

Teaching as a Skill:
How the Theories Apply
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Helping students learn is the ultimate goal of education. Thus, educators must figure out how to do this and help their students better comprehend the content and become better prepared for their future. So how is this done effectively? Learning theories. These are exactly what they say they are, theories about how a student learns. To better understand how some of these look, three specific theories, humanism, 21st Century Skills, and Constructivism, will be examined. Then, I will examine how these theories fit into my own personal teaching philosophy.

In order to have learning expectations for a student, they must be recognized as that, an individual student. That is the idea that drives the humanism learning theory. The learning that takes place is to be personalized to the student. As Joan M. T. Walker states in her work on this learning theory (2009), “The best teachers don’t simply teach content, they teach people” (p. 122). That is the difference in humanism. The student and their specific needs are seen as the most important aspect of the education taking place, and not simply the information transfer. In humanism, education goes much deeper and seeks to educate the students as a whole person. Walker goes on to explain that the best way to implement this theory in the classroom is by diversifying instruction (p. 125). With meeting student’s specific needs being at the center of theory, this makes perfect sense. Students should have their learning needs met in the classroom via differentiated instruction. Another way to use humanism in the classroom would be to have student input held high. The educator could do this by asking students to help construct rules/expectations for the classroom. Thus, keeping the student and their needs at the forefront of the classroom, showing the humanistic learning theory in practice.

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Along with caring for a student, comes the responsibility of making sure they are ready to leave and become a productive member of society in the future. This is where the 21st Century Skills learning theory comes in. This theory is all about helping students develop the four main skills of critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication to be successful in current culture. This is done effectively through problem-based learning (PBL). When looking at a study on how to better teach 21st Century Skills through PBL, the authors stated, “The problem-based learning approach, which grew out of education for medical students, also tends to focus on student learning in a content area through the use of open-ended problems in that area that students are required to research and address” (Wismath, Orr, & MacKay, 2015). This highlights a key to not only PBL but also teaching 21st Century Skills, the student themselves must conquer the problem presented as a group. This method really does foster the learning and better preparation for the future, as the students apply all four of the skills to accomplish the learning goals. Then with students working together to solve problems and develop skills, the learning becomes active.

Active learning is at the root of the constructivist learning theory. Students must be engaged and then able to apply the knowledge they have learned to skills within the classroom. As Richard Fox states in his examination of constructivism (2001), “The greatest insight of constructivism is perhaps the realization of the difference made by a learner's existing knowledge and values to what is learned next” (p. 33). This really shows how the constructivist approach builds upon itself and looks to the future, show the students that content they learn at the beginning of the year is just as important as the content at the end, even after the assessment of that knowledge takes place. Thus the classroom application of this can be seen when developing curriculum for the year. The first project, implementing the active learning portion, students

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accomplish will help them learn how to use certain skills, and then the next applies those on a deeper level and hones the skills to be ready for the future. Everything that happens in the classroom pulls from previous content and makes it relevant to what is happening that day.

The most important application of these theories is fostering the positive relationships and environment. In Humanism, the student as a person is held very high, as it should be. As an educator, how should I ever be able to expect a student to learn if they do not feel safe or free to be themselves in my classroom? That will simply not happen. I need to have positive, yet professional, relationship with my students if I expect them to grab onto the content. There needs as an adolescent, such as feeling accepted, must first be met before we can go into deeper discussions and solve larger problems. As one of the above sources talked about, teachers are teaching people, not simply content. The person receiving the information and how they do so best is just as important as the information. Ultimately the responsibility for creating this environment falls on the teacher and their ability to adapt the content to each student's specific needs. This again goes back to know the students, as the teacher must know their learning preferences and interests in order to best accomplish the goal of that differentiated instruction.

Once that foundation of a positive relationship/environment from humanism is established, then the content can be addressed. However, the theory of 21st Century skills is important to my teaching, as it will help me implement skills that are necessary for a student to succeed but directly tied to content into my classroom. The best way to do so is by letting the students figure out directed problems within the classroom. This is not only a safe place to make mistakes and practice, but it also equips them for real-world issues in which they must be able to use their 21st Century skills. Specifically, in my social studies classroom, I would want the students to take the content, such the US Constitution in a government class or human

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adaptations in a geography class, and make it real to their lives and their situations they encounter. For example, they could work together and make a case for or against a Constitutional issue in a mock courtroom. This would not only be super relevant to things they will one day encounter, but also give them the opportunity to develop 21st Century Skills.

From there, this example also shows how constructivism can work, as the students are applying the knowledge they would already have learned about the court system and the Constitution, and building new knowledge upon it. Thus, helping create a better and more whole student that can apply things from the past to current challenges. And that idea is exactly what these learning theories help educators do. They help us look at the current challenge of helping students learn and applying knowledge/experiences we may already have. We must first start with the fact they are human and then go onto to help them dig deeper and solve larger problems. That idea not only holds true in education, but with any human we come in contact with. If they need help of any sort, we must first have a positive relationship with them before we go any further. Thus, it is important to remember that before we can use any learning theories or go deeper with people, they must see we care. The best way to do this? Caring always, every day, and for every person we come in contact with. Thus, helping people and ourselves be better, making the world a little bit better.

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