Podcasting and Study Abroad: Constructivism in action.

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Abstract:　*This paper describes a project in which university students produce audio podcasts related to their experience on a Study Abroad program. The paper discusses the utility of a constructivism-grounded activity in facilitating reflective thinking by students about their development, and argues that audio podcasts are an appropriate and useful methodology.*

Keyword:　podcast　constructivism　study abroad　reflective

1. Introduction

Constructionist learning theory has been one of the most important influences on the field of education in the last several decades. Constructivism is described by Candy (1991) as the idea that "knowledge cannot be taught, but must be constructed by the learner". Constructivism promotes the idea that to become truly knowledgeable, learners need to interact with the subject matter and create their own framework for understanding, not just read about it or listen to a lecture. Although these ideas have been around for a long time, and were common in teaching manual skills, it was only in the 20th Century that they began to be seen as a separate teaching philosophy.

The first major names to develop clear constructionist ideas as applied to education were John Dewey and Jean Piaget. Dewey believed that knowledge and ideas only emerged when learners had to create them from experiences that were meaningful and important to them. Action by the learner was the key to learning. Piaget developed his constructivist ideas from his beliefs about the psychological development of children. He believed that the basis of learning was autonomous discovery. Through play, children discover relationships between things and people, and build up a coherent view of the world based on active involvement and

experimentation.

Lev Vygotsky also believed that children built up their own view of the world, but he stressed the critical importance of social context. He felt that children develop their knowledge of the world in a state of tension between what they seem to be seeing and experiencing and the concepts that adults are presenting to them.

As constructivism did not spring from a single mind, but developed over a period of decades through the work of many different thinkers and practitioners, it can be a bit difficult to nail down a concise definition of just what makes an environment or methodology constructivist. Three definitions of constructivist practice that I have found useful in my own teaching practice are those of David Jonassen, Bruce Marlowe & Marilyn Page and Jackie Miers.

Jonassen (1994) proposed that constructivist learning environments have 8 points in common:

1. Constructivist learning environments provide multiple representations of reality.

2. Multiple representations avoid oversimplification and represent the complexity of the real world.

3. Constructivist learning environments emphasize knowledge construction instead of knowledge reproduction.

4. Constructivist learning environments emphasize authentic tasks in a meaningful context rather than abstract instruction out of context.

5. Constructivist learning environments provide learning environments such as real-world settings or case-based learning instead of predetermined sequences of instruction.

6. Constructivist learning environments encourage thoughtful reflection on experience.

7. Constructivist learning environments " enable context- and content-dependent knowledge construction."

8. Constructivist learning environments support "collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation, not competition among learners for recognition."

Jackie Miers (2004) of the Technology School of the Future provides this definition:
".. the critical features are that the learning should be ...

- Active and manipulative, engaging students in interactions and explorations with learning materials and provide opportunities for them to observe the results of their manipulations
- Constructive and reflective, enabling students to integrate new ideas with prior knowledge to make meaning and enable learning through reflection
- Intentional, providing opportunities for students to articulate their learning goals and monitor their progress in achieving them
- Authentic, challenging and real-world (or simulated), facilitating better understanding and transfer of learning to new situations
- Cooperative, collaborative, and conversational, providing students with opportunities to interact with each other to clarify and share ideas, to seek assistance, to negotiate problems, and discuss solutions."

In a short but insightful definition. Marlowe & Page (2005) say that constructivism is:

1. about constructing knowledge, not receiving it

2. about thinking and analyzing, not accumulating and memorizing

3. about understanding and applying, not repeating back

4. being active, not passive.

Constructivist thought can be found throughout modern educational theory in public and private elementary and high schools throughout the world. In the next section, I will discuss the application of constructivist principles to the teaching of language in particular.

