

TOWARDS ENHANCING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF PARTICIPATORY THEATRE: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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Abstract

The dynamic nature of teaching and learning has continued to evoke critical analysis. Thus, this paper highlights the role of educators as pivotal in the changes and innovations prevalent in the education process that might give rise to critical analysis. It emphasises that learners need to synergise with the teachers/educators to acquire new knowledge. The aim is not just for the sole purpose of meeting a curriculum demand, but above all, the wellbeing of the learner, which can lead to a developed society. Participatory theatre, as a form of entertainment for enlightenment towards social change, is used here as a means of educating the learners about HIV, drawing fundamentally from the theoretical assumptions of the constructivist method. Thus, the paper proposes the adoption of a blended style of teaching and learning using a post-performance evaluative strategy with students at Victory Secondary School, Makurdi. This has been predicated on the efficacy of the method as practised in most parts of the world. Different views on the need to adopt this method were aggregated using performance and an oral quiz because it appears that for active learning to occur, there has to be a mental construction of new knowledge which is obtained from real and practical experience. The paper concluded that based on the contemporary appeal of constructivism, the incorporation of technology-based online materials is recommended for secondary schools in Benue State for the sustainability of active learning. This paper is part of a research conducted at Victory Secondary School, Makurdi with a class of 40 students (25 girls and 15 boys).

Keywords: Participatory theatre, constructivism, teaching and learning, students learning

Introduction

Educators have a role to play not only in the academic development of a learner but also in their social, health and wellbeing (Baker et al. 2008). The relevance of the above statement can only be achieved when the educator nudges the learner towards the attainment of a synergistic effect which is geared towards not only the acquisition of new knowledge but the overall wellbeing of the learner. Suhrcke (2011); Day, Fleming and Martin (2016) have related excellent academic attainment to good mental health. Thus, Carpenter and Bell (2002) have described learning as an active process which occurs as an individual assimilates information or experiences from the environment; this can be through prior or new knowledge which is applied to the present learning experience. It has also been shown that, for active learning to occur, a student needs to

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mentally construct meaning and understanding of the subject based on new knowledge and existing experiences (Schunk, 2004). Furthermore, a structured and analytical learning space, which includes learning resources, technology, and approaches to learning (Warger & Dobbin, 2009) is also essential for the formal and conducive educational process to be achieved. To enable a better understanding of what a learning space is, Unge et al. (2018) define a learning space as a place which is created to ease, support, stimulate or complement teaching and learning.

Accordingly, teachers and learners over the years have explored different learning experiences using diverse methods for assessment depending on the context and desired outcomes. As a result, blended learning, which is a style of teaching and learning, will be explored foregrounding on a constructivist approach. Blended learning can be defined as a combination of classroom-based face-to-face learning with online resources and experience in an educational setting (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2003; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004); and it is a combination of technological-based online resources and face to face transfer of instructions with the student having an element of control over the learning pace.

To comprehensively discuss teaching and learning, the educator is required to be able as postulated by Rose and Best (2005). This is to aid the students in the development of academic skills, which include oral, written, critical, analytical, time management, interpersonal and organisational skills. Furthermore, the learners' feedback according to Cramp (2011), is an essential part of learning in which the educator provides supervision, supply guidance and support to enable the learner to develop academically to the best of their abilities. In this situation the educator also completes an assessment, which is used to measure the learning skills, understanding and knowledge of the learner, among other requirements.

Consequently, Walker and Grosejean (2010) recommend that the teacher should have knowledge, experience, teaching skills and the right attitude to teaching, and most importantly, an interpersonal relationship with the students. Secondary schools in Nigeria have over the years imbibed most of these outlined principles in their attempt to provide qualitative driven education. However, the adequacy of world-class educational attainment has been characteristically slow in several states of Nigeria; thus, the research into the adaptation of active learning in schools in Benue state becomes imperative. A summary of the methodology used for teaching during the research can be found in table 1 below.

Methodology

Table 1

Dimension	Characteristics of Approach
Learning approach	Performance analysis
Duration	One academic session
Topic	Blended learning/Active learning
Task setting 1	Based on students' prior experience and possibly the experience of others.
Task setting 2	Substantiated by theory and practice
Task setting 3	Actual world setting
Interpersonal	-Monologue and dialogue -Personalised learning
Task engagement	Individual and group performance
Instructional material	Video clips, Textbooks, handouts, leaflets on HIV, pictures, and films
Behavioural objective	The adaptation of active learning by the students.

