Abstract:

Social science plays a pivotal role at upper primary level and as it is essentially interdisciplinary in nature, therefore, to apply constructivist approach in teaching this particular discipline is challenging indeed. Social science is the interdisciplinary integration of concept of social science and humanities for the purpose of practicing problem solving and decision making skills for developing critical citizenship on social issues and also helps children to connect with other people. The knowledge children acquire as a part of social science tends to be the highest priority for teachers, parents, and the children. Constructivist learning may be little more than a reiteration, but constructivist teaching involves great efforts as the subject deals with various aspects of society at global level. The constructivist instructor faces a complex challenge how to organize a course so that students are engaged and can progress in developing a deeper understanding of content, while keeping a course moving and defining a teaching role. By keeping this in view, the present paper is an attempt to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of social science and the challenge it presents to apply constructivist teaching approach at upper primary level.

Key words: Interdisciplinary; Constructivist approach; Social science; Teaching; Upper primary; Students; Learning

1. Introduction:

Social science is inherently interdisciplinary in nature. It is difficult to develop comprehensive understanding of society at any time without undertaking historical context along with examining the roles of persons (sociology), their motivations (psychology), where they lived (geography), the influences of spiritual beliefs (religion), rules that govern behavior (political science and anthropology), or how people negotiate for their needs and wants (economics). The idea that society may be studied in a standardized and objective manner, with scholarly rules and methodology, is comparatively recent. The term ‘social science’ first appeared in the 1824 book An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness by William Thompson (1775–1833). Since the mid-twentieth century, the term ‘social science’ had been generally used to refer all those disciplines which analyze society and culture; from anthropology to linguistics to media studies.
Social science is a group of academic disciplines that study human aspects of the world, in particular those involving social behavior and society. These disciplines, focusing on the study of human social behavior, are clearly distinct from the physical sciences that study non-living systems, by virtue of their subject matter. In life science although the study of nature of life shows notable social behavior in few species, study of human social behavior of complex and higher order is centrally in the purview of social science. Social science differs from the humanities not so much in terms of content but in methodology of the subject as it emphasizes the use of the scientific method in the study of human beings. Social sciences attempt to explore elements of human society in all aspects (www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Social_science). As having an interdisciplinary approach, the teaching of social science should be child centered. It should permit students to pursue their personal interest. By keeping this in view, the present paper is an attempt to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of social science and the challenge it presents to apply constructivist teaching approach at upper primary level.

2. Primary Purpose of Social Science

The primary purpose of social science is to help young people to develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good, as to make them responsible citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. Social science is the interdisciplinary integration of concept of social science and humanities for the purpose of practicing problem solving and decision making skills for developing critical citizenship on social issues. The subject has the potential to be the pivotal part of the upper primary level education as it helps children to connect with other people. As children learn about others, they become fascinated by differences among cultural groups, while at the same time they find commonalities that create a shared sense of humanity. Social science should pull information and ideas from several different disciplines to bring clarity in ideas and concepts among students at elementary level. The knowledge children acquire as a part of social science tends to be the highest priority for teachers, parents, and the children. The common perception is social science is concerned only about—knowing things like the location of the rocky mountains, the conditions of rivers, and the purpose of satellites etc. but this is a limited view because social science must be a vehicle for children to become better communicators, thinkers, researchers, artists and citizens. The ultimate goal of social science is to make learners as active citizens, for they can use the knowledge that they have acquired and the processes they have mastered to make communities, the nation and the world better places to live. Teaching of social science should be centered on contemporary issues, for students search for answers to problems and dilemmas confronted by them today. Also, the issues must be situated in a historical time and place to let them draw genealogy of critical issues and reflect on those in the past. It should focus on such concepts that help students to integrate their knowledge.

3. Constructivism Promotes Learning By Doing:

For the learner to construct meaning, he must actively strive to make sense of new experiences and in doing so must relate it to what is already known or believed about a topic. Students develop knowledge through an active construction process, not through the passive reception of information (Brophy 1992). In other words, learners must build their own understanding. How information is presented and how learners are supported in the process of constructing knowledge is of major significance. The pre-existing knowledge that learners bring to each learning task is emphasized too. Students’ current understandings provide the immediate context for interpreting any new learning. Regardless of the nature or sophistication of a learner’s existing schema, each person’s existing knowledge structure will have a powerful influence on what is learned and whether and how conceptual change occurs.

