CONSTRUCTIVISM: A DYNAMIC APPROACH OF TEACHING-LEARNING SOCIAL SCIENCE AT UPPER PRIMARY LEVEL

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Abstract - Teaching-learning approach in Social Science needs to be revitalized towards helping the learner to acquire knowledge and skills in an interactive environment. As the time is changing at very fast pace Social Science must adopt methods that promote creativity, aesthetic sensibility and critical perspectives. Further, it should enable students of elementary level to draw relationship between past and present to understand changes taking place in society. Teaching-learning should utilize resources like audio-visual materials, including photographs, charts, maps and replicas of archaeological materials reflecting various cultures, so as to make the teaching more realistic and thought provoking. Therefore, the objective of present study is to provide an intense look into constructivist theory and its need in teaching-learning Social Science at upper primary level. Constructivism is a dynamic approach that could be applied in a classroom at upper primary level with great ease by the teacher. Moreover, it keeps the learners active and interactive by providing them application based knowledge.

Key Words - Social Science, Constructivism, Curriculum, Teaching-learning, Teacher, Student, Knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

Social Science is a vital subject in school curriculum particularly at elementary level as at this stage values can be fostered in students with great ease. But in the current or traditional method, Social Science is taught through teacher-centered activities that emphasize memorization of facts and concepts. The fundamental purpose of Social Science is to educate students on how to become effective citizens. Social Science curriculum is an important part at upper primary level of education. It is an applied branch that is introduced in the curriculum with a view to develop proper attitudes, sensibilities and skills in future citizens. Every student is a potential learner and he/she should not be considered blank slate. They have their own views and concepts regarding everything. Therefore, it becomes necessary to engage students in such activities that they can construct knowledge of their own. Society is changing at a fast pace, so the need of the hour is to use constructivist approach in teaching of Social Sciences at upper primary level. Learning is a latent variable so there is no clear and universal way to explain and predict learning. That is why, many theories based on differing epistemological positions have been developed to improve teaching-learning at upper primary level. By providing information about the mechanisms underlying learning and performance, an awareness of theories can help us to design environments to improve potential for learning. The objective of this study is to provide an intense look into constructivist theory and its need in teaching-learning Social Science at upper primary level. Constructivism has become increasingly popular nowadays; it represents a paradigm change in Social Science education. Ye any opines constructivism as ‘a unification of thinking, research, curriculum development, and teacher education appears to now be occurring under the theme of constructivism’ (Yeany1991).

