

## **What Methods of Instruction are Essential for Learning and Why?**

*by Donna Newberg-Long*

First, the teacher should view themselves as a facilitator of learning—a guide for students to explore the world they live in and their place in it. The learning experience must first and foremost be engaging for students. The content of what students are learning should have meaning for them here and now. Dewey was fully aware of this need to engage students, and his child-centered educational philosophy is well known.

Teaching happens when there is a relationship between the teacher and the student or students and other students. Learning happens independently and in relationship with other students or the teacher as reflective partner. To accomplish these goals, the classroom should be set up to allow for independent work as well as small group work. There should be digital tools available for students to research information needed during their discoveries.

Teachers must understand the two types of knowledge and how these are taught and learned successfully, as described in *A Theory-Based Meta-Analysis of Research on Instruction* by McREL. Piaget also believed that teachers must understand the historical development of knowledge. Our teacher training institutions must become more relevant. They must teach students to be successful teachers in our present school environment. Teachers must know how much practice and exposure to certain types of knowledge or skills will lead to proficiency in order to plan for appropriate instruction.

Storytelling as a method of teaching is supported by research—McREL's Meta-Analysis—and I am a strong supporter of using this method to relay important lessons to students. Timothy Reagan (2005) talks about the non-western educational traditions from many cultures in his

book. In African educational thought, he says, “A wise child is talked to in proverbs.” This is the educational philosophy of many cultures. We seem to have lost this wisdom.

Rudolf Steiner schools use the art of storytelling to educate students about good character and great civilizations. By telling the story of the American Revolution through the eyes of George Washington or Benjamin Franklin, students can relate to the struggles of the founding fathers. They were real people with real problems. This has meaning for children. Dry facts allow them no connection. Telling about Ben Franklin as a boy who was odd and inventive—who grew up as an important diplomat with the French—interests children about the life and times that led to the foundation of our country. Stories like those of Sojourner Truth or George Lopez act as examples of how people overcome problems and go on to do great things. What powerful examples for young people today—to know they might be able to overcome their obstacles and reach their dreams.

I believe there is a place for direct instruction in the classroom. When introducing students to new content, it is fine, in fact preferable, to lay a foundation for the subject. Teachers should include in this instruction new vocabulary words and ways to help students make connections to what they already know about the content. As Noddings (2007) said of Dewey, “Teachers must know something of their students’ prior experience and design new learning experiences that grow out of it, but they must also observe their students’ present experience and plan future experiences designed to move students toward a more sophisticated grasp of the subject.” There must be a connection between purpose and the activity students are engaged in, as clearly stated by Dewey.

Practice in problem solving and sharing of ideas is needed for students to progress in the development of their thinking. Time should be given to students to allow them to reflect on each

activity—to think of ways they may want to work in the future that might be more productive or lead to better conclusions to their hypotheses.

Methods of instruction must include research-based strategies proven to raise student achievement. Students should be given time to personalize instructional goals and objectives. Constructivists, along with research done by McREL, support the fact that students' active engagement in establishing and pursuing their own learning objectives is a powerful tool for raising student achievement. Activities should include asking students to identify similarities and differences. Feedback should be given often to students from both the teacher and peers, and should include teaching students to self assess, using rubrics developed by the teacher or the class as a whole. Students should have a clear idea of what proficiency looks like when accomplishing mastery of a skill. The above instructional methods are only the tip of the iceberg, but are focused on teaching students to think in flexible ways. Students should engage in non-linguistic representations of their learning. They should learn to use metaphors and analogies to demonstrate what they know. Working in cooperative groups with structured expectations is good some of the time—but not all. Using cues and questions to connect students to what they already know is essential before launching into a new subject. Providing ways for students to get the feedback they need inspires engagement and reinforces understanding.

The use of textbooks for learning can be less than helpful if they are dry and uninteresting to students. My personal favorite is to have students make their own textbooks to demonstrate what they have learned. These would include illustrations and diagrams, as well as graphs and lots of color, if the students wished to add this. They would summarize what they have learned. Such books are something to be proud of and share with parents. The use of textbooks and most

worksheets are generally used to replace the work a teacher must do to inspire his/her students.

An uninspired classroom does not engage students in learning.

The bottom line is that teachers should engage students in learning activities that research has shown to raise students' abilities and develop their capacities to think, while infusing learning with ethical character so students can arrive at good decisions.