

Instructing Slow Learners at College Level: An Integrated Approach

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Abstract

Dealing with slow learners at college level has turned out to be a daunting task for teachers. Slow learners have already acquired low self-esteem, lack of interest and lackadaisical attitude during their schooling. By the time they enter colleges, these negative attitudes become more intensified. They become the victims of faulty strategies which result in truancy and drop out. It appears to be an intimidating job on the part of the teachers either to make the slow learners unlearn what they have already learnt fallaciously or to make them learn things anew which their advanced counterparts have already learnt. The paper makes an attempt to explore innovative teaching-learning strategies for those who are involved in instructing slow learners in the inclusive class room. These strategies would be based on Jean Piaget's theory of Cognitivism which is influenced by Constructivism, and Lev Vygotsky's theory of Social Constructivism.

Keywords: Slow-learners, faulty-strategies, inclusive, cognitivism, constructivism

Introduction

Instructing slow learners at college level has turned out to be a daunting task for teachers who have to deal with advanced, average and slow learners within the space of a single classroom. A slow learner is one who is unable to keep pace with other students in terms of learning: understanding, memorizing, and interpreting concepts. A learner is branded as slow learner if he/she fails to answer questions, are unable to interact with teachers and peers, and falls short of expectations in the examination. In most cases these learners do not become slow learners at the college. They have been carrying that legacy with them since their schooling and have already inculcated low self-esteem, lack of interest and lackadaisical attitude. By the time they enter colleges, these negative attitudes become more intensified.

The behavioural approach to learning had been teacher-centric with the learners passively listening to the teachers with a closed mind. This method of teaching made the slow learners more inactive and puzzled as they were unable to follow the instructions due to lack of adequate prior knowledge which was taken for granted by the teacher as having already possessed by them. Since the behaviourists considered knowledge as a product, their focus had always been on knowledge as object. This approach is countered by constructivist approach which is based on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitivism. Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory basically takes into account children's progress in cognitive and social skills through four 'linear' and 'cumulative' stages (Piaget, 1964): the 'sensorimotor', 'preoperational', 'concrete operational' and 'formal operational'. We are basically concerned here with the 'formal operational' stage which starting at 12 years continues till adolescence and adulthood. Learners at this stage have an ability to use abstract concepts and to think logically, although everyone does not wholly

achieves this. Some are able to apply these abilities only in adulthood. Learners can also form and test hypotheses applying rational thinking. At the time of developing his theory Piaget was influenced by 'Constructivism'. It is based on the idea that knowledge is neither fixed nor stable but something that is constructed step by step and liable to be changed frequently, depending on the ways individuals and groups endeavour to make sense of the world around them with all its complexity and ephemerality.

Piaget's 'constructivism' theory encourages learners to be active and to have schemes so that they can assimilate and ultimately accommodate everything they learn. Meanwhile, Lev Vigotsky introduces the concept of 'social constructivism' lending Piaget's constructivism the most needed elements of group dynamism and socio-cultural context as another dimension of knowledge formation. He advises students to study together in one group and practice their knowledge.

Review of Literature

Naylor, et al. (1999) are of the opinion that the central principles of the constructivist approach are that learners can only make sense of new situations in terms of their existing understanding. Learning involves an active process in which learners construct meaning by linking new ideas with their existing knowledge.

Von Glasersfeld (1995) argues that knowledge is not passively received but rather actively constructed by the cognizing subject. Thus constructivists' focus shifts from knowledge as a product to knowing as a process.

Noddings (1990) argues that constructivists emphasize on the learner as an active subject capable of exercising a knowing mechanism which is dynamic, not fixed and which allows knowing through continued construction of knowledge.

In constructivist learning, say Brooks and Brooks (1993), knowledge formation is a continuous process which passes through uncertainty, variegated experiences, collaborative initiatives, reflective thinking and diverse interpretations. This is indicative of the non-objective nature of the compilation of knowledge.

Strike, et al. (1992) suggest that conceptual change is not so much a product of replacement but a developmental process that encompasses concepts such as anomalies, analogies, metaphors, epistemological beliefs, metaphysical beliefs, knowledge from other areas of inquiry and knowledge of competing conceptions (150).

Amireh, et al.(2015) are of the opinion that cognitive structure is based on concrete experiences of the learner so that adjustment and adaptation take place through a series of reconstruction.

Statement of the Problem

Instructing slow learners through the traditional behaviourist method has its own limitations due to its focus not on learners, but on teachers; not on the active role to be played by learners, but by teachers; and not on learners' prior knowledge, but on teachers' present knowledge. The review of some of the existing literature has already revealed that the constructivist approach to learning can be a better alternative to addressing the issue of instructing slow learners.

Objectives

1. To explore the problem of instructing slow learners through the integrated approach of Piaget's individual constructivism and Vigotsky's social constructivism.

2. To offer suggestions on the basis of the exploration of the aforesaid integrated approach.

Methodology

The present study is primarily based on secondary sources such as books and journals. However, the data received from such sources are manipulated by the researcher on the basis of her first hand experience of teaching slow learners at college.

