

# 'We Want to See The Teacher'

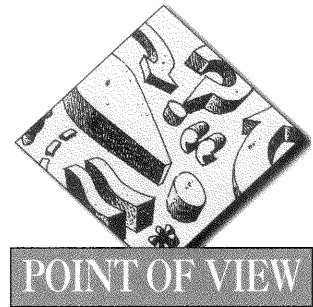
## *Constructivism and the Rage Against Expertise*

*The momentum of the constructivist movement has had a profound effect on how prospective teachers are educated and on how they perceive the duties of a teacher, according to Mr. Baines and Mr. Stanley, who argue that students deserve a chance to learn at the elbow of an expert.*

BY LAWRENCE A. BAINES AND GREGORY STANLEY



Illustration by Mario Noche



WHEN DISCO was king, protest bumper stickers began to appear that proclaimed, "Disco stinks! We want to see the band." Many disco bands at the time actually consisted of a couple of guys with access to synthesizers and drum machines that could keep a beat. These bands never went on tour for the simple reason that there was no real band behind the machinery. Similarly, students today want to see the teacher, although in many cases the teacher has been banished to the scrap heap by the currently popular educational theory known as constructivism.

Textbooks tell us that constructivism is student-centered and is on the opposite side of the continuum from subject-centered or teacher-centered instruction.<sup>1</sup> According to constructivist thinking, "knowledge is personal, and arises out of experiences and interactions which are unique to each individual." The teacher's role is to "facilitate personal learning by establishing a community of learners, and by making it clear to the student that he or she is part of that community."<sup>2</sup>

In truth, many aspects of constructivism are commendable. Few could quarrel with the desire for students in a class to feel that they belong to a "community of learners." The drive to engage students actively in their learning is timely. But somewhere, somehow, the constructivist paradigm has become as inflexible as the instructional approach its proponents are eager

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to dismantle. Not only is it no longer ideologically correct for a teacher to serve as an authority on a subject, but many constructivists characterize direct instruction as a clear and present danger, like some atavistic form of intellectual cruelty. Constructivists routinely invoke the work of Paulo Freire as substantiation for fostering ideals of empowerment in lieu of teaching content.

We find inspiration from Freire (1998) when he exhorts, *We must redefine our understanding of the world; though it is historically produced in the world, this understanding is also produced by conscious bodies in their interactions with the world* (pp. 52-53). His comprehension of the potential for human agency impels us to continue to define our actions as necessary and vital if we actually are to understand that schools are historically produced and that through our interactions we may have the opportunity to make a contribution to the realization of democratic schools that exist to enhance the lives of all learners.<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Imagine a teacher consulting such advice in the process of formulating a plan for teaching physics first period on Monday morning.

## The Evils of Rote Learning

The teacher as a “sage on the stage” has been tossed aside in favor of the learning facilitator, more commonly known as a “guide on the side.” In the constructivist view, memorization of multiplication tables, poetry, dates of historical importance, or scientific formulas is decied as “mindless” and even “hegemonic.” Indeed, in the current educational climate, the worst insult that can be leveled at a teacher is that a lesson involves “rote learning.”

While there is something to be said for having interests in many areas, the rage against expertise and the vehemence shown toward repetitive practice is bewildering. How else does a pianist learn to play Chopin? How else does a lawyer synthesize points of law to elucidate inconsistencies? How else does an artist know the precise mix of colors needed for the autumn sky? How else does a child learn to spell? Mastery of any subject does not come easily. Joseph Campbell once said that he was qualified to be an academic because he had

locked himself up in a room and read for five years. If expertise has become passé, then the decades that a professional spends studying a subject, earning advanced degrees, and pursuing research and publication have become nugatory.

Perhaps it is because we live in a fast-paced world in which patience is rarely considered a virtue that we have come to the point where the desired goal is certification in multiple subject areas — as is the current practice in the preparation of middle school teachers (who can be certified to teach almost everything) — rather than the deliberate, specialized ordeal of building expertise. Unfortunately, we now find ourselves acting as if superior knowledge in one field is suspect while ignorance in many is ideal. Interdisciplinary units and team teaching are great concepts, but a teacher should still be highly knowledgeable in at least one field as a prerequisite to making complex connections among many.

