over time where new ideas are incorporated into existing knowledge by the self, and shared, through peer interaction during active learning (Bentham, 2002). Piaget established a linear sequence of cognitive development in 4 stages: 1) Sensori-motor stage, 2) pre-operational stage, 3) concrete

stage and 4) formal operational stage, associated to development, which with time will become increasingly more complex (Bentham, 2002).

Critics to this theory state that Piaget underestimated children's perception of the world and overestimated mental abilities of teenagers. Other critics state that Piaget did not consider cultural factors in the cognitive constructivist development approach (Woolfolk, 2008).

Social constructivism is a theory developed by Vygotsky that suggests that experienced teachers should communicate knowledge to those less experienced (via instructed learning), in order to lead to higher mental functions such as problem-solving (Bentham, 2002). Through this theory, gaps between individual student potential and what they can achieve with experienced help reduced resulting in students achieving and understanding more than if they were working on their own (Bentham, 2002). Vygotsky placed importance on the teacher in facilitating and directing the learning of students and in providing support (scaffolding), through language or other means, aims to aid students in their learning process. Scaffolding, coined by Bruner (Woolfolk, 2008), offers support in problem-solving and learning via quizzes, clues, reminders, encouragement, providing examples, and breaking the problem down into steps (Woolfolk, 2008, p.61). In this approach, involved parties in the classroom play a role in bringing the knowledge gap for the student through reading, understanding and discussing the topic (Bentham, 2002).

Critics to this author suggest that there might be too much focus on social and cultural interaction, particularly in the child's basic understanding. Another critic is related to the lack of accountability of cognitive processes that allow students to interact in advanced and independent social activities (Woolfolk, 2008).

Conclusion and Personal teaching philosophy statement

Through this process of learning about different teaching and educational theories and philosophies, I came to understand the benefits and hindrances of each school and thought and came to understand that using an individual approach in the classroom might be beneficial for certain tasks and purposes but not for the long-term goals. In my opinion, it is important to use a mix of different and complementing teaching and learning philosophies and approaches to education that can be adapted to the ever-evolving multicultural dynamic systems in the 21st century classroom. Therefore, I conclude by addressing my personal teaching philosophy based on the research from this paper.

My teaching philosophy is based on a set of three values, which are an interlink of both Western and Eastern philosophies and approaches to education. The core values in this statement follow a humanistic and a constructivist perspective on learning and on education, following theories from Dewey, Bruner, Darwin, Makiguchi and Maslow (Levine, 2016; McLeod, 2008; Ayala, 2009; Makiguchi and Bethel, 1989; Maslow, 2013, respectively). The three core values are creating human value, achieving lifelong happiness and mentoring.

Creating human value: According to the Japanese educational theorist Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, “a fully alive, happy fulfilled person is a person whose existence centres in creating value that enhances to the fullest both personal life and the network of independent relationships that constitutes the individual communal life” (Makiguchi and Bethel, 1989). Value-creating education is education that provides guidance towards that end, aiming at interpersonal development and a holistic view of society and nature. I aspire to place this value as a core approach to my teaching, in order to enable each individual not only to achieve their goals, but to contribute positively to society.

Lifelong happiness: This education value is much more than just a preoccupation with one’s own immediate satisfaction, basic needs and security, but it also focusses on the development of a social consciousness that enables understanding and appreciation of the extent to which all human beings are indebted to nature and the society they are part of. This holistic view is more common in Eastern philosophies and it allows each individual to explore their unique potential. It ties to the concept of sustainable development as described in the Brundtland report, which is “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). I aspire to live with the same aim and pass this torch to every individual through my teaching and life experience.

Mentoring: The generic definition of mentoring states “A deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one or more individuals, with the agreed-upon goal of having the less experienced individual(s) grow and develop specific competencies” (Chan and Lo, 2016). Guided by a teacher/lecturer/mentor/facilitator, students will be able to feel safe to debate, discuss and engage in dialogue in the classroom, using both traditional methods and enhanced learning technologies. This value ties with the other two approaches to education in this statement, as it will allow each individual to explore topics and subjects, based on their inherent aptitudes to learning through discovery and interconnection. A key element of mentoring related to teaching is the connection with observational learning, as it will enable students to focus on attention, retention of information, production learnt information and motivation. As a lecturer/facilitator, my aim is to promote motivation on each individual.

The interdependence relationship of these three values aim to stimulate the creativity and knowledge seeking that will eventually lead to wisdom in the long-term. The promotion of a healthy and safe space in the lecture room will potentially lead to personal and interpersonal motivation that will be passed upon the society and hopefully, generations to come.

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