Discussion

Constructivist Approach: An Analysis

Although Piaget's theories tend to focus primarily on the development of the individual while ignoring the greater socio-cultural context, the roots of constructivism are clearly present in Piaget's focus on the active role of the individual in learning. For Piaget, knowledge construction takes place when new knowledge is actively assimilated and accommodated into existing knowledge. For Piaget, our understandings of reality are constantly being revised and reconstructed through time and with respect to exposure to new experiences.

Social constructivists argue that it is through checking out our understandings and perspectives with others that we develop a sense of the 'viability' of ideas. This process of idea testing can be seen in the classrooms of teachers who value students' ideas and promote the process of critical thinking. Vygotsky, the social constructivist, also advocates the use of scaffolds in instructing learners. Scaffolding means providing learners with scaffolds such as cue cards, concepts, mind maps, examples, explanations, handouts, hints, prompts, question cards, stories, visual scaffolds, etc. to encourage them first, to supply the required information. Then the instructor and students work together to perform the task. This is followed by group efforts to complete the task. The fourth is the individual practice stage.

Constructivism's perspectives on the role of the individual and the society, on the importance of meaning making, and on the active role of the learner are the very elements that make the theory appealing to the teachers who deal with learners and, particularly, the slow learners. The constructivist theory thus challenges teachers to modify their strategies relating to instructing slow learners in the following ways:

1. Teachers should be aware of the role played by prior knowledge in students' learning which they can elicit from learners by questioning them and by initiating discussions with them.
2. They should fathom the deep sea of prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs that students use in constructing new understandings and make them unlearn misconceptions if there are any.
3. They should, however, remember that pre-conceptions or naive conceptions have been shown to be very resistant to change.
4. The mismatch between what is taught and what is learned is evidence of the need for constructivist pedagogy that considers the students' conceptual ecology.
5. For understanding to take place, teachers must not only elicit students' prior concepts, but must also build on these concepts during instruction.
6. Teachers should find out what students know, then provide educational experiences that will confront prior conceptions (or provide a "cognitive conflict") in order to promote conceptual development.
7. In order to drive the learner to consider alternative conceptual views, teachers must make the students dissatisfied with the current conception.

8. 'Telling' is not enough because it has limited value for students. Research has shown that students do not always replace preconceived ideas with new ideas. There is evidence that students may hold original intuitive views simultaneously with newly constructed formal concepts (Hewson and Hewson, 1992).

Suggestions

1. Research shows that the human brain has the capacity to process various data at the same time affecting or being affected by thoughts, emotions and socio cultural context. Accordingly teachers must adopt multiple strategies to address various issues which are at work at a given moment. For example, if some students are found to be emotional, the teacher must be able to stimulate him/her emotionally to activate his/her thought process. Once that is done, the teacher needs to explore the socio-cultural context and prior-knowledge of the student by say, questioning him/her or initiating a strategic conversation with him/her to elicit the required information.
2. Audience analysis is a must for adopting effective teaching strategies. Since each student is a unique case, his/her understanding is determined by his/her unique experiences which again are influenced by his/her socio-cultural context. In an inclusive classroom where students of variegated levels coming from different socio-cultural background take part in the teaching learning process, the teacher can stimulate the students towards achieving the desired understanding by making them pass through a contextual 'cognitive conflict'. For example, a lesson on communal harmony may evoke different understandings among students coming from different socio-cultural background. Those who are witness to communal conflict may have a different understanding of the issue compared to those who live in an environment of communal harmony. The teacher should allow the students to express their views freely so that there is a scope for 'cognitive conflict' which will lead the students to move from the local to the global; form the parts to the whole. This is what Caine and Caine (1991) call "patterning" through which the search for meaning moves through.
3. Teachers' focus should be on both 'spatial memory' and 'rote memory'. Unless there is coordination between the two, learning process may be inhibited. What we understand and remember through spatial memory is more lasting and effective. In other words, experiential learning is more effective than rote learning. Teachers may make use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to facilitate experiential learning beyond the immediate spatial matrix of the learners.
4. Stuffing the students with more and more information does not necessarily mean that they understand better. Since understanding comes from within the learner and is determined by the unique experiences and ability of each learner, the duty of the teacher is to motivate him/her to become active participant in the learning process by facilitating effective and meaningful link between his/her prior knowledge and current knowledge so that knowledge formation is channelized in the right direction. Here the teacher should allow full autonomy to the students and make them learn and understand through trial and error.
5. A constructivist teacher does not solely rely on secondary sources or 'cooked data'. He/she should come to the classroom equipped with 'raw data' and encourage the students to use them.
6. The teacher must never be an obtruder in so far as imparting his/her ideas and/or understanding to the students is concerned. After inquiring about the level of understanding of students, the teacher should share his/her views.

7. Teachers should provide an environment in which learners experiment with their ideas based on experience derived from their interaction and discussions with classmates and form their actual experiences in laboratories. The constructivist teachers thus create an environment where the priority is given to student-centric learning in the relevant context.
8. A constructivist teacher should focus on the learning process, not on the predetermined and immediate outcome.

Conclusion

The study reveals that instructors should equip themselves with multiple constructivist strategies to address the issue of instructing slow learners at the college level. An integrated approach combining cognitivism and social constructivism would go a long way in addressing the critical and complicated issue of instructing slow-learners in an inclusive environment.

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