BOOK REVIEW

Title: Innovations in Teacher Education: A Social Constructivist Approach
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The intention of this book is “to propose certain goals and standards for pre-service education, and continue a conversation about directions for our field” (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 5). The authors believe that social constructivism can provide an important, practical direction for achieving such meaningful and practical goals and standards. They see social constructivism, not only as a theoretical construct, but passionately advocate its use as a strategy for addressing educational problems such as the gap between university culture and the classroom and between academic knowledge and popular culture. They also believe that the implementation of social constructivism can address the attrition rate of teachers, the drain of resources by universities, and the enhancement of the profession. This is a tall order but the authors have provided theoretical as well as practical ways in which this focus can make a significant contribution to these areas.

The book is well structured, clearly written, and provides ample concrete examples drawn from eight successful programs, in Australia, Canada, and the United States. Theoretically it links early constructivists such as Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky with more recent theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, and Rorty among others. These connections are sound but not overwhelming for the reader who is interested in practical solutions. The examples from actual programs in a variety of contexts illustrate the main themes of the chapters and provide vignettes that link theory and practice in a constructivist philosophy framework.

Their selection of three key concepts, integration, inquiry, and community, which are “at the heart of constructivism” (Beck & Kosnick, 2006, p. 24) provide the structural organization of the remainder of the book. Thus chapter 2 to 4 deal with “Creating An Integrated Program,” “Fostering Inquiry in the Program,” and “Building Community in the Program” respectively. Chapters 5 and 6 expand the concepts to include “Establishing an Inclusive Approach” and “Having Influence and Gaining Support Beyond the
Program.” These last two chapters illustrate the need to think beyond one’s own program to institutional and global parameters. Chapter 7 completes the book with a focus on “Researching the Program.”

Gaining acceptance for social constructivist programs requires efforts at negotiating, building networks, and presenting research to the educational community. Such tasks are daunting, as indeed is the whole process, but if education is to change for the better, then this advocacy must be an integral part of the endeavor. The very clear emphasis on action research, already present in chapter 2, becomes vital as one research strategy. Beck and Kosnick provide explicit examples of how this might be accomplished based on their own and others’ experience.

What makes this book worth reading is its philosophical stance, its organization, its consistency of method, and its practical dimensions. I found that the book models the constructivist method. The authors present theory, discuss problems, and provide examples and experiences which do not indoctrinate but invite readers to consider their own views. It is organized with clarity, thoroughness, and simplicity which makes it easy to read, logical, and useful. Yet the structure weaves clearly many contradictory ideas into a thoughtful presentation not a forceful argument. This is in line with the constructivist process. Finally, the many varied examples emphasize that there is no single way but a variety of ways in which solutions can be found and problems addressed. Throughout all of this Beck and Kosnick address, though perhaps not as strongly as one would desire, the nature of indoctrination and the constant leveling toward the transmission orientation toward which so many programs have a tendency to gravitate. A reliance on the theory of constructivism and action research, as the authors so rightly point out, can perhaps help to alleviate this tendency. This book is valuable because it comes at a time when many forces are converging on pre-service education and solutions that aim to provide theoretical and practical directions are very much needed.