II. CONSTRUCTIVISM: A DYNAMIC AND SOCIAL PROCESS

Constructivism sees learning as a dynamic and social process in which the prior understanding and the social setting of students are taken into account. The constructivist view of learning argues that students do not come to the Social Science classroom empty-headed but arrive with lots of strongly formed ideas. In constructivist approach, pupils should no longer be passive recipients of knowledge supplied by teachers and teachers should no longer be purveyors of knowledge and classroom managers (Fosnot 1996). From this perspective, learning is a process of acquiring new knowledge, which is active and complex. This is the result of an active interaction of key cognitive processes (Glynn, Yeany & Britton 1991). It is also an active interaction between teachers and learners, and learners try to make sense of what is taught by trying to fit these with their own experience. Constructivist learning is based on students’ active participation where they construct their own knowledge by testing ideas and approaches based on their prior knowledge and experience; they apply these to new situations and integrate the new knowledge gained with pre-existing intellectual constructs. Social Sciences are the conjecture of all the phases of societies that solve problems within a society that may lead to the ultimate development of the society as a whole. So, it is necessary for the students that they remain active at elementary level as at this stage they are naturally motivated and capable of learning things by heart. If we talk about a real class room situation, there is a little room for student
initiated questions, independent thought or interaction between the teacher and the students or among the students. The goal of the learners is to repeat the accepted explanation expostulated by the teacher. To improvise the interaction, various strategies like discovery learning, joyful learning and experimental learning were introduced. The experimental learning is valuable and has shown to improve motivation for learning but it does not guarantee the construction of knowledge that is required in the real world. Hence it requires a shift from teacher-centered education to learner-centered education and now it is towards learning-centered education. Here the emphasis is on the process of learning rather than the individual, one proposed solution to such a paradigm shift in teaching is constructivism. In constructivist approach, child constructs his own ideas from the constructivist perspective, as Piaget stressed, knowing is an adaptive activity. This means that one should think of knowledge as a kind of compendium of concepts and actions that one has found to be successful given the purpose one has in the mind. The importance lies in the fact that mere book reading and rote memorization do not lead to meaningful learning. The idea that we construct in our cognition and its application is the true learning. At present, needs and desires of people and society are changing, therefore, traditional approaches of teaching Social Science at upper primary level are not enough and they need to be replaced by new ways of teaching and learning. Constructivism is not a prescription for how to teach; rather it provides a useful way to teachers to teach effectively. In constructivist teaching learning occurs as learners are actively involved in a process of meaning and knowledge construction as opposed to passively receiving information. Students derive their own meaning and knowledge. Piaget suggests that we learn by expanding our knowledge by experiences which are generated through play at elementary level necessary for learning (www.wikipedia.org.in). A base of prior knowledge is essential so that students can relate themselves to the new ideas and experiences. Constructivism emphasizes that the process of gaining knowledge is as important as the product.

Constructivist philosophy has a long history of application in education programs for upper primary students, but is used less frequently in learning environments. As humans develop, there are qualitative changes in their ability to think logically about experiences, but the processes by which learning occurs as cognitive adaptation and social mediation are believed to be continuous or remain the same throughout the life (Piaget & Inhelder 1969; Vygotsky1978). At the heart of constructivist philosophy is the belief that knowledge is not given but gained through real experiences that have purpose and meaning to the learner and the exchange of perspectives about the experience with others(Ibid.). In current era students are very active and it is must that their energy should be put in learning in such a way that they correlate themselves with various things by doing that of their own. It is vital to make connection between new material and previous experiences.

III. CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

FAVOURS INDELIBLE TEACHING METHODS

Teaching methods based on constructivist views at elementary level are very useful to help students’ learning. The following are practices derived from cognitive psychology that can help students understand, recall and apply essential information, concepts and skills. They are used to make lessons relevant, activate students’ prior knowledge, help elaborate and organize information, and encourage questioning. Important concepts from this perspective suggested by Slav in are:

a) Advanced organizers: general statements given before instruction that relate new information to existing knowledge to help students process new information by activating background knowledge, suggesting relevance, and encouraging accommodation;

b) Analogies: pointing out the similarities between things that are otherwise unlike, to help students learn new information by relating it to concepts they already have; and

c) Elaboration: the process of thinking about new material in a way that helps to connect it with existing knowledge. (Slavin 1994)

To explicitly build on students’ existing knowledge is one of the ways to encourage deep approaches to learning (Biggs, 1995). To achieve this, teachers should have a clear idea of what students have already known and understood so that they can engage students in activities that help them construct new meanings (Von Glaserfeld 1992). Moreover, the opportunities for pupils to talk about their ideas concerning particular concepts or issues are prominent in the learning process. Teachers who employ constructivist teaching try to help pupils to learn meaningfully. They should encourage pupils of upper primary level to accept the invitation to learn and to take action on what they have learnt, and to provide them with opportunities to explore as well as to propose explanations and solutions to current issues.

At upper primary level, using constructivist theory focuses on the aspect that the teacher’s role is not only to observe and assess but also to engage with the students while they are completing activities, wondering aloud and posing questions to the students for promotion of reasoning. Teachers also intervene when there are conflicts that arise; however, they
simply facilitate the students’ resolutions 0and self-regulation, with an emphasis on the conflict being the students’ and that they must figure things out for themselves.