A presentation of three keys for the Dimensions of the Framework used are below, and the full description is in the appendix.

1. **Areas of Activity (A)** which we used while teaching and facilitating the learning outcome.
2. **Core Knowledge (K)** which we used to carry out the areas of activities such as rehearsals and dramatic performance.
3. **Professional Values (V)** that we used to demonstrate our teaching or support during the teaching process.

Demonstrating A1: (Design a Strategy of Activity and Plan of Study)

1.6 million young people aged 10-19 were living with HIV in the year 2018. [UNICEF, 2019]

The first experimental lesson was based on Drama skills and exercises with the topic of discussion being HIV status disclosure. The teaching and learning process were based on the constructivist theory which places emphasis on self-construction of knowledge by a learner through active interaction and taking part in authentic tasks with specific goals. Jean Piaget (1970) propounded the constructivist theory and argues that people construct new knowledge from their prior experiences through the assimilation and integration of new skills with an existing one. This means that learners can generate meaning and understanding when they actively reflect on earlier experiences and apply them to the present learning experience.

The reason for the choice of HIV status disclosure as a topic is because HIV/AIDS is an ongoing global issue (Beck, 2006), and a collective global response must be used to stop the Pandemic. The disclosure of an HIV status could also create awareness of the risks involved in unsafe sex (Amaran, 2012). Given these points, HIV status disclosure is broad. Therefore, the topic was split into sub-topics for a better understanding by the students, and the sub-topics were taught on different lecture days. Accordingly, the inquiry-driven and group focused nature of the lesson from the beginning provided a

friendly active disposition for the students' learning process, this approach postulates that a teacher facilitates while the learner actively participates in the learning process (Von Glaserfeld, 1989). During the lesson, simple ended questions were asked to enable a better understanding of HIV status disclosure. The questions are listed below.

- (a) What is HIV/ AIDS?
- (b) What is HIV disclosure?
- (c) Why is HIV disclosure necessary? (K1)

In order, to achieve the aim and goals of the research, a participatory theatre performance which is usually interactive, was introduced using a short video. Participatory theatre can be defined as an educative tool which can be used as a form of entertainment geared towards influencing people's way of life and bringing about a positive behavioural change (Sayye, 2004). The participatory theatre was used with the primary aim of the research as well as a channel for bringing up different viewpoints about sexuality and HIV, thereby stimulating problem-solving skills among participants (Mwansa & Bergman, 2003), this is significant because it is a form of active learning. Furthermore, the application of participatory theatre to the learning process is in line with Beetham and Sharpe (2007) who have called for a constructivist pedagogical approach to teaching and learning because the learner should always be doing something central to active learning. Collins (2017) has advocates a move from traditional classroom teaching to an approach-based on active learning and engagement.

Consequently, for effective teaching on our part, we used a lesson plan which covers all the activities of the learners and their cross-cultural interactions for a better understanding of what HIV disclosure is. Additionally, the appraisal was geared towards activating the students critical thinking through active and behavioural engagement in the learning process (Mark, 2000) (K2, K3), to evaluate the teaching comprehensively, the students engaged in asking questions and giving answers, which enabled them to solve problem exercises without a large amount of teacher provided instruction. On the third day, rehearsal for an enactment began, because, participatory theatre is a useful interactive tool which is used to forge the mutual relationship between the actors and audience and among the spectators (Ponzetti, et al, 2009), because it is expected that the students will remember the enactment and thus, the lesson taught.

Demonstrating A 2: (Teaching and Support of Student Learning)

Study materials were made available to the students ahead of the lesson. This was to support the diverse learning needs of the students (V1, V2, K4) and because people have different educational needs, it was essential to recognise this fact and to supply handouts which were printed in a bold and straightforward font for simple reading (Werth 2003). Additionally, to enhance easy understanding, the use of electronic devices was allowed where necessary (V1 V2). The researchers then introduced the topic and requested the students to write down what they know about HIV disclosure; the information gathered was enacted in an improvisational drama. An improvisational drama is play-acting, which is carried out without prior preparation or a script. As rightly summarised by Keefe (2002, p. 6), "...Making the most of what you have and getting the most out of what you make". The introduction of this active learning resulted in not just a deeper understanding of the topic, but a better transfer of knowledge (Perkin & Salomon, 1992) (K2, K3). In keeping with (Brownell, 1990), students learn better when they are physically involved in an activity instead of just listening.