Given the uneven quality of instruction, aggravated by the large number of teachers teaching out-of-field, it is only natural to hope that students will be able to teach themselves. Yet the widespread adoption of constructivist nonintervention styles is not likely to produce better results. According to Richard Ingersoll, about one-third of all secondary teachers who teach math do not have either a major or a minor in the subject or in any related discipline, one-fourth of English teachers have neither a major nor a minor in English, one-fifth of science and social studies teachers have little science or social studies in their backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> In some states, the statistics are even more alarming. For example, two-thirds of history teachers in Georgia are teaching out-of-field.<sup>5</sup>

There is no excuse for making learning dull, either as a lecturer or a facilitator. However, as a facilitator, the teacher is not required to know any of the answers. Even if a facilitator does know an answer, he or she is not supposed to communicate it to students. That would be a tyrannical imposition of the teacher's will upon the minds of the students.

## The Teacher as a Force for Social Change

One of the most troublesome aspects of constructivism is that many of its adherents pretend to play in the realm of so-

cial justice as if, by virtue of their own insight, they hold the keys to the enlightenment that would set free the nefarious world:

To use knowledge to improve society from this perspective requires advocacy of some form of social action against the forces of status quo thinking and dominant behaviors reproducing unequal relations on the basis of skin color, ethnic origins, gender, or sexual preference. Although we realize the limitations of curriculum transformation for reconstructing society, we understand the vitality of a curriculum that recognizes diverse perspectives leading to the social reconstruction of schools and society.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, the current focus in some teacher education programs is not on preparing students to teach a subject, but on enabling them to act as guardians of generic democratic principles and liberators of children who apparently are too ignorant to see such “truths” for themselves. Commonly, constructivists place themselves above the fray and are quick to blame obstacles to learning on uncontrollable external forces rather than on factors within the domain of the teacher or student.

Unfortunately, blame is scattered around everywhere except where it often belongs. At the Olympic training center in Colorado Springs, for example, coaches do not blame equipment. If a cyclist does not go fast enough, it is not the fault of the bike. If a shooter cannot demonstrate Olympic-class accuracy, he or she is passed over in favor of someone who can. It is not the gun's fault. So too, when constructivists point accusing fingers at everything but the student and teacher, they often miss their mark. Perhaps the problem, if that is indeed the correct word, with the “sage on the stage” format is that too many teachers can in no sense be referred to as sages. In short, a teacher who possesses a thorough grounding in the subject matter and an enthusiasm for sharing it with students is almost as rare a specimen as the principal who wants to hire such a teacher.

Ignorance of subject matter is not something a teacher should “celebrate,” as some have proposed.<sup>7</sup> Rather, lack of preparation should be a source of embarrassment. As a spokesperson for a subject, a teacher must stay current enough to provide the guidance students need to make quanti-

tative intellectual leaps. When a teacher ceases to be an expert in the subject matter taught or, worse, ceases to care about it, the time has come for that teacher to seek employment outside of the classroom.

## Married to the Method

Teaching is one of the most demanding and dynamic occupations on earth. With that in mind, the pronouncement that one method of teaching is best seems dubious. In a constantly changing environment, a teacher must be eclectic, spontaneous, and highly adaptable. The insistence on a single strategy bears the hallmark of academic educators who are isolated in their own theoretical models. Consider this "call for papers" from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), an organization made up of deans and department heads from colleges of education across the country: "A simple 'transfer of information' from presenter to participant will not suffice. . . . Sessions must utilize collaborative learning principles."<sup>8</sup>

So much for empowerment and academic freedom! Despite the mandate from AACTE, Kenneth Stunkel contends that no single instructional model, whether interactive or not, "can substitute for a well-

organized lecture that structures a mass of information, illuminates basic concepts, reviews relevant literature, and displays what it means for someone to care about learning, inquiry, and teaching."<sup>9</sup>

At this point, it might be helpful to note that, when the situation calls for serving as nonintrusive, coffee-drinking guides on the side, we think that teachers who have the presence of mind to step back and shut up are doing the right thing. We do not, however, view such teaching as the only way to go about providing a stimulating learning environment. Rather, we view such an approach as only one choice in an array of possible instructional strategies, a decision that should lie wholly with the teacher, who knows better than anyone the needs of the students, his or her own talents, and the objectives for the course.

