Chapter 22

Dialogism in the Digital Age: Online Discussion Boards as Constructivist Platforms

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide pre-service and practicing teachers a constructivist lens for viewing how they use technology, specifically online discussion boards, in their classrooms. The chapter explores the way that student-focused and constructivist teachers can utilize technology in ways that remain consistent with maintaining important student relationships, which are so central to paradigm and student success overall. This chapter explores the role of dialogism in a student-centered classroom and provides several specific and practical strategies for ways to use discussion boards in the classroom. Each of these strategies connects to the roots of constructivist beliefs. In particular, this chapter highlights the role that writing can play when using this technology.

INTRODUCTION

As standardized testing has become more prevalent and a more powerful variable in our educational landscape, teaching has become increasingly centralized and focused on testing outcomes (Au, 2007). While assessment is a critical part of the teaching profession from a variety of perspectives, including behaviorism and constructivism (Shepard, 2000), constructivist teachers can find the testing-centric classroom to be incompatible with their learner-centric approaches to teaching (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

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This systemic tension often leads teachers to search for middle ground where assessment practices and constructivist techniques can play out simultaneously. One such space is the online discussion board, or ODB.

**Why Constructivism, and Why Now?**

It has been increasingly recognized that many of the students who are a part of our public school system have endured adverse childhood experiences as they enter and progress through their school years. Estimates suggest that as many as 26 percent of children in the United States will be a part of a traumatic event before they enter school (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012). These traumas can include many things—from severe or chronic poverty, to abuse at the hands of a caregiver, to strife related to immigration hurdles, to community violence. These hurdles that our nation’s children face have prompted teachers to re-examine the role that positive student–teacher relationships play in their students’ success.

Forming positive relationships with students has been identified as a key step to helping students who have endured traumatic events (Craig, 2016; Souers, 2016). As teachers have begun to re-examine and appreciate the value of their relationships with students in the classroom, some teaching practices that utilize technology may actually feel counterproductive to building those relationships. Holding discussions over a chat room rather than in a brick and mortar chatroom can feel less personal and possibly have a distancing effect on student–teacher relationships. However, we argue that there are strategies that can support the implementation of these technologies and make the ODB as viable a relational space as the physical classroom.

Online discussion boards (ODBs) are poised to become as ubiquitous in 21st century classrooms as chalkboards were in the previous century. But an ODB is unlike a chalkboard in many ways, and those who care about 21st century learning practices should understand what is unique about the ODB as a medium and as an assignment. Unlike the words on a chalkboard, usually composed by the hand of the authorial and authoritative teacher, an ODB is “authored” largely by the student-learners. What, then, do we need to understand about the role of the 21st century teacher in this ever-present medium? We propose that constructivism is an ideal theoretical orientation for understanding the context and potential of the ODB in the current educational landscape.

First, constructivist teachers avoid the temptation to turn the discussion board into a new kind of chalkboard or a means for delivering a kind of “text-lecture.” Second, constructivist teachers are comfortable with the idea that knowledge is co-constructed and thus are more apt to let knowledge evolve through a community of inquiry (COI) they have thoughtfully constructed with their students. Third, those teachers acquainted with constructivist principles are more apt to regard the ODB as a unique text in itself because on an ODB, questions are pursued (not merely answered), students are regarded as thinkers (not merely empty vessels waiting to be filled with the teacher’s knowledge), and teachers are seen as mediators and facilitators (not merely the keepers of the knowledge to be translated). The ODB is indeed pervasive, but we worry that it has potential to become stale when merely assigned out of routine. With constructivist principles in mind, teachers assigning and assessing the ODB should think carefully about deep reflection, rubrics to measure meaningful participation, rhetorical questioning techniques (their own and the students’), and the use of narrative and case studies. We contend that when thoughtfully considered as a dialogic, polyvocal text with a unique potential to elicit deep learning, the ODB may have the potential to bring democratic principles to life through composition and co-construction.
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