

Situated Learning Approach in Literacy Work Stations

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Introduction

There are many theories and instructional approaches in education, as well as many “buzz words” that change from year to year. The situated learning approach is one theory that many educators are including in their classroom instructional approach (Herrington & Oliver, 1999). Situated learning has many benefits including giving students a chance to learn from and teach their peers, and to draw understanding about concepts in realistic settings. While there are some limitations to situated learning, such as being able to actually provide students with authentic activities, there are many uses for this approach in an elementary classroom.

One use that fits very nicely with the situated learning approach is using literacy work stations during language arts instruction. Literacy work stations encourage student collaboration and give students open-ended authentic opportunities to learn and grow as readers and writers. Through the use of instructional technology, students are able to make connections between literacy concepts in the classroom and real world applications. While management of literacy work stations and availability of technology can stand in the way, literacy work stations have helped students reach higher levels of reading achievement (Kracl, 2011). Through collaboration among students and the use of authentic activities, students can benefit greatly from the situated learning approach and the use of literacy work stations.

Situated Learning

The Theory Into Practice Database (Kearsley, 2011) explains the two major components of situated learning. First, the “knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context, i.e. settings and applications that would normally involve that knowledge” (Kearsley, 2011, “Principles” section). This educational approach puts an emphasis on student learning through

realistic experiences: the research shows that this becomes a more meaningful and lasting educational experience.

The second component of situated learning is the understanding that “learning requires social interactions and collaboration” (Kearsley, 2011, “Principles” section). The situated learning approach, developed by Lave and Wenger in the 1990s, has increasingly been used in elementary education classrooms. Students involved in a community of practice with their peers will be more engaged in the learning, particularly when there is technology involved in the activities (Kearsley, 2011).

Benefits

In an elementary classroom setting, situated learning can be very beneficial. While teacher instruction is an important part of a student’s education, the students also thrive when given an opportunity to learn with and from their peers. According to Mason and Rennie (2006), “learning comes from the process of interacting, reflecting, and collaborating on how to do the task” (p. 22). Students building and facilitating relationships within the classroom develop lifelong skills for collaborating with peers. These skills will most likely be required of them later in life.

As Herrington (1999) notes, “Students learn to draw less on the teacher as the ‘fountain of knowledge’ and to distribute their cognition amongst a range of supports including their physical resources, computer-based tools, and each other” (p.11). For a classroom with a variety of technology tools, situated learning can be especially helpful in encouraging students to collaborate to solve authentic “real-world” activities. For example, students may work together to create, perform, and record a sample newscast after reading a novel. During a study of several diverse groups of elementary students in California and Maine, Cummins, Brown, and Sayers

(2007) found that students are more on task when provided with a wide variety of multimedia instructional opportunities.

Limitations

While technology does support the learning of concepts in true context, there is some concern about computer programs, which, while simulating a realistic environment, are still separated from reality (Herrington & Oliver, 1999). Students cannot always get a clear picture of how a concept may be viewed in the real world when using only a computer program.

Another limitation for the support of the situated learning approach in an elementary classroom is the fact that “a situated learning environment also provides authentic activities which are ill-defined—students find as well as solve the problems” (Herrington & Oliver, 1999, p. 4). While the goal is to allow students to lead and take control of their learning, some teachers of younger students may feel hesitant to turn over so much of the control to their students.

Elementary Education Uses

The situated learning approach lends itself well to the elementary classroom, and “commonly, Situated Learning is focused upon problem-solving skills and situations of peer-to-peer learning” (Mason & Rennie, 2006, p. 106). One example has Japanese elementary students creating maps using a program called SketchMap (Mirura, Ravasio, & Sugimoto, 2006). Students use tablet PCs to collaboratively create maps of their neighborhoods and upload them. Other students may access the maps and add to them. This project is an appropriate example of situated learning because it gives students a chance to collaborate on an activity that involves their surroundings. Students are learning important skills about creating and reading a map while in a realistic and authentic environment.

When considering that the two main notions of situated learning are social collaboration between students and knowledge presented in an authentic way, literacy work stations come to mind. Literacy work stations exemplify many aspects of situated learning, as will be discussed further in the following sections.

Literacy Work Stations

Literacy work stations are a learning method in classrooms during a language arts block. Typically, students are participating in literacy work stations while the teacher is instructing small groups through guided reading. Debbie Diller is an educator who has written many books on the practice of using literacy work stations. She explains work stations in the following way:

A literacy work station is an area within the classroom where students work alone or interact with one another, using instructional materials to explore and expand their literacy. It is a place where a variety of activities reinforce and/or extend learning, often without the assistance of the classroom teacher. It is a time for students to practice reading, writing, speaking, listening, and working with letters and words. (Diller, 2003, p. 2)

There are a variety of different work stations that can be utilized, including a listening station, a word work station, a writing station, a nonfiction station, or a fluency station. While some teachers may choose to have a separate technology station, each of these other stations lend themselves to extensive technology integration. For example, students could produce podcasts of Reader's Theater plays in the fluency station, or create a classroom newspaper in the writing station using a template from the internet.

