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**Cover Page Footnote**
Thanks to Bong Gee Jang, Ph.D.

# A Wood Comes Toward Dunsinane: The Synthesis of Traditional and Constructivist Methodologies

RANDALL KAPLAN

## Old Birnam Wood

When I was a sophomore in high school, my English teacher required each student in the class to memorize and recite a passage from *Macbeth*. I chose the Act 5, Scene 5 speech in which the eponymous antihero is horrified to realize that, despite all previous assurances from witches and apparitions alike, hell had indeed frozen over. Earlier in the play, Macbeth is told by a specter that he will never be vanquished "until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" (4.1.96–98). He interprets this to mean "never" as Birnam Wood refers to a forest a few miles away from his castle—which sits atop Dunsinane Hill—and how would a tree uproot itself and take the long walk uphill to his doorstep? But when Malcolm leads his army to Dunsinane, he instructs them to camouflage themselves with branches cut from the trees of Birnam Forest so that Macbeth won't be able to tell how many they are in number. Macbeth is shocked, of course, because when the specter told him to "[f]ear not, till Birnam wood / Do come to Dunsinane," he thought he was in the clear. But now he sees, to his horror, that "a wood / Comes toward Dunsinane" after all (5.5.43–45).

Memorizing this speech armed me with an alternative to expressions like "when pigs fly," "the twelfth of never," and, of course, "when hell freezes over." My locutionary arsenal now included "[when] Birnam wood do come to Dunsinane." To this day, whenever situations arise in which I'm asked if I plan on doing some particular thing and I don't merely want to say "never" but rather "it is highly unlikely yet possible and perhaps even inevitable," I have just the right phrase at my disposal. And I've become better at reciting and analyzing the passage over the course of time due to the fact that it's always there—in my mind, at my fingertips, at my disposal—for me to inspect anew.

## This Town *Is* Big Enough for the Both of Us

Constructivist and project-based strategies for learning have largely replaced Traditional, old-fashioned methods such as rote memorization and retrieval-based strategies... and justifiably so. In some cases, though, this supersession has been overweening; some Constructivist curricula have rejected Traditional styles if not in toto then at least bountifully. Using a dialectical prism to view the evolution of education, as both Jean Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky did with learning models (Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993, pp. 63–64), if the thesis is the Traditional system (created over a century ago), and the antithesis is The Age of Constructivism, enjoying its zenith now, then the desired synthesis must weave recitation and other mimetic exercises into project-based Constructivist curricula.

There is much value to be found in the methodologies of both Traditional and Constructivist formats. The Constructivist approach is being taken to its natural apex by educators such as Larry Rosenstock who have created Constructivist utopias like High Tech High in San Diego (Leibowitz, Lombroso, Ridley, & Whitely, 2016). Teachers in schools like these conduct project-based, interdisciplinary units of study in order to effectively prepare students for the type of world they will inhabit, a world whose economy will reward innovation and creativity over mere retention of information.

In such Constructivist institutions, students work in small collaborative groups to solve meaningful, ill-structured problems (open-ended problems with more than one solution) while teachers facilitate their self-directed learning. Experiential learning approaches—such as Anchored Instruction, Project-Based Science, and Problem-Based Learning—utilize the distributed expertise present in groups of intrinsically motivated people. Students bring their own strengths to the table and share in the construction of deep understanding.

This is all well and good. . .very good. . .extremely good. And the education community as a whole is very excited about the prospect of such schools proliferating and thriving. But the success of Constructivism doesn't have to (and should not) come at the expense of every Traditional methodology. Not all students have the tools they need to become expert learners, and not all students learn at the same rate. Without the proper tools in place, nothing can be constructed, especially not deep understanding built upon the integration of new and previously acquired knowledge. Previous knowledge is the fodder—the raw material—necessary for construction to even begin. Constructivism shies away from explicit, teacher-based instruction in the Traditional vein, but such instruction is sometimes a prerequisite for success in subsequent Constructivist activities. There might not be a time and a place for everything under the sun, but there certainly are times and places for Traditional strategies, strategies like... rote memorization and the repetitive processes necessary to achieve its goals.