A local high school English teacher divided the class into two groups to study *Macbeth*. One class was taught using lecture and discussion without cooperative groups. The experimental class employed constructivist techniques, which divided students into groups of three to five students and used film, CD-ROM, relevant websites, and books. On the final exam, the average grade of the students in the lecture/discussion group was 82%, and the

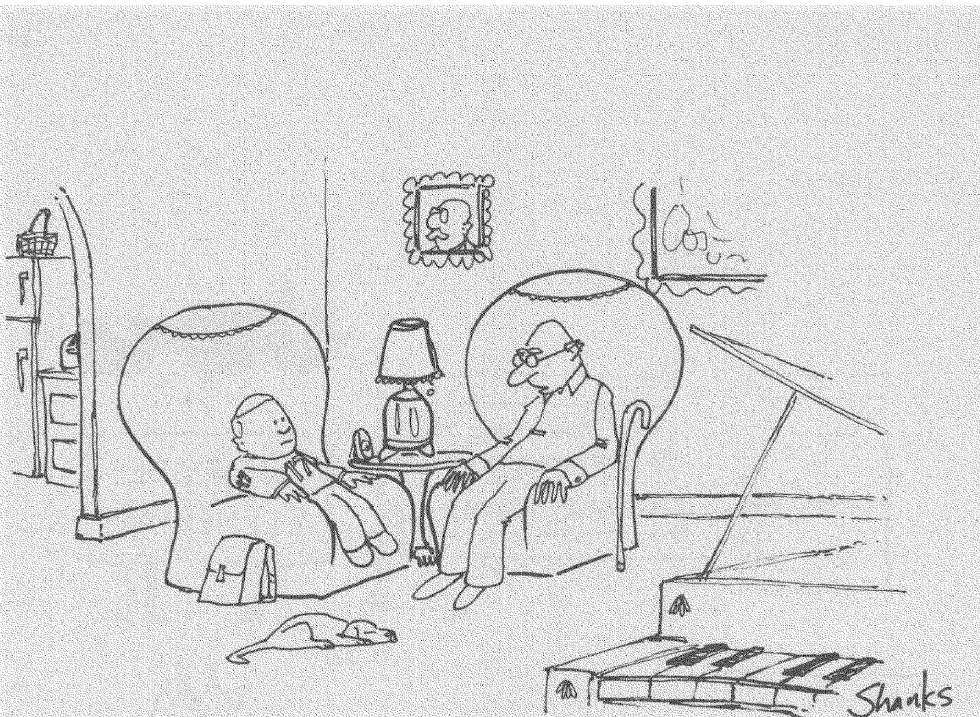
average grade of students in the constructivist group was 67%.<sup>10</sup>

In a second experiment, to study *Hamlet*, the groups were reversed (the group that scored 67% was given the lecture/discussion, and the group that scored 82% was given the constructivist treatment). Again, the students in the lecture/discussion group far outscored their peers in the constructivist treatment. In addition, on an attitude survey that queried students about their learning preferences, only one student out of 60 stated a preference for the constructivist approach. The other 59 favored lecture and discussion. One student commented, "We could talk among ourselves or read a book at home. We go to school so that you can teach us."

Similarly, in another local high school history course that made use of both constructivist and lecture/discussion approaches, students overwhelmingly ranked the constructivist component as their least favorite. In a questionnaire given to students at the end of the first semester, they wrote these comments: "Why should we teach ourselves when we have you?" "We miss the neat things you tell us about the subject." "We enjoy your extensive knowledge."<sup>11</sup> This teacher holds a doctorate in history. And although he does spend a good deal of time "on the side," he has the intellectual authority to be a true sage.

