

***Constructivist, learner-centered, holistic* – What do these terms really mean and how are they related to adult literacy and learning?**

In my years as a facilitator, I never used the word *constructivist* to describe what I was doing. I might have used the word *holistic* to describe my approach to working with adult learners, and I would definitely have used the words *learner* or *student-centered*. Over the past few weeks, I've been interviewing practitioners working in adult literacy and essential skills in Alberta to learn more about how they see what they do. It's made me curious about what these terms mean and how they relate to adult literacy and learning.

What the Research Says

In education, **constructivism** is a theory about how people learn. There are two important concepts in this theory. The first is that people construct or build new knowledge on what they already know. The second is that people actively construct meaning through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Thirteen Ed Online, 2004). Click here to find out more about how constructivist teaching compares to a more traditional model.

http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index_sub1.html

To me, constructivism looks a lot like learner-centered teaching. Instructors acknowledge that each student is an individual with unique learning needs. Instructors bring together a variety of techniques throughout the course and engage in dialogue with students, encouraging questions, reflection, and active participation. Learning is interactive, building on previous knowledge and experience. Students work in groups, learning from each other. Students' past experiences, culture, and knowledge are valued.

Learner-centered teaching can mean different things to different people. In an effort to clarify the definition, Maryellen Weimer, a specialist in adult education and author of the second edition of *Learner-Centered Teaching*, identifies five characteristics:

Learner-centered teaching engages students in the hard, messy work of learning. Students need opportunities to practise learning skills and tasks. Teachers do less of the work for their students.

Learner-centered teaching includes explicit skill instruction. Teachers help students learn how to think and solve problems. Learning skills develop faster if they are taught with the content.

Learner-centered teaching encourages students to reflect on what they're learning and how they're learning it. Assignments give students an opportunity to reflect, and analyze what they are learning and how they are learning it. The goal is to make students conscious of themselves as learners and encourage the development of learning skills.

Learner-centered teaching motivates students by giving them some control over learning processes. Teachers search out ethically responsible ways to share power with students. For example, they might give students choices about assignments and deadlines.

Learner-centered teaching encourages collaboration. It sees classrooms as communities of learners. Learner-centered teachers believe that students learn from and with each other. (phrases in bold from Weimer, 2012)

Click on <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/five-characteristics-of-learner-centered-teaching/> for the full article plus other interesting adult-education-related blogs.

Traditionally, teacher-centered approaches see teachers as the disseminators of knowledge and students as passive recipients. By contrast, the learner-centered approach seeks “to engage students actively in their learning in ways that are appropriate for and relevant to them in their lives outside the classroom” (Peyton, Moore, and Young 2010).

For more information on the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners within this approach, click here <https://teal.ed.gov/tealGuide/studentcentered>

Holistic education looks at the learner as a whole person. This approach tries to engage all aspects of the learner: spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental — and their interconnectedness with others and the world. Learning is active and reflective, and creates meaning in the context of people’s lives. “Holistic education aims to call forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning” (Miller 2000).

Indigenous peoples’ approaches to learning are holistic, balancing the four dimensions: body, mind, heart and spirit. In her literature review, Ningwakwe Priscilla George argues that literacy/education policies need to reflect:

- that we are Spirit/Heart/Mind and Body; therefore each component needs to be recognized and nurtured in programming
- that we are not apart from Creation; rather, we are a part of creation, in that everybody is/has Spirit/Energy
- that we all have a reason for being here in this life. That is, we have a purpose, and gifts for realizing that purpose
- that we have a great power at our fingertips in managing the energy of which we are a part. (George 2008, 46)

What Practitioners in the Field Say

Not surprisingly, adult literacy practitioners weave together threads from all three methodologies in their teaching. Practitioners I talked to spoke about the importance of looking at adult learners as whole, unique individuals with full lives outside of the classroom.

“Students taught me that they have a lot going on in their lives outside of math,” said Jim Neve, a recently retired math teacher. Before he taught full time, he was filling in for a math tutor at Alberta Vocational College. On his first day tutoring in an adult basic education program many years ago, a student came in and began to cry and talk about her life for the next ten minutes. She didn’t open a book and Jim simply listened. When she was done, she packed up her books and left. When Jim looked

at the other tutor perplexed, the tutor told him, “You have to dry the tears before you can do the math.” It was an important lesson for Jim, one that he kept in mind throughout his thirty years of teaching.

