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**Final Reflective Essay**

 When I enrolled in this course I was not sure what to expect. Like many other courses I have taken the title of the class and the course description only gave me a glimpse of what the course would have to offer. As I anxiously waited for the class to begin I began to develop my own theories about what I would be learning in this course. I wondered if it would be about how children learn in school, how they learned outside of school and possibly ways that adults continue to learn. As it turned out the class was about these things and more. In the following three pages I will address three important areas in which I have obtained knowledge and skills relating to this course. These skills include my ability to understand and apply learning theories, the importance of outside learning and how teachers’ learn.

My ability to understand and apply learning theories is one of the most important skills that I have obtained in this course. This class has provided me with an abundance of knowledge about learning theories. Although I know there are many more theories that exist, I am amazed at how much in-depth learning I have obtained from this seven week course.

The learning theories are not new to me. Prior to this course, I had heard of them in other classes, especially in my child development courses. However, for the most part, I was only able to retain the names of the theorists, but I could not remember what they were known for. As a result of this course I not only can remember their names, but I know exactly what each of them is known for and how their theories can be applied in education. I believe the important contributing factor to my learning of this topic was that the course covered a few topics in-depth rather than offering a little bit of knowledge about a lot of topics. This reminds me of the Lewis and Tsuchida article (1998) that we read for class. On page 50 of the article it talks about Japan having only has eight science topics, compared to an average of more than sixty-five topics in the United States. In Japan educators feel that fewer topics allows more time for hands-on exploration and understanding of each topic. This is the type of learning that I feel I have experienced in this course. Throughout the course we explored six different topics about learning and were presented with various experiences. Some of these experiences included exploring websites, having discussions with others in the class and thoroughly thinking about these skills and how they apply to real-life situations.

I believe that much of my learning can be contributed to John Dewey’s theories of learning. Dewey believed that learners needed to be active rather than passive participants in their own learning. Since this was an on-line class as a learner I was required to be active in my own learning. Dewey also believed that the teacher’s task was to provide conditions that stimulate thinking (Philips &Soltis, p.56). Each module that I experienced as a learner in this course provided conditions that stimulated my thinking. Whether it was through experiencing games on a website or reading various articles and then responding to the online group about what I had learned and how it would apply in my professional work. This type of active learning is in contrast to a traditional college course where the students are often passive in their learning; taking notes as the professor lectures.

 I also feel the knowledge that I have obtained in this course could be attributed the Gestalt theory. The Gestalt psychologists felt that humans learned by responding to meanings as they made intellectual connections. In other words, we learn by coming to “see” the link between certain ideas (Philips & Soltis, p. 36). As I mentioned earlier, my past experiences with learning theories left me void of retaining any of the knowledge that I had “learned.” Within days or weeks of being presented with the material, I would have to study in order to memorize the material for the exam. However, this course has been different, because as each module was completed, I could “see” the link between the ideas that were presented and how they apply in education. In many of the modules we were first presented with information through various readings. Then as learners we were able to “see” the link by exploring websites relating to the topic, having online discussions within our groups or by writing essays that required us to apply what we had learned. Since I was able to make these learning connections in each of the modules, I would feel confident taking an exam on this material with very minimal studying. I also feel that since I was able to “see” the connections between the theories of learning and how they can be applied in my professional work, I will be more likely to retain and utilize them in the future.

As a kindergarten teacher not only do I plan use this knowledge, but these skills combined with Dewey’s theories of learning also serve as a source of reassurance for me. I consider kindergarten to be different from the other grades in some ways. First, many children in this grade are experiencing school for the first time. Therefore, I need to provide many hands-on, meaningful and engaging activities to keep them focused and to develop each child’s learning potential. Second, although I have curriculum standards that I need to meet, I do not feel the pressure that teacher’s in the others grades feel to prepare the students for standardized tests such as the MEAP. As a result, there are times in my classroom when I spend more time on certain topics than I had planned. This often happens in science because the children are involved in hands-on activities and engaged in meaningful learning. As we move on to the next unit I am disappointed because we may not be able to cover the next topic as thoroughly as I would like. For example, this spring we spent a lot of time learning about how things grow. The children had the opportunity to plant bean seeds and grow grass. We also did various experiments such as using things other than water (coffee, pop, juice) to see how the plants would react to it. During this unit the children were very engaged and developed a wealth of knowledge about plants. However, the next unit was about insects and because the end of the year was approaching we briefly touched on this topic. This resulted in less meaningful activities and the students not becoming as engaged in the topic.

What I have learned about this after studying Dewey’s theories is that it is more important to engage the children in active learning opportunities, rather than trying to cover a lot of topics. Covering many topics often results in the children being passive learners, because there is not enough time for hands-on activities, which are more time consuming. I plan to use this knowledge in my professional work by not only continuing to provide hands-on learning opportunities, but to also increase the amount of active learning that is happening in my classroom.

Another important piece of knowledge that I obtained from this course is the importance of learning outside of the school environment. This type of learning allows for students to have real-life experiences that can’t be duplicated within the school. This type of learning is also a powerful way to engage students in socially constructed learning, as they interact with their parents or other people that are knowledgeable about the topic being studied. Once again, my learning about this topic can be contributed to John Dewey. During this module we were required to visit websites about museums. While visiting these websites I was actively engaged in my learning. I was engaged by playing various games or clicking on objects and reading facts about those objects. These engaging opportunities allowed me to experience what types of learning are available to students outside of school. I plan to apply this knowledge in my professional work by providing suggestions for outside of school learning experiences in my monthly newsletter to the parents. These learning experiences will correlate to the topics that we are covering that month.

 The last important piece of knowledge I obtained that I would like to mention is about how teachers learn. Many times the school district is focused on student achievement. When it comes to how teachers’ learn, professional development is often scheduled by the district as a way to meet their time requirements for professional development. Rather than considering how to best meet the needs of teachers so they can perform their job more effectively. If the school districts were to schedule more meaningful and effective professional developments, this would directly result in higher student achievement. After all isn’t this why professional development time was originally created? Unfortunately it is often times not being used effectively. Much of my learning on this topic can be linked to social constructivism. After reading the articles about how teachers learn, I was engaged in many meaningful discussions with other teachers in my group. These teachers also shared their opinions and what they had learned about this topic. Through these social interactions with one another I was able to construct new ideas and confirm some of my original thoughts. I plan to make use of this knowledge in my professional work by sharing what I have learned with my colleagues and the building principal. I feel that if more of us can work together in creating meaningful and engaging professional development, then this time will be more effectively utilized. If we consider how teachers’ learn when creating these opportunities, then teachers will be better able to use what they have learned in their classrooms.

 As this course comes to a close, I am leaving it with much more knowledge about learning than I have mentioned here and certainly more than when I began the course! I mentioned Dewey numerous times in this paper. I feel that much of what I have learned in this course directly correlates to Dewey’s theories. I guess this is why he is referred to as the “educational theorist” (Philips & Soltis, 2004).

**Works Cited**

Lewis, C. C., & Tsuchida, I. (1998, Winter). A lesson is like a swiftly
     flowing river. *American Educator,* 12-51.

Phillips, D. C., & Soltis, J. F. (2004). *Perspectives on learning*
     (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.