There is a thirst for knowledge in our classrooms. Although the desire to learn is a natural and self-reinforcing human trait, the instinct sometimes seems hopelessly buried in some students. However, even with regard to history (the subject students consistently seem to choose as their least favorite), people have responded enthusiastically to media presentations pertaining to historical events. The History Channel, the A&E Network, and such productions as Ken Burns' documentary on the Civil War were not created to bore viewers. And it is no accident that Oscar nominations so often go to movies that deal with historical topics: World War II, the sinking of the Titanic, or the re-creation of Shakespearean England.

In English classes, students want to know effective ways of speaking, writing, and reading. They want to know what an adult who has been reading books for decades thinks about classic and contemporary literature. In science and mathematics, students want to know if their answers are correct. They want to understand the process-



"In my elementary school days, we were too poor to have a dog. If we wanted our homework eaten, we had to eat it ourselves."

es by which solutions to complex problems are reached, how scientists think, how mathematicians calculate, and so on. High school students want to hear from a teacher who has more knowledge of and insight into a subject than they do. Lecture and discussion, as parts of a diverse teaching strategy, are powerful educational tools, especially in the hands of a charismatic, demanding, and knowledgeable teacher.

## The Rage Against Expertise

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of constructivism is that there is no body of knowledge associated with it. With constructivism, the teacher is supposed to set up the learning environment, know student preferences, guide student investigations, and then get out of the way. Such an approach would seem to be more of an edict than a theory. Nevertheless, thousands of articles by thousands of professorial constructivists have found their ways into the pages of respectable, refereed journals in education. The momentum of the constructivist movement has had a profound effect on how prospective teachers are educated and on how they perceive the duties of a teacher.

Consider the following revelation written by a team of teacher educators at a state university in California regarding the redesign of their curriculum: "In developing a teacher credential program, . . . the faculty emphasized reflective practice for the general preparation of preservice teachers so that they might become reflective practitioners."<sup>12</sup> Or consider this conclusion from an article about collaborations between prospective special education and general education teachers: "Results provide evidence that many new teachers understand teaming difficulties. They view collaboration preparation as setting the stage for future conferring arenas, indicating that they believe collaboration opportunities in university preparation opened their eyes to knowledge of necessary dedication of all involved."<sup>13</sup>

At a time when student achievement, school violence, and the quality of teachers have become grave national concerns, too many professors in colleges of education have opted to focus on the abstruse details of constructivist theory rather than on the pressing educational issues of the day. In reading recent constructivist jargon, one can readily understand the grow-

ing public prejudice against teacher education programs and the drive to quickly ratify alternative certification programs across the country.

Despite the flagrant shortcomings of the constructivist approach to teacher preparation, education courses can be among the most rigorous and relevant in a student's college career. Learning how to teach something of value to a group of students who might be hostile or comfortably complacent is no easy task. Teacher education courses must help prospective teachers present subject matter effectively to a diverse group of students in innumerable and unpredictable situations.

In many ways, the future of the teaching profession and the fates of colleges of education rest upon the ability of professors of education to abandon their silly, theoretical turf guarding and to seek to create an earnest response to the formidable problems facing public education. Students deserve a chance to learn at the elbow of an expert. Ask them, and they'll tell you. They want to see the teacher.

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tice," *Action in Teacher Education*, Summer 1992, p. 18.

3. Michael Vavrus et al., "Weaving the Web of Democracy: Confronting Conflicting Expectations for Teachers and Schools," *Journal of Teacher Education*, March/April 1999, p. 128.

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5. Gregory Kent Stanley with Lawrence A. Baines, "No Respect, No Respect at All: Some Thoughts on Teaching History," *Magazine of History*, Fall 2000, pp. 74-75.

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12. Joseph Keating et al., "A Collaborative Action Research Model for Teacher Preparation Programs," *Journal of Teacher Education*, November/December 1998, p. 383.

13. Dorothy O'Shea, A. Lee Williams, and Robert Sattler, "Collaboration Across Special Education and General Education," *Journal of Teacher Education*, March-April 1999, pp. 147-59. **K**