Just because rote memorization and other mimetic activities have fallen into ill repute by virtue of their being associated with conservative models of education—such as those endorsed by the likes of E.D. Hirsch, Jr.—does not mean that the value and benefit of particular exercises associated with those models should be completely brushed aside. Hirsch (1997) claims that political progressivism, with its aim to treat all classes of citizens and students equitably, should logically demand a more Traditional education system as opposed to the student-led programs it usually endorses. Constructivist programs, according to Hirsch (1997), may have the opposite effect they desire: they may hinder and further impoverish disadvantaged students, whose intrinsic motivation may not be as strong as their privileged peers. If disadvantaged children are encouraged to follow their own interests, as student-based systems prescribe, they will not be able to "master the traditional culture" and "command its rhetoric," which are prerequisites to improving their socio-economic situations. In order to accomplish these necessary skills, disadvantaged students especially "should gain enough traditional knowledge to understand the worlds of nature and culture surrounding them." They should "gain the knowledge that leads to understanding, and master the traditional culture" (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 42–45). This is best accomplished via Traditional methodologies, Hirsch argues, whose lessons rely heavily upon memorization, recitation, and recall.

Lisa Delpit's critique of progressive education in her *Harvard Educational Review* essay "The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children" (1988) is even more vehement than Hirsch's. She claims that Constructivist techniques favor students of the majority culture and actually widen the achievement gap. She believes that Constructivist techniques (in which student learning is merely facilitated) deprive students of their teacher's expertise. She writes that minority students yearn for what they do not often get in their lives outside of school: form and structure. (Delpit, 1988, p. 287). Content delivery that includes the form and structure Delpit condones undoubtedly employs rote memorization and imitative strategies. Delpit writes that in a society that values freedom and autonomy of the individual, liberals mistakenly believe that making "rules or expectations explicit is to act against liberal principles, to limit the freedom and autonomy of those subjected to the explicitness" (Delpit, 1988, p. 284). Yet, Delpit insists, this is exactly what is needed.

No one in 2017 can legitimately argue as earnestly as Hirsch and Delpit did in 1997 against Constructivism as a whole. Educators have seen its increasingly edifying effects too many times over the past two decades to do such a thing. These days, extremists on either "side"—dogmatists who claim that Traditional or Constructivist methodologies must exist in exclusion of the other—are misguided. The two go together and must work in tandem to first give students the tools they need (via Traditional methods) and then to allow them to use those tools to build meaning for themselves (via Constructivist methods).

The mimetic activities of Traditional education can be of invaluable service in the humanities, arts, sciences, math, and language arts curricula. "Repeated retrieval [of information] enhances long-term learning" (Karpicke, 2012, p. 158) and makes that learning more meaningful. This claim has been borne out by studies in cognitive science (Nunes & Karpicke, 2015), not that cognitive science studies are needed to convince anyone of this deeply intuitive idea: of course dedicating time to memorizing information will facilitate future use of that information. In the 17th century, Francis Bacon made virtually the same claim when he wrote, "If you read a piece of text through twenty times, you will not learn it by heart so easily as if you read it ten times while attempting to recite from time to time and consulting the text when your memory fails" (Bacon, 1620, p. 143).

A synthesis of both Traditional and Constructivist systems of thought yields a best-of- both-worlds framework from which educators can draw to suit their purposes. Any polarization between the old and new systems is contrived;

they are not mutually exclusive. Education shouldn't be a case of *this town ain't big enough for the both of us*. When it comes to Traditional and Constructivist ideologies, the town is definitely big enough for the both of them.

## The House on [Your Street Here]

According to John Dewey (1910)—the preeminent, progressive educator/philosopher and, for all intents and purposes, the founder of Constructivism—, students should participate in workshop-type learning and demonstrate their mastery socially and creatively. Yet even Dewey recoiled against the excesses of certain extremists purporting to be his followers. Although he frowned upon the idea of rote memorization being the main focus of learning activities, he didn't spurn it outright. He believed, for example, that it is a "primary truth that the recitation is a place and time for stimulating and directing reflection, and that reproducing memorized matter is only an incident - even though a [sic] indispensable incident - in the process of cultivating a

thoughtful attitude" (Dewey, 1910, pp. 201–202). The knowledge and facts of a unit of study— the bits of information—are food for thought. They are the bites that need to be digested and turned into energy (i.e., understanding—in this culinary metaphor) before they can become wisdom. These facts, these bites, are means to an end. They are not goals but milestones, steps along the way. But these are, nonetheless, necessary and essential steps. Without having taken them, students will not have the necessary fodder with which to construct understanding.

Memorizing, reciting, and imitating have important roles to play in modern educational systems. Ohio State University Philosophy of Education professor Bryan Warnick writes that "[s]ome imitation can produce novel results" (Warnick, 2009, p. 115). Imitation can also "reconcile the value of imitative learning with the demands of critical reason" (Warnick, 2009, p. 12). Students can benefit from the synthesis of the most efficacious practices from all eras of educational philosophy. Rote memorization can be used to effectively acquire information; this information, in turn, enables students to more efficiently construct their own deep understandings.

