



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter- January 2025

"Putting the child at the center of their learning."

A Constructivist Approach to Whole Group Instruction

Krista and I (Dana) were discussing whole group instruction recently. We shared what we have heard from many colleagues about the prevalence of whole group instruction in their respective schools/districts across the country. We heard descriptions of children sitting with the class in long lessons while the teacher presented/lectured from a textbook or stack of slides, children participating in whole group call-and-response exercises, and whole group worksheet activities.

In that meeting, Krista threw down a challenge as she knows my feelings about this type of instruction. She understands how much I dislike seeing students sit for long sessions where the teacher is doing most of the talking, the students are passive and distracted, and very little learning takes place. "Why don't you write a newsletter about a constructivist approach to whole group instruction?" she asked. "Share some ideas for how teachers can make a typical whole group lesson more constructivist."

Challenge accepted! I began to think about some of the incredible lessons I have seen delivered to the entire class. I identified a couple of key principles in a constructivist approach to whole-group instruction – engagement and open-ended.

The first principle is **engagement**. Engagement is, after all, the key. Exposure to a learning concept means little if the child is not talking, exploring, experimenting, understanding, and most importantly, engaged. Engagement is not merely sitting through a lecture, reading and responding to stacks of informational slides, or waiting for the teacher to finish giving directions so the child can do something. The lesson must be all about doing – all engagement.

The following lesson example came from a method for teaching math concepts I learned years ago from Constance Kamii. Constance Kamii was a noted Professor of the Early Childhood Education Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Early in her career, she studied with Jean Piaget, which began her deep dive into how children learn mathematics developmentally.



In response to a question about what the difference between a behaviorist classroom and a constructivist classroom is, Kamii said:

"In a traditional room, you would probably see neatly arranged desks, neatly obedient children, and probably lots of worksheets. That keeps kids very neat and quiet and well-behaved. In a constructivist classroom, you will probably see lots of movement, if not noise, especially when they play games. (The students) will certainly be talking a lot and arguing back and forth. Their opinions will be asked, and the kids will challenge each other. There will be lots of spontaneity, and- what I like to see, but it's hard to produce-children who are thinking".

(<https://sylviamartinez.com/questioning-assumptions-with-constance-kamii/>)

Kamii believed that we traditionally teach math through rules and steps to follow rather than conceptually. These rules take away a child's motivation to figure out the problem in a way that makes sense to them. She even produced a series of videotapes created in real classrooms around Birmingham, Alabama. I could watch those tapes for hours. They were so fascinating. Here is a description of a whole group lesson I observed on one of those tapes.

This was a second-grade classroom. The students were working on double-digit addition. To introduce the concept, they were seated with nothing in front of them, and the teacher was at the whiteboard. She wrote a problem on the board, for example, $17 + 19 =$, and then (very calmly) waited as the children worked on solving the problem.



When each child thought they had the answer, they signaled to the teacher they were ready to come up to her and whisper their conclusion in her ear. The teacher then went to the board and wrote alongside the problem the answer the child had given her. She created a list of all the children's answers, never offering any response to make the children believe their answer was right or wrong. She just recorded each number she was given.

After all the children had answered, the teacher asked the students to explain how they had arrived at their conclusion. She might call on one child and say, "How did you arrive at 31 for the answer?" That child then explained their thinking. After the explanation, she would ask the other students if they agreed or disagreed with the first child. And then the debate was on. I observed passionate debate. These seven-year-olds would go into detail about how they had arrived at their conclusion.

At times the teacher would bring a child to the whiteboard to demonstrate their process visually. Sometimes, in the middle of their explanation, the student would find an error in their thinking and change their mind. When the students agreed that an answer was incorrect, the teacher would erase it from the board. One little girl became so determined to make her case for why she was correct she stood up and said, in her charming southern accent, "I'm right, I know I'm right, and I can prove it!"



Dr. Kamii wanted to see this type of debate in the children. Following steps or rules without thinking about the concept being learned is not what we are looking for to help children understand. Hearing the other children's thinking helped each child change or deepen their understanding. Eventually, they would come to agreement on the correct answer. Notice that the students weren't doing a worksheet with multiple problems. They might only tackle a few problems in one session, but this was engagement at the highest level.

My second principle for whole group instruction is **open-ended**. In *Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*, I talk about tasks in learning centers as being open-ended. The same applies to activities or tasks students are asked to do in whole group



instruction. With open-ended tasks, students bring their ideas, creativity, and interest to the work. The opposite of open-ended work is worksheets, such as fill-in-the-blank, cloze, or matching activities where students find one right answer. Let's take a concept from a worksheet and see if we can accomplish the same objective in an open-ended way, which requires more thinking by the student.

