3

The Constructivist Approach and the *Panchatantra*

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Abstract

One learns by doing. This age-old concept has appeared under many labels over the years and has remained the most powerful educational tool till date. Teachers are challenged to find classroom-based approaches that will prove beneficial for students of all age groups and help them understand what needs to be learned. This challenge is not new and common to the profession. Constructivism is an approach that encompasses all phases of the learning process by supporting the inclusion of a variety of discussions, participation and group work as part of reading and learning. In this paper, the role of this approach in teaching and education has been discussed. The ways a teacher can innovate one's teaching skills by going beyond today's textbook centric education, and making students participate and discuss the topics covered in textbooks in a creative manner has also been elaborated. The paper discusses, with examples how Panchatantra, the first-ever effort in the education system that went beyond textbooks and turned students into active learners, can be used as a tool to this end. Some examples from the tales of the Panchatantra have also been highlighted in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

Life has become more complex due to knowledge and information explosion. So, there is more to learn with technology advancing at an unprecedented pace, making it difficult to grasp what needs to be learned.

In 1916, John Dewey, a well-known educationalist, said teachers need to assign tasks to students that involve

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acquiring and testing ideas and information in active pursuits, typifying important social situations. This view has been applied in classrooms for generations and has been reaffirmed in recent years. Lev Vygotsky developed the concept of the 'zone of proximal development (i.e., the difference between what a learner can do with and without help), which suggests that the learner benefits from interaction with others in the process of learning. The 'zone of proximal development' involves teachers, as well as, students. Learning is a social phenomenon, and one's interactions with others provide stimulus, motivation and information exchange that is vital to one's overall development. This would appear to be most significant with reference to language use, an important human characteristic.

In recent years, the term 'constructivism' has been used to label the phenomenon of learning as an active process, wherein, each person processes the information received and formulates new ideas. The term may, thus, be explained as: "Constructivist teaching and learning recognises that knowledge is created in the mind of each learner, and that effective teaching approaches to delve into the learner's mind through active learning; learner-generated inquiry; concrete and authentic experiences; discussions and reflections; collaborative investigations; and structuring learning around primary concepts" (Graves, 1998).

In classroom education, constructivism strongly supports the inclusion of a variety of discussion and group work as part of reading and learning (Wilen, 2004). Hence, the learning process is dependent on communication not only with teachers but also with others. Students share ideas and information with each other as they engage in learning activities. This provides an environment, which helps enrich the thought process of the participants.

The constructivist approach employs five phases to learning and teaching, known as the 5Es (engage, explore, explain, elaborate and evaluate).

The 'engage' phase aims at promoting interest and motivation among the students. In this phase, the emphasis is on activities to arouse the curiosity of the students, puzzle them and raise questions for further investigation.

The 'explore' phase provides the students with practical experiences. In this phase, they continue raising questions, listen to the views of others and investigate different phenomena. The students are encouraged to express and share their views.

In the 'explain' phase, the students explain their findings to others and their ideas are subjected to greater scrutiny. In this phase, the teacher introduces the students to relevant scientific explanations. By the end of this phase, the students should have developed greater understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

In the 'elaborate' phase, the emphasis is on the students applying their understandings developed during the previous phases to a range of familiar and unfamiliar situations. In this phase, they can see how fruitful their new ideas are. This phase is important as it allows the students to see how well their ideas work in a range of contexts.

'Evaluate' is the final phase. Here, the students' understanding is assessed formally and they are encouraged to reflect on and question the ideas that they have developed. Each lesson taught involves aspects of each phase discussed above, and each phase should be evident in the planning and implementation of the unit as a whole.

PANCHATANTRA — THE FIRST TEXT USING CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

The *Panchatantra* stories have regaled children and adults alike for more than two-and-a-half millennia. Each story ends with a moral. There is a story about a king, who worried that his three sons did not possess the wisdom to live in a world of wile and guile, and therefore, asks a learned man named Vishnu Sharma to teach them the ways of the world. Vishnu Sharma decides to pass on wisdom to them in the form of stories. In these stories, animals speak like human beings. *Panchatantra* is a collection of stories about the five ways that help human beings succeed in life. *Pancha* means 'five' and *Tantra* means 'ways', 'strategies' or 'principles'. Addressed to the king's children, the stories are, primarily, about statecraft and have become popular across the world. The five principles are as follows.

- *Mitra-Bheda*: loss of friends
- *Mitra-samprapti*: gaining friends
- *Kakolukiyam*: of crows and owls (war and peace)
- *Labdhaprasam*: loss of gains
- *Aparikitakaraka*: ill-considered action or rash deeds

It is under these five principles that the precepts of basic education, such as building of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are woven in such a way that they leave no scope for the students to get bored or tired while they imbibe the essence of these strategies. The art of storytelling is used to teach these principles to the students. Moreover, the author of *Hitopadesh*, another text derived from the *Panchatantra*, puts it — "*Niti* imparted with the help of stories remains engraved in the minds of children forever."

It can be said that the 5Es of the constructivist approach are in line with the five *Tantras* of the *Panchatantra* as the process adopted for teaching is the same and students learn a lot without problems that they, usually, face in the traditional or conventional way of teaching–learning.

Applying constructivist approach using the *Panchatantra*

The teaching ideas discussed in the following paragraphs demonstrate how constructivist approach may be

used with the *Panchatantra* in helping students advance their knowledge and skills in a variety of academic areas. These activities replicate the processes by which learning occurs and provide opportunities for social interaction as a vehicle for fostering learning and active practice in various skill areas.