Thereafter, the students formed groups of five to reflect and discuss the key findings from the enactment because the interactive approach created a positive class climate that encouraged creativity and motivation, resulting in holistic learning (Lešnik, 2017). The students used their discretion to critically and constructively draw on their understanding of the content taught, which made it easy to supply feedback and comment on the depth of knowledge of the topic, and giving praises appropriately (K2, K3). Overall, the students had learnt about HIV status disclosure, types of notification, and how to reveal an HIV status to others. Also, more materials were shared, in addition to the lessons held after the enactment (K1, K2, K3, K4), open-ended questions were asked, leading the development of an understanding of the topic; also, the feedback was given at the end of the discussion by the research team (K2, K3). Furthermore, using proper body language according to Bulut and Sonmez (2005) should be used consciously due to its effect on the student's attention. The body language was not domineering, and this can be achieved by not standing over a seated learner; meanwhile, the students were also given room for an anonymous evaluation of the exercise (K5). Lastly, an online forum [WhatsApp] was set up, where the students shared ideas, asked questions, and contributed further findings on the topics taught (K4). We made an allowance during school hours for the students to have one-on-one contact with any member of our team and the school Health master; this is because of the diverse learning needs of the students. (V1, V2).

Demonstrating A3: (Assess and give feedback to Learners)

Another step in the lesson was the introduction of a Pop Quiz as a formative assessment to the students to measure what they had learnt, and feedback was gotten on the teaching methods. Also, the quiz served as a structure for the students to deliberate on their learning activities and experience (Barab, et al, 2007). The students were also encouraged to discuss, ask questions, and review the answers from the quiz in groups (Nicol & Boyle, 2003). While the discussions were going on, the teacher moved around the classroom listening and deducing if a student needed more hints on the topic learnt and taking note of the active students and those who seemed nonchalant by asking them questions about their opinion (Mckinney & Graham, 1993). The reason for encouraging group participation was to find if the students had a clear understanding of the topic taught (K5).

Subsequently, a summative assessment was administered to enable the students to receive an evaluation of their written work. Whether it met the appraisal criteria (V4), the review was designed to determine an understanding of the subject content and the relevant competency. Thus, the question used was to critically discuss the harm and risk reduction strategies that can be used in the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS as enunciated by Catania et al. (1990).

Demonstrating A4: (Developing a Productive Environment for Student Support and Guidance)

The students made the lesson more interactive by sharing their understanding of the topic with each other (Brownell 1990), on the other hand, the team rewarded the students by acknowledging the student's inputs (K1, K2, V1, V2). It was also crucial to get an evaluation from other colleagues (s), who evaluated the teaching style and gave feedback (A5).

An Evaluation of Constructivism as a Learning Theory

This article attempts a retrospective review of the constructivist theory of learning and highlights its sustenance in contemporary teaching and learning. Jean Piaget's (1970) conception of constructivism is that education is an ongoing evaluation of constructive knowledge, which is better learned through interaction with prior experience. Jean Piaget was a Swiss Psychologist whose epistemological theory of cognitive constructivism has become one of the most critical approaches relating to teaching and learning (Jonassen, 1991). Thus, it has been postulated that learners perceive and construct knowledge differently, even when given the same scenario, based on their unique previous experience. Constructivism as a learning theory places emphasis on the adaptation of active implementation of an idea to solve a problem instead of the passive transfer of facts and knowledge (Piaget 1977; Mvududu & Thiel-Burgess, 2012; Jayeeta 2015). Also, (Bruner, 1996; Maclellan & Soden, 2004) have expounded the Constructivist theory as the active construction of new knowledge through a learner's perception of their experiential world, based on their prior knowledge. Also, constructivism, as a learning theory, expounds the idea that, through personal experience and prior knowledge, a learner can understand and make meaning from what is being taught.