The more traditional approach to instruction, a bottom-up strategy, involves isolating the basic skills, teaching these separately and building these incrementally before tackling higher order tasks. This is an essentially objectivist and behavioral approach to instruction, similarly cognitive information processing views often lead to similar instructional practices. Instead of carefully structuring the elements of topics to be learned, learning proceeds from the natural need to develop understanding and skills required for completion of significant tasks. Learning occurs in a manner analogous to just in time manufacturing, where raw
materials are received just prior to their use rather than held in expensive inventories.

4. Challenges To Apply Constructivist Approach At Upper Primary Level:

Constructivist learning may be little more than a reiteration, but constructivist teaching involves great efforts as the subject deals with various aspects of society at global level. The constructivist instructor faces a complex challenge how to organize a course so that students are engaged and can progress in developing a deeper understanding of content, while keeping a course moving and defining a teaching role. Simultaneously, the energy generated by a room full of students free to pursue their own interests can be magical. However, in the constructivist classroom the instructor has less control of the class dynamic than he or she does in a more traditional one. Student discontent is simply more visible when the instructor does not provide the content of the course. Therefore, it becomes a challenge to use constructivist approach in an apt manner in a social science classroom. The social science teachers can face certain challenges as mentioned below:

4.1 Difficulty in Structure of Learning Tasks:

The structure of learning tasks in the constructivist classroom may look different than what some teachers envision when they think of the term. The activities structured in the constructivist classroom are negotiated according to caliber of the students. On the one hand, students might move about the classroom freely to get supplies, meet study group members, confer with the teacher or return to work started at an earlier point. On the other, they have to reach some new conclusions through their experiences. Therefore, sometimes students may just ramble on and do not reach any certain conclusion. In a constructivist classroom such learning tasks should be structured that depend upon the analysis of the needs of learners. Constructivist learning theory is not prescriptive, neither dictating classroom structure nor teaching technique. It does explicitly state that conceptual change is the key to cognitive growth and development, and thus conceptual change becomes an essential quest. Thus, structuring appropriate learning tasks need a great endeavor on the teacher’s part.

4.2 Time-Management: A Burning Question:

Because teachers have limited instructional time, the manner in which time is used in the classroom is always a concern for teachers. Teachers feel considerable pressure to complete their requirements of their assigned curriculum. Thus it is predictable that teacher raise questions about how to accomplish the most with the time that is allocated. One may badly squander precious learning time through the poor application of any instructional methodology. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for effective constructivist teaching that the conditions for learning be carefully structured, and that students’ learning activities and learning be carefully monitored. Competent constructivist teaching demands not only full engagement by students, but also meaningful engagement and accountability by teachers.

4.3 Problem In Completion Of Course Content:

Constructivist approach value asking big questions, giving students’ time to think, and providing opportunities to explore to find answers. While this way of teaching requires more time, by ensuring sufficient time, students gain a better grasp of complex ideas. Moreover, deliberate investigation by students tends to foster the disposition to pursue issues and phenomena more completely, even those that are more difficult. Many lament the fact that school curricula contain so much material that it is almost impossible to cover it all. But where is the learning in ‘coverage’? When the emphasis in school is placed too heavily on information and its recall, the inevitable result will be prodigious amounts of forgetting. Thus, the position of constructivist educators is not to worship efficiency, but instead to value the quality of the learning. They subscribe to the principle that ‘more is less’. On the surface it may appear that efficiency is sacrificed, but the more important outcome for learner’s of all ages, it is argued, involves learning with depth.

4.4 Lack of Well-Organized Information:

All the students are not geniuses. The students who comprehended the importance of independent learning are more likely to appreciate the efforts of the teacher on questioning, while students who possess a transmission view of learning they just focus on the teacher’s information presentation. If the information is not well organized, all the students are not able to comprehend the content. In
in the constructivist teaching-learning environment the teacher who acts as a guide must take care to organize the content or information in a well manner in order to get positive responses from the learners.

4.5 Difficulties in Learning Environment:

According to Jonassen, ‘through constructivist approach meaningful learning or purposeful knowledge may be promotedby a learning environment that has three main features. First, one should use authentic problems, that is, tasks having the contextual feel of the real world. Secondly, the learning environment should represent the natural complexity of the real world and avoid oversimplification of the task and instruction. And finally, a constructivist learning environment should support collaborative knowledge construction through social negotiation’ (Jonassen 1991). It is believed that such learning environments invite learners through interaction with others to engage in problem finding, problem-solving, and inquiry learning. Through the combination of complex, real-world problems and meaningful social interaction among learners and teacher, constructivists assert that learners are encouraged to discover or invent new rules or revise old rules and in the process come to a deeper understanding of underlying concepts and principles. The discovery process embedded in a constructivist learning environment also allows learners to re-evaluate what they know, and to change their understanding based on what they have directly learned from their environment. Constructivist theory favors that the open-ended, problem-based, inquiry learning characteristics of constructivist learning environments require learners to struggle with the ill-structured, real-world problems in order to solve them but all the learners are not able to understand problems or issues they come across. Therefore, such learning environments should be provided to students that after strenuous learning processes through identification, formulation, and restructuring of goals; planning; development and execution of plans; self-monitoring; and appropriate use of resource management strategies.

