

Assignment 1 – Sam Ansaldi – November 11, 2014

“What a student needs to be an effective learner”, is a question that theoretically could be answered in its simplest form by one word; engagement. This however leaves a lot of room for interpretation and frankly does not cover all aspects of functional learning. In order to properly answer this question we may have to start at the beginning and turn to some of education's more prominent figures. Let's start with John Dewey.

John Dewey took the concept of “modern” education and saw an opportunity for a restructuring to take place. The primary educational system at that time consisted of inapplicable concepts taught by under qualified teachers heavily relying on antiquated texts. The material was intended to challenge the student's mind, but it bore no connection to the real world nor did it align itself with relevance to the student's everyday lives. For many years the ideas of rote memorization and complex problem solving were thought to stimulate a student's intellect, this was until John Dewey had a different idea. Dewey's idea incorporated hands-on learning of subject matter through the use of naturally stimulating experiments and activities. The students would connect with concepts such as Ph balances, economic challenges, and historical teachings through self driven cooking lessons, theatrical plays and spirited discussions. This concept proved to be very effective and popularity grew for its unorthodox methods. Dewey's ideology stemmed from a child's true nature of exploration, imagination, and an innate sense of learning from their surroundings. He was the founder of “hand-on learning”.

Now even though I am a big fan of hands-on learning, or active learning as it is often referred to, I can see how some people may think that it lacks in effective delivery or structure. Diane Ravitch is clearly one of those people stating that "As the academic curriculum lost its importance as the central focus of the public school system, the schools lost their anchor, their sense of mission, their intense moral commitment to the intellectual development to each child. Once that happened, education reform movements would come and go with surprising rapidity, almost randomly, each leaving its mark behind in the schools. Over time, as this happened, educators forgot how to say 'no,' even to the loopy notions of what schools were for."

While some of Diane's ideas are warranted, they seem to dismiss the importance of the benefits of education through engagement. Diane's approach, like many others, holds a great deal of stock in traditional learning. Rote memorization, vocabulary drills, and theoretical problem solving are considered by many to be the foundational building blocks of a well rounded successful learner; it's structural education vs. societal learning. Dewey emphasized that school was primarily a social institution, a community, where learning was a means to an end in a social setting. He believed that a child's true nature revolved around its social interactions within its environment. Even though Dewey's and Ravitch's ideas seem to be in stark contrast with one another, the amalgamation of each practices core concepts make up most of what public education has become today. Are there problems associated with non-traditionally organized education practices that focus highly on experiences over in-depth content; yes. Just as institutions that prioritize theoretical problem solving and memorization of processes and terminology lack in overall student stimulation. There must be a middle ground.

Unfortunately middle ground is not a concept commonly heard when the subject of constructivism is being discussed, especially by Lawrence A. Baines and Gregory Stanley. Their approach to constructivism suggests that “In the constructivist view, memorization of multiplication tables, poetry, dates of historical importance, or scientific formulas is decried as "mindless" and even "hegemonic." According to them constructivism has taken the focus off of the teacher as the center for knowledge acquisition and turned them into a facilitator of knowledge that the students are intended to use in

order to guide their own individual learning experience. They argue that students are no longer learning from an expert, and according to them that is precisely what the students are yearning for. This argument falls right back to the prior where a middle ground must be established in order to facilitate successful learning. We need the students to want to learn the information needed to excel in this modern society, and as humans we are born with that thirst for knowledge, but it is a knowledge that needs to be guided and needs to be nurtured. Growth is a process of learning, and within that process we must learn to do for ourselves as much as we need to learn from others. It is how that knowledge is presented which in my mind makes all the difference.

We are all born with the capability to learn. It is our nature to assess information as we internally process it and determine whether that information is sound based off of the evidence we experience. If however, new information is introduced that conflict with our prior knowledge of the subject it is our prerogative to either deny and discard or accept and modify our initial views based off of this new evidence. This is how we learn and this is how we grow. It is an instinctual behavior that all humans' posses, however those skills can and must be honed with by the proper modes of instruction. To truly be a successful learner a student must be allowed to conduct realizations through self exploration and experimentation while allowing them the opportunity to open up to new information provided to them by a practitioner that stimulates the students intellectually and philosophically. This is our true nature; this is how we become a successful learner.