

## **Constructivism in Ms. Kittelson's Classroom**

When the students work in small groups, they work in student-facilitated, heterogeneous groups that are monitored by the teacher but not led by the teacher.

When the students work individually, the teacher creates high-interest tasks that build upon the students' prior knowledge and personal experiences – from “Dear Hypocrite” letters to their own obituaries to narratives written from the perspective of their physical scars to metaphoric mind maps about any one of an array of academic concepts.

The tasks have access points for all students – the differentiation is built in – because low-achieving students are not low in all ways and need to be able to rise within the task to the same level as the other students. Each activity includes a built-in continuum of possibility.

The students attempt the task individually first, without direct, objectivist instruction. There are simple, written guidelines in at least two different places and sometimes outlines, models and/or organizers; however, it is important to not overload the students with too many organizers upfront and to instead let the students construct their own based on their own process. They can easily get overwhelmed.

EXAMPLE: “We’re going to the store. Let’s go.” (The student automatically grabs his shoes in time to run out the door.) Versus, “We’re going to the store. You will need socks and shoes. Put on your socks. Would you like black, white or brown? Put on your shoes, either your sneakers or your loafers. Tie your sneakers. Let me show you how in case you don’t remember...” With this second scenario, too much time is wasted on tasks that the student already knows; the student receives the message that going to the store is much harder than he thought – so hard, in fact, that he couldn’t do it on his own; and, by the time he has finished tying his shoes he is pooped and has forgotten what it was all for.

Along the way, at certain intervals, the students share with their peers their process – the students ask and answer interpretive, not just factual, questions and provide thorough answers so they can better understand and articulate their intellectual and creative processes.

The students provide for themselves and for each other scaffolds to assist with the portions that are thus far inaccessible. They share their thinking and their doing.

The teacher introduces scaffolds to some students based on where they still seem to be stuck.

The students return to the task to reconstruct their work.

The teacher facilitates the process and evaluates the students on their engagement in the process.

The teacher evaluates student products, including essays, projects and exams, in order to perceive growth, not only to see if an arbitrary objective has been met.

## Questions in a Constructivist Classroom

### Typical questions that students might ask each other:

“Will you read the set-up to my narrative and tell me if it includes enough sensory details? It feels like the right length, but then when the rising action starts – when the neighbor knocks on the door holding a casserole – it doesn’t feel suspenseful enough.”

“What is the difference between *situational irony* and *hypocrisy*?”

“Is *semester* a polysyllabic word?”

“Will you help me find evidence of personification in this passage?”

“Is ‘Once upon a time’ a cliché?”

### Typical questions that students might ask the teacher after they have asked each other and to which the teacher might respond with more questions:

“Carl and I were talking about adverbs. We were wondering if they counted as sensory details. He says they do because they tell you how something was done. I say they don’t because they are focused on the action and not on description, and you said the action should come *after* the description.”

“My group and I were arguing about whether or not the Bible is fiction or non-fiction...what should we put? I say it’s fiction and just a collection of stories meant to teach us life lessons. Jennifer says it’s literally the word of God and is therefore non-fiction. Will we lose points if we say it’s both?”

“Tiffany, Paco and I were debating about the difference between *irony* and *hypocrisy*. They agree there is no difference. I think that one involves a time lapse – that a cop being thrown behind bars later, after he is no longer a cop, is ironic. A cop being thrown behind bars right now, based on his breaking the same law that he enforces, makes him a hypocrite. What do you think?”

### Questions and statements students should not pose to the teacher because they perpetuate dependency, reward students for ignoring initial instructions, and do not involve high-order discourse:

“What are we doing?”

“I don’t get it.”

“Am I doing this right?”

“How do you spell \_\_\_\_\_?”

Informational questions that are clearly answered on the task guidelines.

Questions that are easily answered by other students who need and would welcome the opportunity to retrace their steps and articulate their thoughts.