4.6 The Constructivist Classroom: Not A Place Where the Teacher Pours Knowledge:

In the constructivist classroom, the focus is on the students. The classroom is no longer a place where the teacher pours knowledge into passive students, who wait like empty vessels to be filled. In constructivist approach, the students are urged to be actively involved in their own process of learning. The main activity in a constructivist classroom is solving problems. Students use inquiry methods to ask questions, investigate a topic, and use a variety of resources to find solutions and answers. As students explore the topic, they draw conclusions, and, as exploration continues, they revisit those conclusions. Exploration of questions leads to more questions. Consequently, sometimes it becomes difficult for the teacher to answer all the questions. If students are unable to reach a certain conclusion their interest in the activity will be lost so, the teacher should carefully choose the tasks in a constructivist classroom so that learners have a feeling of satisfaction at the end of their project or task.

4.7 Role of Teacher: As A Guide

Constructivist teachers do not take the role of the ‘sage on the stage’. Instead, teachers act as a ‘guide on the side’ providing students with opportunities to test the adequacy of their current understandings. The educator should consider the knowledge and experiences students bring to class. Learners construct their knowledge through a process of active enquiry. Knowledge is actively constructed and learning is presented as a process of active discovery. Due to its interpretivist nature, each student will interpret information in a different way. Thus the teacher needs to be careful and watchful in a constructivist classroom.

4.8 Problems Faced By Students in Learning:

The role of the students is to actively participate in their own education. Students have to accommodate and assimilate new information with their current understanding. Students begin their study with pre-conceived notions. Students are very reluctant to give up their established ideas and may reject new information that challenges prior knowledge. Learners need to use and test ideas, skills, and information through relevant activities. Students need to know how to learn or change their thinking or learning style. If students want to learn something new they need to receive different ‘lenses’ to see things in new ways. In this regard, students need to develop multiple perspectives to solve problems or issues in multiple ways.
4.9 Assessment Criteria

According to constructivist theory assessment should be used as a tool to enhance both the student’s learning and the teacher’s understanding of student’s progress. It should not be used as an accountability tool that serves to stress or demoralize students. Types of assessment aligned to this epistemological position include reflective journals/portfolios, case studies, group-based projects, presentations like verbal or poster, debates, role playing etc. Brooks and Brooks state that rather than saying ‘no’ when a student does not give the exact answer being sought, the constructivist teacher attempts to understand the student’s current thinking about the topic. Through nonjudgmental questioning, the teacher leads the student to construct new understanding and acquire new skills (Brooks and Brooks 1993). But when the cumulative records of the assessment are to be formed, teachers can face problem to know the exact position of the student in class. Therefore, the teacher needs to be very careful while assessing the students and should follow a particular criterion.

5. Conclusion

Using constructivist teaching methods, teaching content, the frustrations experienced when confronting real-life questions, and the lack of details and structure in the instructions - all sorts of student complaints highlight the complexity of adopting constructivist teaching. The constructivist teaching-learning approach requires effort into all aspects that are necessary for teaching preparation. The teaching content, teaching preparation involves the development/modification of real-life conceptual questions, re-organization of teaching sequences, investigation of students’ backgrounds and learning attitudes, and even one-to-one interviews with skeptical or passive students. Some of these efforts may be unnecessary for traditional lecturing, but could be greatly beneficial to the outcomes of constructivist teaching.

In constructivist teaching, teachers may obtain better insights into the students’ knowledge background, preferences for topics, and favorable strategies, which may provide crucial information for on-going modifications in the innovative teaching-learning strategy. The success of constructivist teaching depends on frequent responses from students, which are not easy to obtain. Real-life examples are appreciated by most of the students, while some may be concerned about the standard of the course, the completeness of interpreting the phenomena, and the coverage of the topics.

The students taught using constructivist methods should have a deeper comprehension of the learning process and outcomes, and as a result, became more critical than those in traditional classes. Several studies indicate that constructivist teaching is beneficial to developing students’ perceptions of learning, in terms of independence in learning, coherence of concepts, and cognitive engagement (Chang 2005b; Elby 2001). Thus it can be said that a variety of barriers may need to be faced and overcome before the teacher can enjoy the sweetness of the expected positive learning outcomes of the constructivist teaching design.

References:

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