

Olga Usova
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A5 Final Project: Memo
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TO: American schools in Stuttgart, Germany.

FROM: Olga Usova

DATE: November 26, 2017

SUBJECT: Action Research Proposal: Implementing Pop Culture to Promote Student Engagement in Online Learning Environment.

I. Introduction

The action research proposal explores the relationship of popular culture and student engagement in distance education employing constructivist and collaborative theories. The study will be conducted in Stuttgart, Germany, where students are from varying backgrounds and ethnic groups with a somewhat equal 50/50 gender split. Most of the students reside in American households; however, some of the students are bilingual or consider English as their second language. A small number of students have never lived in America and have been educated in local schools in Europe and/or Asia. All students in the study groups will be required to participate in the same activities but only one group – the test subjects – will receive instruction that employs elements of pop culture in online teaching.

- **Purpose**

Disengaged students lack the psychological investment necessary to master academic knowledge and skills when they encounter the impersonal context of learning materials. Additionally, teachers/instructors must learn to incorporate a variety of instructional methods in the classroom to include direct students' interest. In today's classrooms, especially online, the student population is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of culture, background, and ethnicity. Teachers must meet the needs of these students by committing to high quality interaction with students and finding common ground to promote student engagement in

academics. If students are able to make personal connections to the lessons, which is what constructivist models of teaching is all about, they are able to activate existing knowledge to motivate learning through direct engagement in classroom activities (Bates, 2017). The goal of this action research proposal is to provide a potential solution to assist educators of American schools in Stuttgart, Germany, in identifying diverse students' interest to increase student engagement in academic studies.

- **Question**

Would constructivist and collaborative models of eLearning be more successful if elements of popular culture that promote student engagement in meaningful learning were employed?

II. Review of Literature

Teachers around the country are abandoning the traditional teacher-centered objective instruction and instead, opting for Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky's student-centered constructive pedagogy to activate student engagement in learning (Koonce, 2004). Ali Rahimi, Ph.D. Professor of Applied Linguistics and author of 13 published books, conducted a research study to compare the significant philosophical assumptions and major characteristics of objective and constructive teaching styles and the subsequent effects each approach had on student engagement in learning (Rahimi, 2011).

In his research, Rahimi examined both methods of instruction to determine the key ideas and traits of teaching and learning. Studying the components of objective teaching Rahimi determined that the transfer of knowledge is mainly from teacher to learner and relies heavily on textbook instruction to convey learning. Students are considered passive learners who submit to deliberate instruction and are expected to learn what the teacher knows to be true. Evaluating the

transfer of information, Rahimi explains that students become disengaged from meaningful learning as “teachers tend to value correct answers and ignore student thinking on topics being taught” (Rahimi, 2011, p. 91-94). On the opposite side of the spectrum, Rahimi determined the instruction in a constructivist classroom is based on student-centered learning; where the learner engages in the study using their prior knowledge and experience to make a direct connection to the materials being taught (Rahimi, 2011, p. 96). The teacher creates a learning environment in which the students are presented with complex problems or projects that are supported by “information resources, cognitive tools, and learning support strategies,” such as teacher modeling, scaffolding, and collaborative learning (Rahimi, 2011, p. 98). Students are encouraged to analyze and evaluate information to interpret meaning based on their own experience and understanding of the world in which they live. Students engage with products of culture and use this information to construct a reality that meets specific learning goals (Rahimi, 2011, p. 96-101). The constructivist method of teaching is a learner-controlled environment where students become engaged through practical responses to problems. Students engage and participate in learning by incorporating their own ideas, experiences, and individual style into classroom activities to gain the essential knowledge needed for meaningful learning.

Agreeing with Rahimi’s research that a constructivist approach to teaching promotes student engagement in learning, David Childs, a professor at Northern Kentucky University, integrated aspects of popular culture into his high school social studies curriculum to explore the topic of racial stereotyping in America (Childs, 2014, p. 291). Childs observed that his students were quick to engage in conversations about “being black” but were reluctant to “read and listen and foster historical thinking” (Childs, 2014, p. 294) in relation to mandated textbooks and formal instruction. Listening to his students, and identifying their specific interests in music –

rap and hip hop, Childs decided to incorporate popular music into classroom activities. Childs firsthand experience at promoting student engagement through the use of music and lyrics is a testimony of how the understanding and application of popular culture is a powerful tool for engaging students in the instruction and learning in today's studies.

Conclusion: I theorize that the steps taken to incorporate popular culture into eLearning material, examples, and instruction will promote student engagement in a meaningful manner. When a student can draw from their background knowledge or cultural experience to connect new learning to existing knowledge they employ critical analytical thinking skills to decode the meaning of the text. Exposing students to popular culture connects the current lives of the students to the classroom. Students are therefore able to structure the information in a meaningful manner that they can recall at a later date. The ability to connect with the lesson engages the student in learning which boosts motivation and self-efficacy to reach their end goal.

References

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