Reading activity: determining logical sequence

In this activity, the students are given a story. The parts of the story are printed or written on separate slips. The students are asked to form small groups (up to four members in each group) and distribute the slips among themselves. The group members are asked to read aloud the segments of the story that they have received. When all story segments have been read out, the group members have to place the segments in order, forming the entire story. They need to paste the segments on a sheet of paper in order. At last, the group members put their names on a paper and submit it to the teacher for review and grade.

This is a jigsaw type of activity, which provides a vehicle for reading aloud, listening and comprehending the main ideas and supporting details. This activity is helpful in providing the students with an opportunity to examine the use of transition words that help in tracking the sequence of events in reading material.

A note on assessment

In this activity, the emphasis is on the sequence of the story, which needs to be logical. Attention to transition words is a consideration as the sequence is clearly indicated by transition markers.

Sample story in eight parts

The Foolish Tortoise

(Transition words are given in bold.)

Part 1: The tortoise did not like people shouting and said, "Why should these fools shout like that?" But even as it uttered these words, it lost hold of the stick, and down it went when it hit the ground and died.

Part 2: "How can we help you?" asked the geese. "We can get to any place on Earth by flying. But you can't travel like that."

"It is true that I cannot fly like you," said the tortoise, adding, "but you can help me and take me along with you."

To this, the geese said, "How can we do that?"

Part 3: **Once,** there was a tortoise in a large tank. It had two geese as friends. The geese used to come to the tank and the three of them spent most of their time together. They lived happily for a number of years.

Part 4: **Then,** there was a drought in the country, and for a long time, there was no rain. Rivers and tanks were drying up. There was famine in the land. People and animals were dying. Birds were flying away to places of safety. The two geese sensed the danger from the drought. They, too, decided to migrate to some other place.

They met the tortoise to take leave of him.

"Why do you bid me farewell?" said the tortoise. "Am I not your friend? Don't you want me also to live? Why do you leave me here to die?"

Part 5: **So,** all of them agreed to the plan. The geese brought a strong stick and held it with their beaks at both ends. The tortoise held on to the middle of the stick with its teeth and the geese flew, carrying the tortoise. They flew higher and higher.

Part 6: "That is easy," said the tortoise. "Bring me a stick. I can hold the middle of the stick with my teeth. Both of you can take hold of the ends of the stick with your beaks and fly high, taking me along. Fly slowly to a place, where we will be safe from the drought."

Part 7: The geese thought over the matter and said, "We hope we can manage this but there is one danger in the plan. If, by chance, you attempt to speak a word while we are up in the air, you will lose hold, fall down and be crushed to death."

"But I will do no such foolish thing," said the tortoise. "I will not utter a word as long as we are in the air," it added.

Part 8: They flew over fields and hills, and then, over a city. The people of the city noticed the strange sight in the sky. They had never seen anything like that before. They clapped and shouted, "Look! How wonderful! Two birds carrying a tortoise, and see how they are doing it."

Analysis

This is how the *Panchatantra* tales could be used in a classroom to enhance the linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional skills of young learners.

Images or pictures can also be used and the students can arrange them in sequence.

Besides, the following elements of storytelling and story listening can assist a child develop literacy skills.

- Listening
- Re-telling
- Experiencing sequencing — a progression of events
- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Visualising
- Thinking about motives (developing the understanding of characters' personalities and actions)
- Thinking about values and morality

From re-telling to thinking about values — all can be taught to the students using one of the many tales from the *Panchatantra.* The title of the story is 'Ringdoves Escape'. The value of cooperation is vividly demonstrated in this story. Reading it and doing activities based on it is an effective way of promoting cooperation in classrooms and among students. This story will get the students thinking, talking and discussing about the importance of cooperation.

The story starts with a hunter setting a giant net beneath a spreading

banyan tree and scattering grains to catch birds. White Wing, a ringdove king, and its flock notice the grains from sky. They swoop downward and are soon trapped in the net. As the hunter gleefully approaches the birds with his club, White Wing tells the ringdoves, "We must not panic, my friends. There is a way to escape from this terrible fate but we must all agree to work together. The net is too large and too heavy for any one of us to lift. But if we all fly upward at the same time, I am sure we can lift the net and fly with it." The other ringdoves quickly agreed. When White Wing signaled, all birds flew upward at the same time. They lifted the net and it looked to the hunter, who watched in amazement, like a flying net rising on its own and vanishing into the sky.

Various activities can be done around this story. Some of them are as follows.

Drawing

This story lends itself vividly to illustration. Ask the students to draw it in panels and strips.

Discussion

Ask the students — "Name something you can do with a group that you can't do by yourself." List their choices on a board or chart paper.

Role-play or performance

Some students can be asked to perform the story assuming different roles, while others can observe them and give feedback.

CONCLUSION

There are several ways to enable children to learn. The key to this, however, lies in recognising that students must be actively involved in the learning process. Constructivism reminds us of this. When the teacher is able to provide activities that are colourful, concrete and enjoyable, then the students are likely to get engrossed with greater enthusiasm and attention. The results are predictable. Vishnu Sharma, who authored the *Panchatantra*, knew it well and devised a way of teaching that we now know as 'constructivism'.

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