Given people’s complicated histories and lives, creating a safe space for learning to actually happen is important for all practitioners. Whether learners had previous bad experiences in learning math or other subjects, personal histories of violence and trauma, or experiences of bullying, it’s essential to make the classroom a positive, safe environment. “We spend a lot of time at the beginning of the class trying to determine how safe they [students] want it and what the rules are and we have to keep going back to those rules regularly to remind people,” Carol McCullough, Adult Basic Literacy Education instructor at Bow Valley College explained.

Practitioners also talk about the importance of relating the learning to learners’ interests and lives. “Building or creating socially and personally meaningful learning contexts is key,” Trish Pryce told me as she spoke about her experience teaching an adult upgrading program on a reserve. Other practitioners echoed this sentiment.

“It’s not about me creating an agenda and hoisting it on them. It’s following what their perceived needs are and teaching to that perceived need.” — Liette Wilson, Pebbles in the Sand facilitator and English Language Literacy Instructor, Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association.

“I approach things from a broad point and start with what they see in their lives” said Lorene Anderson, a workplace essential skills practitioner. “If I were going to teach someone to read, I would not start with the alphabet or picture books. For example, if he wanted to travel, it might be looking at maps. I want him to understand that there is a print representation of something physical.” She feels that adult learners learn best through the real tasks they do in their lives.

Most of the practitioners use interactive group work and encourage collaboration. Penny Marcotte, a math/science teacher in a Bow Valley College Aboriginal upgrading program, finds that her students benefit enormously from being self-paced and working in smaller groups with people who share similar backgrounds.

Whether you call the work constructivist, learner-centered, or holistic, these stories from the field suggest that adult literacy practitioners approach their work from a number of perspectives in an effort to intentionally create meaningful learning experiences for their diverse learners. Check out the new Adult Literacy Research Institute blog at

<http://www.centreforexcellenceinfoundationallearning.ca/>

References

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Adult Higher Education Consortium, Calgary, AB. Retrieved from http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ablkc/NourishingSpirits_LitReview_en.pdf

Miller, R. 2000. A Brief Introduction to Holistic Education. *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*. Retrieved from <http://infed.org/mobi/a-brief-introduction-to-holistic-education/>

Peyton, Joy Kreeft, Sarah Catherine Moore, and Sarah Young. 2010. Evidence-based, Student-Centered Instructional Practices, *CAELA Network Brief*. Washington, DC: Centre for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved from <http://www.cal.org/adultesl/pdfs/student-centered-instructional-practices.pdf>

Thirteen Ed Online. 2004. Workshop: Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning. *Concept to Classroom*. Retrieved from <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/>

Weimer, Maryellen. 2012. Five Characteristics of Learner-Centered Teaching. *The Teaching Professor Blog*. 8 August. Retrieved from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/five-characteristics-of-learner-centered-teaching/>

Useful Resources

Mercer, Karen, April Bellegarde, and Alice Charland. 2012. A Selected Literature Review for Adult Learner Success: Aboriginal Upgrading Program, Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning, Bow Valley College. Available at http://centreforfoundationallearning.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/2012aug07_litreview_aboriginal_final.pdf

The Canadian Council on Learning Report *Redefining Success in Aboriginal Learning*, 2007, has holistic models for First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. See <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl/Reports/RedefiningSuccessInAboriginalLearning/RedefiningSuccessModels.html>

The Social and Holistic Approach to Numeracy website gives examples of how to use a social/holistic approach when teaching numeracy. See www.socialnumeracy.ca.

For more information on learner-centered teaching, check out the Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy website <https://teal.ed.gov/tealGuide/studentcentered>

This website from Michigan State University elaborates on the concept of learner-centered teaching in a postsecondary context. It has useful definitions, principles to guide practice, and resources. <http://fod.msu.edu/oir/learner-centered-teaching>

This document from the University of Southern California serves as a resource for faculty. It includes an explanation of learner-centered teaching, ideas for implementing it, and tips for engaging students. http://cet.usc.edu/resources/teaching_learning/docs/LearnerCentered_Resource_final.pdf