IV. LESSON PLANNING: NEEDS TO BE BASED ON APPLICATION IN SOCIAL SCIENCE CLASS ROOM

One aspect of the Social Science class that must be changed is the way lessons are planned. The teacher must realize that the world is very complex and that multiple perspectives exist on nearly every issue (Rice & Wilson 1999). This will move away from typical factual India centered information that Social Science students of upper primary level receive under traditional system. To assert the constructivist method the teacher needs to provide the students with lessons that they can employ in real world situations. If the teacher addresses this effectively then they will be able to present the material in complex learning environments that will foster authentic experiences (Driscoll, 1994). It is essential that the content and skills that the students develop are made relevant to the students (Doolittle & Hicks 2001). This will allow for the learning to become interesting to the student and in turn it will cause the students to become more attentive and eager (Ediger 2000). Aside from causing the students to become more attentive it will also make the learning experience more personal to the students, because it will allow them to feel some ownership and value to the knowledge that they acquired. One method for illustrating this is for teachers to organize the student learning and instruction around specific important events (Borich 1997). This is especially effective when teaching a lesson on controversial issue. When a major controversy is involved it can provide the multiple perspectives required to form a wider understanding of an issue. A final result of this is that student will begin to process what they have learned on multiple levels, which leads to higher order of thinking and strays away from strict factual information (Rice & Wilson 1999).

Along with providing the students with complex issues and multiple perspectives the teacher should also offer a variety of formats in which the information can be presented (Nuthall1999). Social Science needs to use a variety of methods and procedures to assist each pupil to achieve as optimally as possible. “Learners individually possess diverse learning styles and intelligences” (Ediger 2000). The key element here is that notevery student learns in the same way, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to determine the best way that his or her students learn. Constructivism provides various ways to access the students’ multiple intelligences. Problem solving activities provide the student with an opportunity to be exposed to an authentic learning experience (Cole & Wilson 1991). Moreover, if student-centered activities are employed the student will begin to develop a greater confidence in his or her knowledge and feel more connected to the work. When this happens a teacher can then turn the classroom environment into a “learning community” (Eggen & Kauchak 1997). A “learning community” creates an atmosphere that is more interactive than that of the “traditional” class.

One of the key functions of a learning community is that the students turn to each other and try to negotiate a solution when conflict in learning occurs.

V. TEACHER: A GUIDE AND A FACILITATOR

Primary function of the teacher in a constructivist classroom teaching at elementary level is that he/she takes the role of a guide and a facilitator or in simpler terms a coach. Doolittle and Hicks state: ‘Constructivism requires that teachers become facilitators of knowledge not conduits. The teacher’s role is to create experiences within which students will learn and then guide the students through those experiences; is a form of scaffolding’ (Doolittle and Hicks 2001).

In constructivist theory the teacher is responsible for guiding the students through the specific experiences or activities. This allows for the students to construct their own knowledge through exploration, rather than the traditional educational approach and strategy that simply provide the students with the correct answer or fact.

Quality teaching can only be defined by looking at how teachers involve learners in competent knowledge and the skills needed for effective classroom management, pupil assessment, subject teaching, and in regular professional learning. Quality teaching is basically a process that helps teachers to focus on the educational improvements of learners through the integration of adequate knowledge of curriculum content areas, critical reflective teaching, empathy and commitment to the educational process and the acquisition of managerial competencies within and outside the school context. According to constructivist theory, students cannot achieve high levels of performance in their studies in the absence of skilled, talented and highly dedicated teachers. Therefore, teachers are the guides and facilitators who are responsive and sensitive to the needs of the community to ensure that education is tailored according to the special needs of each learner. Teachers should demonstrate commitment; have subject specific content knowledge and know their craft; love children; set an example of moral conduct; manage groups effectively; incorporate new technology in their teaching and students’ learning so that the students when grow up can contribute to society at large. Thus, the role of the teacher being a mentor or guide is to extend students’ deep
understanding when it comes to the facilitation and acquisition of higher order thinking and problem solving skills. The teacher must provide scaffolding for understanding and coaching, and finally create learning environments where learners can strive for excellence.