A phonics worksheet's aim might be to identify words where we can hear the rhyme in words in the "at" word family. Typically, that is done by asking students to circle all the pictures shown where they can hear the "at" rime. For example, bat, cat, pat, and chat. This method has some inherent issues, such as whether the children can decipher the pictures. The worksheet I'm thinking about showed a girl patting a dog. The children were confused. Was the word girl? Dog? Or pat? A quick look at their worksheet will not tell whether the child understands the concept or misread the pictures.

Alternatively, why don't we have students come up with the "at" words? Practice hearing those sounds in words and make their own list. Now, they are hearing the sounds and encoding them into words in the "at" family.

Here is how I would do this objective as a whole group lesson. Save a tree and go without the worksheets. After brainstorming many words where we hear the "at" rime, provide each child with whiteboards, markers, and letter tiles. Each set should have multiples of each letter. Place each set into a plastic bag so that children have their own set of tiles for all types of word work. Print "at" on the whiteboard and ask the students to do the same on their whiteboard. Then, ask them to look through their tiles to find a letter to put in front of the "at" they wrote on their whiteboard. Collect the words they wrote.



Students can share their words, define them, or use them in sentences. Then do it again. Print another “at” on their whiteboard and make another word. You can collect actual words and nonsense words. I like to provide students with wordbooks (just a simple book stapled with several sheets of paper) where they can write all their “at” words on a page. Draw pictures to go with each of their “at” words. They can choose one or more to write in a sentence or a poem. Other phonics lessons can follow the same process with “in” words, “ing” words, or words with the same beginning constant blend or ending digraph, depending on the needs of the students. You get the idea. **More engagement. Less confusion. More open-ended.**



Whole Group Instruction REFLECTION QUESTIONS:



What is your favorite way to conduct a constructivist whole-group lesson? What works for your students during whole group instruction, and what does not?



How much time do you spend in whole group instruction on an average day? Do you move to different groupings often throughout the day, or is one whole group lesson followed by another and another? How can you adjust for more movement and open-ended learning for your students? (Check out the sample schedule on page 51 of *Constructivist Teaching by Heart!*)

Share your comments about this newsletter topic, “A Constructivist Approach to Whole Group Instruction,” [here](#).

PONDER BOX: An excerpt from *Constructivist Teaching by Heart*, pg. 50

“Here is how I [Dana] approach a balanced schedule. I want to balance teacher-directed times with child-directed times throughout the day. For example, if I begin the day with a whole-group read-aloud, I will balance that time by following with a child-directed activity – back and forth between teacher-directed and child-directed...If students have had to listen too long, you may be doing the best lesson, but no learning occurs. In primary classrooms, whole-group instruction will usually last from 10 to 20 minutes.



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Use this wonderful text set to teach about the many different types of New Year traditions and celebrations around the world. Compare and contrast the themes, vocabulary, and main ideas + details in each book. Develop a culminating activity to display and share what can be learned about traditions and people around the world.

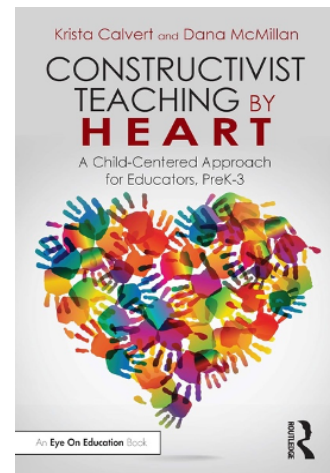
Theme: New Year Traditions Around the World



Measuring a Year – Jewish New Year, *Freedom Soup* – Haitian New Year, *Bringing in the New Year* – Lunar New Year, *Shante Keys and the New Year's Peas* – Customs from many cultures and countries, *The Lucky Grapes* – Spanish New Year

Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: I am an instructional coach in an elementary school. In the mornings, I see many of our students sitting on the carpet while their teacher is giving directions, discussing their day, or just providing information, but the kids appear very antsy and ready to move on. How can I help teachers make this more engaging for students?



A: When I (Dana) observe classrooms, I “script” the activity by recording the time, who is speaking, and a quick shorthand about what was said. Then, when I meet with the teacher, I ask them how long they thought the activity lasted. I find the person speaking has a much different feel for the time than those being spoken to. If the teacher replies with a much shorter time than was the reality, you may want to begin with a couple of tips on how to keep a greater awareness about the time when students are passive with no engagement. They may need to set a timer, move a clock where it is easy to see, or shorten the information given at each session so that kids have more time to dive in and learn together. Another option would be to hand over some responsibility to the students. Get them actively engaged in the morning meeting by assigning roles and responsibilities encouraging teamwork and participation.



Thanks for reading!

Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here](#)!