Immanuel Kant, although he despised imitation in philosophical thought, admitted its usefulness in art and aesthetics, and found "a central place for [it] in his educational thought" (Warnick, 2009, p. 21). Kant describes imitation as "the cultivation of one's understanding, will, indeed, of

choice, according to the example of others" (Caygill, 1995, CJ §47). Kant distinguishes between imitation as mere copying and imitation as emulation—the copier is a thief while the emulator pits himself against the original creator in order to test his own mettle (Caygill, 1995, CJ §47). "In the latter case, the pupil's own talent and originality is stimulated by the example of genius, which thus 'arouses like ideas on the part of [the] pupil'" (Caygill, 1995, CJ §47).

With this in mind, I recently had my 9th grade students choose a writing assignment based on a vignette from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. They were to create pieces either about their names (based on "My Name") or about the house they lived in (based on the book's eponymous vignette). I asked them to use Cisneros's pieces as blueprints and to configure their own pieces so that they adhered as closely as they could to her formats. This emulative assignment turned out to be very satisfying for me, yielding as it did so many heartfelt, personal, and well-thought-out (not to mention well-structured) short essays. Completing the assignment helped many of my students develop a much higher degree of empathy for the narrator of the book, Esperanza, than they would have otherwise acquired. The assignment also enabled me to connect more deeply with my students, increasing my empathy for them. Having volunteers read their pieces out loud also went a long way toward improving the classroom atmosphere—making it feel safer, more sacred, and more communal.

Donna Gorrell (1987), paraphrasing Piaget, writes that "[w]ith use, imitated forms become internalized, incorporated into cognitive structures. By the act of imitating, the learner interiorizes the model, causing the formation of images" (Gorrell, 1987, p. 54; Piaget, 1962, p. 77). This is another benefit of a writing exercise such as the one described above. When students "copy" or emulate a master writer's structure, that structure is internalized by the students, much more so than if they were to study the structure only from the outside. Aristotle, in his *Poetics, Part IV*, writes that "the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood" and that people are "the most imitative of living creatures. . . . [T]hrough imitation [people learn their] earliest lessons; and it is also natural to delight in imitations" (Nahm, 1948, p. 6). The ultimate goal of imitation, recitation, and memorization is twofold: emulation and parody. Both require a keen discernment, a sharp and close reading. In order to emulate something, either to spoof it or to honor it, one must truly grasp its essence. Warnick writes that "[i]mitation can communicate a positive message or a negative message; it can communicate

worship and esteem or ridicule and disdain. It can open up a moment of contemplation" (Warnick, 2009, p. 101). Iambic meter in poetry is called the "lampooning measure, being that in which [early poets] lampooned one another" (Nahm, 1948, p. 6). Imitation is an essential element in the creation of satire, spoof, and parody—endeavors that require students to use higher-order thinking and to operate at the apex of Bloom's Taxonomy pyramid.

Not quite as far back as Aristotle, Vygotsky advocated a social learning theory in which he claimed that cognitive development could be accelerated through proper cultivation. He considered different social contexts in an effort to universalize his theories that development is a social process stimulated by others, both peers and adults, who provide scaffolding and ensure that the learner is operating within his "zone of proximal development," and that cognitive conflict drives development. Albert Bandura went further, blatantly stating that children learn through imitation. James Mark Baldwin (1906) transferred the idea of imitation from physical and lower cognitive realms to intellectual and learning domains, writing, "[Imitation] enables me to pass from my experience of what you are, to an interpretation of what I am; and then from this fuller sense of what I am, back to a fuller knowledge of what you are" (Baldwin, 1906, p. 323). This capsulizes the main goal of both literary analysis—merging the horizons of reader and text, à la Hans-Georg Gadamer (Fry, 2012, p. 31)—and most moral education (gaining empathy for the other), not to mention fulfilling three of the six facets of understanding (Perspective, Empathy, and Self-Knowledge) as put forth by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in their seminal work *Understanding by Design* (2005, ch. 4).

By getting inside the structure of any particular piece of writing—by inhabiting it, memorizing it, and really coming to know it intimately—students become much better equipped to interpret the text meaningfully. Because writing is, among other things, crystallized thought, students are able to merge horizons with authors who have translated their own thoughts into words. This hermeneutical miracle "isn't just a bridge across a historical gulf—because it can also come into play across a social or cultural gulf" (Fry, 2012, p. 31). Nurturing empathy in students is one of a teacher's most consequential responsibilities. And the act of understanding texts, and by extension texts' authors, "doesn't always concern what Gadamer would call merging *historical* horizons. It's also about merging...interpersonal horizons" (Fry, 2012, p. 31).