VI. FOCUS ON ACTIVITY BASED TEACHING-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

A teaching and learning environment dominated by the constructivist approach is different from a teaching and learning environment dominated by the traditional approach. In an academic environment dominated by the traditional approach, information is given directly to students and there are no activities in which students can be active learners. In the constructivist learning environment, debates, and activities for the interests and needs of learners, a certain uncertainty and collaboration to provide creative thinking are organized for the learners (Taylor, Fraser and Fisher 1997). There are some specific activities that blend in quite well with constructivist theory. It is important to have social interaction. One example of this is cooperative learning. Cooperative learning allows students of upper primary level for development to become active in social collaborative activities. Such activities require that students work primarily in groups. The groups do not have to be of any certain size, large or small. To establish group size a Social Science teacher should take into account the size of the class and the complexity of the activity that is being performed. Cooperative learning activities should not be simple activities that are called “group work” and that require the students to just search for answers to fill out a worksheet. The activities need to focus on complex issues that have multiple perspectives. Cooperative learning should require the students to collaborate and critically analyze the issue at hand; this will cause them to develop higher-level thinking skills. Some sample cooperative learning activities are group problem solving, group inquiry, simulations, and debates. The activities encourage creativity, value, and foster higher-level thinking.

Today we live in a society that is becoming increasingly dependent on the use of technology, specifically computers. One sector of society that technology is gaining importance in is education. In Social Science classroom, technology can be incorporated to support many aspects of constructivism. Computer technologies provide many tools that can be employed in a Social Science classroom. Some various types include simulation and strategy software, multimedia presentations, databases, and telecommunications (Rice & Wilson 1999). By using technology to assist in the classroom it will provide the students with a more dynamic and interactive environment.

CONCLUSION

Thus in a nutshell it can be concluded that constructivist approach allows a different perspective on education, we see also different measurement and evaluation activities. In this approach, learners are very active in the teaching and learning activities. Exams which do not allow thinking and commenting, which measures the knowledge and skills in the bottom rung of the cognitive level with multiple choice and short answer quizzes will be inadequate and insufficient (TOZET). That is why, in the constructivist approach, in place of product-oriented learning, focusing on the process of learning by exhibition, project work, portfolio, scoring key diagnostic tree, checklists, performance evaluation, self-assessment, alternative assessment tools such as peer reviews should be used. Here, which is evaluated is not the product of learning but the learning process and that students continue learning throughout the assessment and evaluation studies. Considering all of this information, it can be concluded that the constructivist learning approach which use a different view in learning activities, have an important contribution on the academic achievement of students and on the durability of the information learned.

Constructivism is a theory on how people develop and acquire knowledge. Its main premise is that knowledge and reality are based upon social consensus. This is a theory that challenges the traditional methods that a majority of Social Science teachers use to teach students of upper primary level. The traditional methods place emphasis on the memorization of facts and concepts. There needs to be a reform in the way Social Science is delivered to the students of elementary. The constructivist theory needs to play a crucial role in the way the content of Social Science is presented to the students. A constructivist approach would call for a number of changes to occur in the Social Science classroom. Classroom management and the role of the teacher would have to change from their traditional roles. A key aspect of this would be to start presenting material in a fashion that shows the complexity and multiple perspectives of real world situations. According to Brown, ‘the teacher’s role would shift to that of a guide and facilitator. The classroom environment would begin to take the shape of a “learning community” where interaction is an important key. In order for changes of this nature to occur in the classroom the teachers need to be well versed in theory and understand its implications’ (Brown 2000). Once the theory and its applications are understood, educator will be able to effectively teach Social Science to their students.
REFERENCES


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