Jonathan Brown

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Facilitating Inclusive Education through Active and Collaborative Learning

Alice Udvari-Solner and Paula Kluth

Alive Udvari-Solner and Paula Kluth bring several, very interesting, perspectives on the modern classroom, how students learn, and how they should be taught. The most obvious idea that they make a case for is the one of an inclusive classroom. That is to say, a classroom that includes students of different levels of ability, culture, and learning styles.

The first tool they posit should be employed in inclusive learning is differentiated instruction. The basis of it is that students vary greatly, and so need to be taught in various ways. As one, can imagine, giving students individual instruction, while simultaneously teaching them in an inclusive classroom, can be a very difficult task. It seems at first like a contradiction; how can you teach all the students while also teaching them individually? Well, one solution Udvari-Solner offers is the Universal Design Process. It requires instructors to create complex plans before entering the classroom. The goal is to plan for multiple teaching approaches, so more easily facilitate flexibility and variability. Tomlinson (1995) defines differentiation by saying “In other words, a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, processing or making sense of ideas and to developing products” (19). The definition sums up what every teachers goal for their classroom should be.

The second element that Udvari-Solner and Kluth postulate to be necessary for a successful inclusive classroom is active learning. In his book "Professors are from Mars. Students are from Snickers" Ronald A. Berk says that the only way to really learn something is by " ... hearing, seeing, doing, smelling, feeling, tasting, inhaling, injecting and purchasing on credit ... " (McKeachie). The fact is that people just don’t remember most of what they see and hear. We are exposed to far too much stimuli to remember things that way. If we did we would experience sensory overload on a constant basis. Teachers need to be aware that all students need to be exposed to information in different ways, not to mention that individual students receive information better in a variety of ways. Udvari-Solner and Kluth wrote “Active learning involves putting students at the center of instruction and giving them opportunities to solve, explore, experiment try, create and invent” (20). Active learning is about letting the students get into the meat of the subject. It’s about not only letting them think, but encouraging them to question and be active about their questions.

Active learning flows naturally into collaborative learning. When students are encouraged to be active in the classroom and think for themselves, it’s only natural that they look to their peers for discussion and answers. People, even children, don’t like to be given answers. They like to seek them out, to find truth for themselves. Kluth and Solner put it this was “Opportunities to organize, clarify, elaborate, or practice information are engineered, and listening, disagreeing, and expressing ideas are as important as the ‘right answers’” (21).

The biggest problem with the writing is that it seems a little naïve in regards to the control that teachers have over the amount of material that they have to cover in a given time. When talking about teachers who claim to not have to time to teach actively (due to the amount of information that needs to be covered) they respond by saying “The truth, for these teachers, is that they can’t afford not to use active learning in their teaching if they want students to learn and remember and ever-increasing number of facts, figure, ideas and concepts” (22). Instead of answering the concern, which is based on time, they respond by talking about the effectiveness of the teaching strategy. The problem that teachers are required to cover a certain amount of material is never actually solved. It seems to just be pushed aside, as if teachers have any control over the amount of information they are required to teach to their students.

Active and Collaborative learning are powerful, potent tools in an inclusive classroom. It is well recognized that these methods increase the amount of information that students can learn. However, these methods do take more time, and are not always practical for teachers to implement.

Udvari-Solner, Alice & Kluth, Paula. “Facilitating Inclusive Education Through Active and Collaborative Learning.” Joyful Learning: Active and Collaborative Learning in Inclusive Classrooms. Corwin Press 2008. 17-23. Print.

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