## Mend Your Speech a Little

Last fall, I gave my AP Lit students a chance to earn extra credit. The assignment was to memorize a line or two from *King Lear*. They had to do two things with their excerpts: 1) insert them dramatically into conversations outside of school, and 2) insert them subtly into conversations outside of school. They then had to recite their excerpts in front of the class and recount what happened on the two occasions they employed the quote with family, friends, or whomever else. Although the students initially balked at the assignment, not being used to memorizing and reciting things, those who did it reported their experiences with enthusiasm. They found the memorization useful; it added to their ability to relate to (merge horizons with) both Shakespeare and his characters (ancient kings, dukes, earls, and members of royal families). One student reported having told his erudite uncle who was playfully giving him a hard time about not immediately solving a riddle he'd given him, "Mend you speech a little / Lest it mar your fortunes." Several students employed the famous "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" in their daily interactions with siblings and parents. And, of course, several reticent students walked around all week with "I cannot heave my heart into my mouth" at the ready. One student even had the inspiration to utter Cornwall's sadistic "Out, vile jelly!" while making a PB&J. The assignment not only added depth to their understanding of *King Lear* but added joy and intellectual humor to their lives. If my students memorized their one or two lines as well as I memorized that Act 5, Scene 5 speech from *Macbeth*, their snippet of Shakespeare will be available to them for further contemplation forevermore.

Echoic exercises gift students with permanent knowledge, knowledge they can continue to hold in their minds, knowledge they can examine at will over time, knowledge that will enhance both their experiences in the classroom in the short term and their experiences in life in the long term—whether professional, social, familial, or romantic. This can be implemented and accomplished by the synthesis of Constructivist tenets with Traditional education models. Constructivist simulations of workplace scenarios and project-based learning most certainly should dominate the educational landscape. But dedicated rote memorization will cement knowledge and attach it to the wisdom and understanding achieved through Constructivist methods. The means (knowledge gained through mimetic activities) is necessary to achieve the end (wisdom or deep understanding achieved through student-based activities). For all of the

reasons stated above, rote memorization should be extended from recitation to written assignments and should include prose as well as poetry in English—not to mention historical documents in Social Studies and Civics, excerpts from scientific papers in Science, and mathematical proofs in Math. Bringing back Traditional education methodologies in order to instill structural integrity in students' writing, whatever the content area, is necessary.

Recitation requires memorization—not the type of memorization that allows a student to summarize or do moderately well on a quiz, but the type that effects mastery of the material. Memorization and recitation go hand in hand with emulation, mirroring, and modeling. Modeling of comprehension strategies by teachers leads to students being able to model their own writing on a particular text's aesthetic, form, or content. If teachers can show students how to read, think, and learn successfully and comprehensively by modeling thoughts, predictions, questions, and ways to link texts to prior knowledge—through GRC (Guided Reading Comprehension) strategies such as Think-Alouds, QARs (Question–Answer Relationships), QtA (Questioning the Author), GRP, Intra-Act, and DR–TA (Directed Reading–Thinking Activity) (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2014, ch. 7)—, then students can learn to write successfully and comprehensively by modeling their own writing on particular texts—through WTL strategies such as POVGs (Point Of View Guides) and RAFT Writing (Role, Audience, Form, Topic) (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2014, ch. 9). The most extreme forms of this modeling are outright imitation, emulation, or parody—as portrayed in *The House on Mango Street* assignment above.

Emmer & Evertson (2013) suggest an exercise in which students work in pairs to rewrite fairy tales in the style of a specific author. Students assist each other in identifying the features of the author's style they wish to emulate. They help each other with outlines and revision, but each student ultimately writes his own piece (Emmer & Evertson, 2013, p. 111). Experimenting with styles can help students to master certain writing skills and eventually find their own voices, just as learning to sing or play others' songs helps singers and musicians develop first mastery and later their own styles. The procedure works well for all forms of literature, not just fairy tales: poems, parables, and other stylized pieces, especially.

Becoming a master emulator or parodist takes time. After memorizing or copying a passage of a text verbatim, the next step might be a simple Copy Change exercise in which students use an existing text as a template for their own, new text. Emulating an established and successful framework ac-

tually frees students' creativity. Imitation is a heuristic that serves to aid innovation. What seems limiting at first is actually freeing. Focus is freeing, as formalist poet Robert Frost implied by equating writing free verse poetry—in which there are no structural or format rules and no rhyme patterns—to playing tennis without a net.