Literacy work stations differ from traditional learning centers in that they are not just busy work meant for something students can do when they finish class work. Students are

responsible for their own learning rather than the teacher creating endless activities to complete (Diller, 2003). Students attend work stations daily, and in groups, so there is more connectivity between students and the work they are doing. As Diller (2003) says, it is an opportunity to teach students about enjoying the process of learning, without having to create a “product” every day.

Uses and Benefits

Literacy work stations are a good example of a situation where situated learning is evident. They are social in nature and encourage collaboration among students. They also give students the opportunity for choice, which allows them to choose from a list of appropriate and authentic activities that are meaningful to their lives. In accordance to the ideas behind situated learning, students must be able to have some choice in the activities that they are involved in. In a work station, a student is surrounded by language and text and all the many ways those are used in daily life. In this way, rather than spending time on isolated skills, students are immersed in reading text and can pick up a “better grasp of the skills and strategies needed to be a successful reader” (Kracl, 2011, p. 16).

In today’s society there are many different forms of communication, including both print and electronic mediums (Cummins et. al, 2007). Literacy work stations give students a chance to become experienced in reading a variety of text forms such as library books, electronic books, webpages, text messages, and more. In literacy work stations, students are provided with opportunities to become familiar with forms of interaction that they will be faced with in the real world.

Limitations

While there are many advantages and positive aspects to using literacy work stations in an elementary classroom, there are some limitations that should be addressed. One problem that needs to be addressed is management. As Diller (2003) explains, it is very important to set clear expectations for student behavior, as well as have students involved in making the rules and regulations. This method holds students accountable for staying on task and choosing appropriate activities. While there are bound to be some students who have trouble staying on task while participating in literacy work stations, if students are engaged in authentic activities, they will be much more likely to stay on task.

Another potential problem in using literacy work stations is a lack of technology support, either at home or at school. While technology is not necessarily vital to the success of literacy work stations, it is a big part of providing opportunities for students to collaborate in authentic activities. In schools with a high percentage of families with low socioeconomic status, there can be a significant gap of students having access to computers at home. Therefore, it is always necessary to provide students access to computers and other technology at school (Cummins et. al, 2007).

Situated Learning and Cooperative Learning

Situated learning encourages student collaboration in learning; literacy work stations lend themselves very well to this idea. Research shows that students learn so much from each other, particularly when they are encouraged to step up and begin to share their own knowledge with their peers. Grabe and Grabe (2007) expand on this by explaining, “As students interact, they acquire knowledge from one another and they learn from the process of trying to put their ideas into words to allow someone else to understand them” (p. 67). When reading and

comprehending text, an important skill to practice during literacy work stations, students need to be able to express their understanding of the text. Students may express their comprehension verbally to another student, or they may have the opportunity to show understanding through a multimedia project. For example, students could work together to create a comic and, using the many web tools available, retell a story they have just read.

Literacy work stations are also a chance to create cooperative yet diverse groups.

“Cooperative groups generally consist of two to five students and are often purposely made heterogeneous, mixed with respect to ability, gender, and ethnic groups. Cooperative groups provide a way to include students with special needs” (Grabe & Grabe, 2007, p. 326).

Technology can help students with special needs be on a more level playing field with their peers. For example, a student who lacks fine motor skills may use a computer to type and communicate during collaboration time. In a cooperative group, suddenly students become equals, everyone bringing their own strengths to the group, and students “work together to enhance their individual acquisition of knowledge and skills” (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996, p. 9).

Situating Learning Through Authentic Activities

As Lave and Wenger argue, learning should be “situated” and practiced in situations that are realistic (Kearsley, 2011). This is more easily achieved in literacy work stations with the use of technology. Technology, particularly the internet, allows for more open-ended exploration for students (Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2002). The authors go on to explain that “authentic activities comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time” (Reeves, et. al, 2002, p. 564). Students generally attend literacy work stations daily, so they are well suited for ongoing projects.

It is important to avoid using technology solely for knowledge level types of applications, as these are not authentic activities. According to studies done by Cummins et. al (2007), the “use of computers only for drill-and-practice negatively impacted academic achievement” (p. 95) in diverse student populations in California and Maine. Teachers should instead encourage students to use technology, such as laptops, digital cameras, or handheld devices, for more open-ended authentic activities. These activities can still be tied to state curricular standards, making them both an authentic and effective use of valuable classroom exploration time. For example, while studying cause and effect within literature, students can explore the cause and effect relationship that is present with real world decisions or problems and their consequences.

Conclusion

The situated learning approach can play a strong role in an elementary classroom, particularly in the form of literacy work stations. The combination of strong student collaboration and learning through authentic activities can provide a valuable learning experience for students. According to Harrington and Oliver (1999), several important aspects of a classroom where situated learning is occurring are scaffolding from teacher to student, collaboration, reflection, and assessment. These aspects are all very much present in literacy work stations. Students who are involved in classrooms like this are successful in becoming strong readers and writers. When the element of technology is included in literacy work stations, teachers are more able to include authentic activities that will give students a realistic understanding of reading and writing in the real world.

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