Constructivism in language learning

Becoming a competent speaker of a foreign language means being able to communicate effectively in that language. Grammar and vocabulary are important,

but the ability to meaningfully and appropriately use them in conversation with others is the real goal. One can have a deep knowledge of the grammar of a language and understand thousands of words, yet not be able to have a normal conversation, or respond appropriately to questions or statements. Foreign language learners must learn how to accurately read the context to accurately apply the rules they know in real life situations. Yet language education, especially in Japan, often relies on behaviorist and even pre-behaviorist teaching methods (Grammar-Translation, Audiolingualism, Structural-Situational Approach) that emphasize memorization, grammar rules and repetition to form "good habits" in learners. "It was assumed that language learning meant building up a large repertoire of sentences and grammatical patterns and learning to produce these accurately and quickly in the appropriate situation. (Richards, 2006) While for some exceptional students, these methods met with some success, they do not allow students to produce, experiment with and practice the language components they are studying.

Language learners must mentally construct a model or construct of the language and how it works, often called an "interlanguage". A basic property of an interlanguage is that "the learners themselves impose structure on the available linguistic data and formulate an internalized system". (Gass & Selinker, 2001) Constructionist methods recognize this and aim to help students in formulating and revising this internalized system through offering opportunities to practice and synthesize the language input they get from instruction and the input they get from actual linguistic interaction with others.

Although explicit reference to constructivist thought is rare in discussions of language pedagogy, most modern language pedagogy is based, in some form, on recognizably constructivist principles. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), for instance, displays clear parallels with constructionist ideas, such as the importance of authenticity of tasks, negotiation of meaning and collaboration, experimenting with new language, and above all, active use of the language as a tool for learning it.

Constructivism and its application to Study Abroad

One area where a considered application of constructivist principles might be particularly useful is during Baiko Gakuin University's Study Abroad Program in Australia. Baiko students spend eight weeks enrolled in an Intensive English program at the University of Southern Queensland. They live with host families, and learn not only English, but how to operate in a totally new environment. Many students report with pride on problems they solved, situations they adapted to, new social skills they have learned. As well as language improvements, this experience helps make them more well-rounded internationally-minded people, more capable of independence in a multicultural environment.

The program is popular and students do gain substantial improvement in speaking and listening skills, but for many students the improvement is temporary. After one or two months back home, the language gains begin to slip away, they revert to more passive lifestyles, and they forget details, lessons learned, and achievements gained during their stay abroad. The challenging environment that forced them to stretch their limits just to get through the day is no more. While we as educators can try to ramp up the tempo and push them harder than before in our classes, we cannot compete with the experience of living in an English speaking household or talking with waiters and bus drivers and sales clerks as the default.

Since we cannot recreate or extend the Study Abroad experience, perhaps we can try to deepen it. Perhaps we can help students process and reflect on the changes studying abroad has caused in them. While students are actively learning and adapting during their time abroad, they may not be setting aside much time to think about it, to digest it on reflect on what it means. For too many students it seems a whirl of activity, enjoyable but with little lasting result.

There is little teachers back in Japan can do while students are abroad to help them reflect productively on their experience. We have only periodic communication with them, and do not want to take much time away from their main activities of learning and experiencing another culture. What is needed is an activity that is largely self-directed, requires them to think about the import of their

experience themselves, analyze what it means to them and organize their thoughts and feelings. It should ask them to produce and create a means of both expressing these thoughts to others, and capturing them for later reflection themselves. A constructivist approach seems ideal for a self-directed project with minimal oversight by instructors. I propose that student-produced podcasts might be just such an activity.

Introducing Podcasting

What is a podcast? The word "podcast" is a portmanteau of "iPod" and "broadcast", and describes an audio program that is recorded digitally, distributed via computer networks and accessed with a digital media player or computer, rather than broadcast over the airwaves like a radio show or requiring physical media. Podcasts can be recorded on IC recorders, many MP3 players, computers and recently, even many cellphones. Because it requires little specialized equipment, no special technical skills and no sponsorship, podcasting has become a popular medium for those without large resources to distribute content to a wider audience. The low cost and flexibility of recording technology allows nearly anyone to produce and distribute a program. Using technologies like RSS feeds or iTunes, a podcast can be made available to a worldwide audience at almost no cost if desired, or simply sent via email or accessed through links on a host webpage.