In this spirit, after discussing whether or not *The Pearl*, by John Steinbeck, qualifies as a parable (as Steinbeck implies in his introduction to the book), I discussed story morals with my 9th-grade students. I had them choose morals (as in *moral of the story*) and construct their own short parables to "prove" those morals. To prepare for the exercise, we read and analyzed several famous parables. Students modeled their own pieces on one of these parables. And true to Frost's quip, by having a proper framework for their writing, students were able to write more freely.

Fisher and Frey (2013) point out that "students think about the content while they are writing. In fact, students often report that they understand the content a bit better once they have written about it. [They] have had more than one student tell [them], 'I didn't know what I thought until I wrote it down'" (Fisher & Frey, 2013, p. 97). This echoes the sentiment of many authors, including Joan Didion, who explains the reason she writes as being "entirely to find out what [she's] thinking, what [she's] looking at, what [she] see[s] and what it means" (Didion, 1976, *NY Times Magazine*). Fisher and Frey also say that "[w]riting [one's] reactions down helps [one] remember the thoughts of the author" (Fisher & Frey, 2013, p. 49). If exercises like POVGs and QtAs can help young writers get "under the skin" of a character, as suggested by Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz (2014), then mimetic writing can help young students get under the skin of an author—or at least of the narrator of the author's piece. And writing down passages verbatim from a masterfully constructed text can certainly aid in the process, in much the same way that writing down one's own thoughts can help one understand oneself much more.

To this end, I had my students present portfolios of their annotations for *Passing*, the Harlem Renaissance novel by Nella Larsen. These portfolios amounted to students' "greatest hits" annotations, two each from the categories of characterization, conflict, and mood. One of the columns for each entry required the transcription of the excerpt they were annotating. These were to be written or typed out verbatim. The result—as in the *King Lear* memorization and recitation assignment—was that students where able to assimilate and understand the text more deeply, especially the excerpt they were analyzing.

## The Third Language: Synthesism

The skill of memorization should be fostered in English students for the purposes of reciting not only excerpts of literature but rhetorical devices, types and structures of essays, grammar rules, and more. To have complex information at one's fingertips and completely at one's disposal is impressive and useful. Being able both to speak about information confidently and to write it down flawlessly results in being able to speak and write *about* it, which allows cognition and analytic reasoning to operate at the highest intellectual level.

When I teach *Lord of the Flies* I like to have my students cast the rebellious actions of the stranded teenagers—who are clearly based on schoolchildren from 1950s Great Britain—into a modern mold (they have to come up with what Ralph standing on his head is akin to—last year it was breaking into a Running Man dance or Dabbing). I also have them translate the argot of these characters into modern day parlance. In so doing, I ask them to memorize exclamations from the book—stuff like "Wacco," "Wizard," and "Smashing"—and to use these terms in their lives outside of school à la my *King Lear* assignment. When I want to glean the meaning of the antiquated slang words from *Lord of the Flies*, I translate them into the 1980s jargon I grew up with. I find it entertaining for me and edifying for my students—in the sense that they can better connect with the material—to hear these expressions and words in a "third" language, the language of present day teenagers. My hope is that by assimilating language verbatim, students' readings of texts will become more fluent.

My own "readings" of certain operas, for example, have become more fluent via memorization. I am a proponent of opera being performed in the language of its audience. I am in the minority on this issue, but there is much historical precedent—from Mozart to Poulenc— involving the approach. Luckily, there are first-rate opera companies that have performed and recorded standard repertory in English. So, for example, I can listen to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* ad nauseam in English, memorizing parts of the libretto in the process. Then, when I see and hear a performance of the masterpiece sung in Italian, I no longer have to glance at the supertitles to understand intellectually what's going on. I have bridged my intellect to my emotions by memorizing the story and associating the music with the libretto. In much the same way, deeper, more enduring, and more complex understandings of characters, plays, novels, and poems are possible when mimetic routines are in the mix.

The experiential learning practices of Constructivism fa-cilitate higher-level thinking and transference of understanding. But there is no reason to think that the mimetic practices of Traditional education styles cannot be incorporated. It is not an all or nothing proposition; a curriculum doesn't have to be either Traditional or Constructivist. The two methodologies are not mutually exclusive but rather a thesis and antithesis. Teachers and curriculum designers should allow for a synthesis of the two. Rote memorization, imitation, and many other mimetic activities are so obviously efficacious in situations that call for their employment. Educators must acquire as many useful tools for their playbooks as they can.

Ten or twenty years ago, the "specter" of Constructivism might have convinced us that we would not be reintroducing rote memorization, mimetic writing, imitation, and recitation into our curricula "until / Great Birnam Wood" came "to high Dunsinane Hill." Well, "[n]ow a wood / Comes toward Dunsinane." And the wood should be let (back) in.

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