Besides, Brooks and Brooks (1993) describe constructivism, as a theory of knowledge and not of teaching, they further explain that the approach seeks to liaise between temporary knowledge and a person's ongoing cognitive developmental process. Additionally, Constructivist theory applies to active learning and teaching practice and has an impact on cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1970). To sum up the different views on constructivism, it is not out of place to affirm the position of many who see it as a learning theory which emphasises the adaptation of active implementation of an idea to a problem, instead of the passive transfer of information. It is important to note that, constructivism as a learning theory places prominence on a learner's cognitive process (Snowman, 1997) because it is believed that, the learner has a rich, vast earlier knowledge which can be applied to the present learning experience. The above is because the learner is expected to experiment continuously with concepts through social negotiation (Wenger, 1999); thus, the focal point of constructivism as a learning theory is on the mental construction of knowledge based on prior experiences. Equally, the approach has a profound impact on learning because it enhances the development of a student's conceptual understanding (Murphy et al. 2018); therefore, the provision of a conducive learning environment will contribute to creating awareness of the subject taught and the process of knowledge construction (Elliot, 2007).

In discussing constructivism as a learning theory, it is crucial to see it as a search for meaning which can be developed through active participation of a learner in the learning process, and this can be through, experimenting, observation, interaction, collaboration and problem-solving (Baumgartner, 2003; Sutton, 2003; Rummel, 2008). Consequently, Clapper (2014) states that the educator only serves as a facilitator who plans and collaborates while motivating and encouraging the learner to discuss, question and construct their own opinion on a given subject (Bernaus, et al, 2004) and finally get to an exact conclusion on the chosen topic.

Constructivism and Active Learning

Consequently, during active learning, the teacher serves as a facilitator whose role is to aid the learner towards acquisition of new knowledge; thus, a constructivist teacher encourages students to question their assumptions and those of others when faced with a problem (Gray, 1997); given the need for interactions among the students, and between the teacher and students, this is vital for the learning process to be complete. Furthermore, in a constructivist classroom, different educational strategies are used for intellectual understanding, and to strengthen the assimilation of knowledge (Balachandran, 2015), this is because instructional strategy can be used for stimulating learning behaviours in a student and the practical adaptation of teaching strategies to meet the learning needs of the students. Lastly, the learner's prior knowledge is recognised and integrated into the learning process.

The Benefits of Constructivism

According to Driscoll (2000), constructivism as a learning theory seeks to improve a learner's critical problem-solving skills through the application of logic and conceptual growth. While Tam (2000) places emphasis on the cognitive development of the learner through the dissemination of information, it is expected that the learner will actively focus on the information received, organise the ideas presented and create meaning using prior knowledge or experience and arrive at a conclusive result (Bereiter, 2014). The learner is expected to think and understand the subject material rather than memorising the ideas. For Driscoll (2000) constructivism exists in the human mind as learners continuously updating their perception of the world around them mentally to construct or interpret their reality. Also, Brooks and Brooks (1993) state that constructivism encourages learners to internalise, start, and reorganise information. This results in the learner aspiring to reach elevated levels of different thinking which aids them to understand the introduction of new knowledge and strategies better. Most importantly, a learner develops social and communication skills through the exchange of ideas and discussion on the subject in the classroom with significant others.

Criticism of Constructivism

Notwithstanding, the many advantages attributed to constructivism, does not stop its critics. Kirschner, et al (2006) points to the fact that empirical studies might not be comprehensive due to constructivist approaches being minimal. This is because the learner constructs knowledge internally; thus, the necessary experience might be subjective. Also, Christie (2005) states that some learners might not have the ability to structure their prior knowledge to confirm or produce results when needed in a new learning experience. To sum up the viewpoints of the critics, technological and environmental factors, especially in Benue State, can also be a hindrance to the constructive development of a learner.

Conclusion

As far as we are concerned, constructivism as learning theory has created an environment where learning occurs in an authentic and stimulating manner, because students are responsible for their education, while the teacher guides and supports them where necessary for the construction of new knowledge. Therefore, it behoves on the students to ensure that, the learning process will result in inherent self-sufficiency.

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