# From Objectivism to Constructivism:

# The Evolution of a Blended Multimedia Writing Course

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## Introduction

Because Assignment 1's topic requires this writer to relate to his own teaching/learning or practice experiences, the writing style of this paper will lean heavily towards narrative—with as much critical analysis as 2,000 words can allow. Of course, constructivism will be the controlling idea as I share the details of this teaching/learning experience and various current literatures will be provided as support.

## The Awakening

In February of 2012, I was asked to develop a blended English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course in multimedia writing for the College English Education Committee (CEEC) at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea. I had applied to – but not yet started with – the University of British Columbia (UBC) Master of Educational Technology (MET) Program and possessed only superficial knowledge about constructivist pedagogy, as gleaned from the UBC MET Program course overview web page ("Course Overview | UBC Master of Educational Technology (MET)," n.d.). Furthermore, because the word *constructivist* appears only three times on the page, I was completely unaware of just how prevalent and important the concept of constructivism is in the MET Program. Therefore, when I was researching and developing the multimedia course proposal, I was oblivious to the fact that a paradigm shift in instructional design was well underway (Cooper, 1993) and felt no compulsion to seek out information about constructivism or assess any existing "blended multimedia EFL" courses that were already being taught with a constructivist approach. I had not yet read any constructivist literature and consequently dove into modelling my proposal after the traditional assumptions of objectivism (Jonassen, 1991). In April, 2012, I proudly received approval from my department to go ahead with the development of the course.

Most of the detailed planning and development was done before the end of the year because of the anticipated need to focus on my first two MET courses (ETEC 510 and 532) that were set to begin in early January, 2013. After the initial orientation and "get acquainted" activities, it didn't take long before both MET courses introduced me to some major educational research and constructivist/socio-constructivist concepts as presented in a number of required readings that were both scholarly and enlightening (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Cazden et al., 1996; Jonassen, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Papert, 1980; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994).

Much to my increasing consternation at the time, those required readings—as well as the always insightful MET forum discussions—were beginning to challenge many aspects of the blended course in which I had already invested so much time and energy to painstakingly develop into what I naively regarded as my masterpiece of blended instructional design. The WordPress space was full of video tutorials, impressive filmmaking examples, a blog that featured automatically updated RSS, YouTube, Twitter, and Pinterest feeds, as well as a plethora of additional resource links. In addition to the WordPress space, there was also a secure Learning Management System (LMS) to provide even more resources and grading information for students

The problem was that when I came across the Palloff and Pratt readings, for example, they pointed out that online learners would rather *interact with one another* than read endless paragraphs of text or watch video tutorials and lectures. Furthermore, Palloff and Pratt reported that "the ability to engage in asynchronous discussion with their peers" is what online learners value the most (2001, p. 10). My nearly completed online design, resplendent with a wide array of wonderful Web 1.0 technologies and *autoblog* feed sources, could definitely provide an excellent platform for delivering teacher generated and professionally created content, but it was destitute of any Web 2.0 affordances for facilitating the

meaningful peer discussions, interactivities and student generated content that would enable constructivist learning to take place.

In addition to suddenly confronting the reality that my online design masterpiece was sorely lacking the constructivist affordances of interactivity and user generated content, I was also beginning to grapple with another research based reality: students' universal need for a sense of community. According to sources like Barab and Duffy and Scardamalia and Bereiter, learners gain some real benefits from both online and offline communities (2000; 1994)—and my blended course design hadn't provided much for that, either. Apart from some occasional small group activities in the face-to-face environment, the planned online learning space offered little to help students connect with one another during the week between each of their face-to-face classes. Everyone would be encouraged to post comments on the eJournals (blogs) that each student would be required to develop, but there was nothing else – no clear pathway for developing a meaningfully interconnected online learning community. This was totally out of touch with a key fact of life that was so eloquently expressed by Etienne Wenger in 1998:

> Communities of practice sprout everywhere—in the classroom as well as on the playground, officially or in the cracks. And in spite of curriculum, discipline, and exhortation, the learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice (as cited in Barab & Duffy, 2000, p. 59).

After some reflection, I thought that, although this may be true for younger K-12 learners, learning communities may not be so important to university students—especially students like mine, who were born and raised in South Korea, a young democracy with a very traditional objectivist education system that relies almost exclusively on lecture-based teaching in both high school and university. I reasoned (incorrectly) that, with years of lectures and conditioning, it is likely that Korean university students do not feel any need or

desire to participate in either face-to-face or online learning communities. Hoping that it would spare me from having to make even more changes, I decided to check more literature so I could find support for leaving my precious course design "as is."