Podcasting and constructivism

Podcast production by students is an excellent example of a constructivist learning activity by the standards most of the definitions mentioned above. It meets all the criteria set by Miers: 1) Active and manipulative, provides opportunities to observe their work. Podcasts are actually created by the students, who can then listen to and evaluate them, or get feedback from others. Students choose the topics, organization and scripting (or non-scripting), recording location and method and timing of the recording (within certain limits) and the final audience. 2) Constructive and reflective, integrating new ideas with prior knowledge. Podcasts mix students' knowledge of organizing ideas and narratives with their current experiences, presentations and technical skills. 3) Intentional. Podcasts

give students a chance to think about, assess, and reformulate their learning goals and progress.　4) Authentic and real-world. The content of the podcasts is their own current experience and adjustment to a new environment.　5) Cooperative, collaborative and conversational. Students work together and evaluate each others' podcasts, and give advice and assistance. After their return home, they will hear podcasts from many other students.

Student creating podcasts will be asked to think about and reflect on the meaning of their experience, their growth, goals and achievements. By organizing these thoughts in order to share them with others, it is hoped that they will approach their studies and experiences more thoughtfully, and become more aware of the achievements and adaptations they are undergoing. After their return, the podcasts serve as tangible pieces of work for evaluation by teachers and the students themselves.

An additional benefit of podcasting is that it allows students who have better written than oral skills to excel by allowing them to practice in a safe environment and choose the best performances for their final recordings.

Podcasting assignments for Study Abroad participants

In the past two years I have asked students in my classes to record podcasts in Australia. I considered these assignments to be pilot studies, to determine what refinements were likely to make the exercise successful as a tool for reflection.　As I didn't have a clear idea in mind at the time, and I wanted to see what would emerge, the instructions were very simple. I asked students to record one or two 3-minute podcasts on any topic they chose. I gave some examples, like food, transportation, culture shock, home life, interview with someone, but left it very much up to students to see what they would come up with.

IC Recorders were given to two students to hand out as needed for use in making their recordings. The response was mixed, with large differences between the groups based on personality and motivational factors. The first year students were more diligent and reminded each other to make the recordings. The two students with the recorders were very enthusiastic about the project and were active in reminding others to record. The second year, response was much lower. There

were very few technical problems, and students who did more than the requested 2 recordings showed a marked improvement in recording quality. The podcasts I got were indeed interesting, but as students had been given little guidance on what to talk about, most were on very shallow and trivial subjects, although some were more insightful. I gave students the choice to work in pairs or alone, but most recorded alone.

In the future, some changes will be made in the assignment. In years past this assignment had no connection to any class, and was optional. Nevertheless, when there were some students encouraging others to do it, participation was quite good, and most students found it enjoyable. For the next year's program, I will request that Oral Communication teachers make this a small part of their grade for the semester following the Study Abroad program. I believe that making it even minimally required will boost participation.

Another adjustment concerns the advancements in personal technology; nearly all students have adequate recording capability in their cell phones, digital media players and laptop computers. I may not send the IC recorders may not be needed next year, or at least may be a central feature of the project. Students will be asked to upload their podcasts directly, either through a simple webpage, or though Language Cloud, a free Learning Management System that I intend to use for some classes in Spring of 2013.

I also intend to have students record a pre-departure podcast about their expectations and fears, and a post-return podcast summarizing their feelings. This will give them practice in planning and recording podcasts, and introduce the idea of using their own feelings and experiences as subjects for reflection and expression.

In all, I am hopeful that this deliberate constructive approach to encouraging reflection will be effective in helping students get the most out of their Study Abroad experience, and to help make their improvements and achievements more long-lasting.

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