It turned out that there was not any literature (in English) that specifically related to Korean university students and learning communities, so the next best source with the closest resemblance to my situation was an American study that was conducted in 2012. The subjects were 1,847 students (aged 18-33) at the University of California, Riverside. Most of them had ESL or EFL backgrounds and the study was concerned with ascertaining their receptivity to Web 2.0 technology in their learning environments. It was important for the researchers (and me) to distinguish between Web 2.0 and Web 1.0 learning activities and this was accomplished by defining Web 1.0 activities in terms of *transmitting data to the user* – as in an objectivist framework – and Web 2.0 tasks as *users interact and even help create data* – as in a constructivist environment (Vance, 2012, p. 483). According to the final results, the majority of learners in this study had a strong preference for Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook, MySpace, and blogging; however, they also indicated a firm desire to continue receiving information through such Web 1.0 technologies as "podcasts posted by the instructor (not co-created by students), Twitter reminders of upcoming assignments," and PowerPoint presentations (2012, p. 488). Fortunately for time-pressed me, this suggested that, although I would have to make some changes to my online space, they wouldn't need to be radical: providing some additional ways for learners to communicate, collaborate, and interact as members of an online community would suffice. And it would not be necessary to completely eliminate the Web 1.0 technologies because, according to this North American study, ESL/EFL university students still feel a need to be the recipients of a certain amount of instructor generated data, too.

There were two other small Asian studies (Noytim, 2010; Shih, 2010) that indicated similar results and so, with my newly acquired knowledge and constructivist philosophy, I

went ahead with tweaking and redesigning my "masterpiece" course *while I was teaching it* for the very first time. Although it was no longer a masterpiece and there were a few bumps along the way, most of the tweaked activities yielded some very positive outcomes. This was reflected in the student evaluations at the end of that first semester, and, despite all the on-the-fly tweaking, the first iteration of the course turned out to be a solid success. Many of students commented in their course evaluations that, although it was totally new to them, they appreciated the constructivist approach:

> I really like working in groups and projects where group members collaborate and create a great presentation for the class. The reason why I like this is because I am much more comfortable doing this because all my school years, I've been working in this manner. Here in Hanyang, I figured out that most classes are only listening to lectures. I find "hands-on" more effective and a better approach for learning (Anonymous, Multimedia Class Student Survey, 2013).

## Reflections

Now, as I reflect on what the MET Program has taught me about constructivism and how much my multimedia course has evolved over the past four semesters, I am almost overwhelmed with the realization that I now have a solid understanding as to why such constructivist principles as interactivity, collaboration, user generated content, and learning communities are so preferable to the assumptions of objectivism. In the classroom, I have personally facilitated and witnessed numerous instances of scaffolding, with either myself or More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) learners helping the less advanced students through their Zones of Proximal Development (ZPDs) in a number of ways: sometimes by translating my English instructions into another learner's first language; other times by demonstrating how to capture good audio with a smartphone camera or set up a basic WordPress blog; and still other times by taking on the role of "director" as the small groups collaboratively work on their filmmaking projects. (McLeod, n.d.)

In addition to witnessing the manifestation of Vygotskian principles, it is also gratifying to observe how the students respond to situated learning: the blogs they develop and populate with their own thoughts, images, and videos are not cloistered within the university IT system. With the exception of two brief writing assignments that are submitted through our LMS, everything my students produce and upload is authentic and "fully productive of useful learning" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). This is because it is *out there*, situated on the World Wide Web, interconnected through my "parent" site (Bartanus, n.d.), accessible to anyone at any time and, as a result, it engages the students immediately and quickly motivates them to take their work very seriously—especially after exploring the very relevant issues of ID theft and online privacy at the beginning of the semester.

Another reason these students are extremely motivated is because, as I've confirmed through some of ETEC 530's readings (P.C. Blumenfeld, Krajcik, Marx, & Soloway, 1994; Phyllis C. Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Marx & And, 1997; Thomas, 2000), they are being constructively instructed to collaborate on projects that enhance their personal interest and perceived value. The tasks are varied, relevant to real-life issues, occasionally novel, and almost always challenging. At the beginning of every semester, a quick survey consistently reveals that more than 95% of the multimedia writing students have never developed a blog or created/edited a meaningful video; however, by the end of each semester, every student has created authentic artifacts that live in the YouTube and WordPress communities.

As a result of all of the above, the vast majority of multimedia writing students eventually find themselves taking responsibility for their own learning—perhaps for the first time in their lives. Furthermore, because this Project Based Learning (PBL) class allows learners to decide on their own blog themes, film topics and genres, the end results of their individual and collaborative projects often exceed expectations. The PBL environment actually encourages students to embrace the responsibility of creating both their own "driving questions" and the activities that answer them during their eJournal and filmmaking projects.

This ultimately leads to them also determining the nature of their own artifacts, which further enhances the authenticity and relevancy of their work (Phyllis C. Blumenfeld et al., 1991, p. 371). In other words, the PBL environment of my continually evolving multimedia writing course allows students to construct new and meaningful knowledge that would not, in my opinion, be attainable in a more traditional objectivist environment.

As a final reflection, I must note that, had my "masterpiece" not been so vastly improved by the constructivist influences that began in January, 2013, I am sure that the multimedia writing course would not have been nearly as popular or meaningful as it is today. Our department has added an additional two sections and the two that I teach have been completely full for the last two semesters. It is exhilarating to know that, for a couple of hours each week, a few hard-working, overstressed Korean university students can get away from their ongoing onslaught of lectures, quizzes, and exams to enjoy some meaningful knowledge building.

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