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Active learning: who is saying what and why?

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Background

An active learning discourse permeates educational research literature and current educational policy from the early years through to higher education across a number of countries.   This paper begins by tracing the active learning discourse evident in Curriculum for Excellence 3 to 18 (SEED, 2004), a developing curriculum policy in Scotland, where active learning is explicitly addressed in terms of definition and pedagogical implications within the context of early years settings, and implicit, though much less distinctive, throughout the remaining years. Active learning might be considered to be closely aligned to the discourses of 'personalisation', 'individualisation', and 'responsibilisation' of education (Ball, 2008, p.204) where the individuals are being encouraged to take more responsibility for learning and consequently for any associated failure to do so. The paper then seeks to address the lack of clarity surrounding the definition of active learning in much of the research literature. Active learning is not a new or innovative discourse, however, given its resurgence and prominence in current policy, the development of clarity in professional understanding regarding its meaning and pedagogical implications is vital in order to support good educational practice.

Research Questions

Research Aim

This paper seeks to explore this active learning discourse as it is presented and discussed in a selection of literature from a range of educational settings.

Research Questions

How is active learning defined?

What are the associated pedagogical implications in learning and teaching?

What are the issues surrounding the implementation of an active learning approach?

Methods

A range of tools will be drawn from literature to facilitate interpretation of the data. An analysis of current educational policy will be undertaken to explore the explicit or underlying discourse of active learning. An understanding of policy as process (Ozga, 2000) and as text will enable us to explore how the policy is interpreted and enacted within different settings (Ball, 2008).

The literature search will identify a range of texts which explicitly discuss the active learning approach. Themes pertinent to the research questions will be identified and examined using the definition offered by Watkins et al. (2007) underpinned by a constructivist epistemology in order to address intended outcomes.

Frame

The definition of active learning offered as a framework for analysis in this paper is three fold: behavioural, cognitive and social (Watkins et al, 2007). This definition is underpinned by a constructivist epistemology (Mayer, 1998 in Watkins et al, 2007). There are various conceptions of

constructivism (Larochelle et al, 1998), however, within education, and specifically relevant to the framework definition used here, two branches are most evident, namely cognitive constructivism and social constructivism (Phillips, 2000). Within these conceptions the focus is on individual construction of knowledge and understanding as well as that constructed through interaction with others (Fosnot, 1996). Learners are active constructors of knowledge and understanding and meaning making is central to learning (Simons, 1997 in Watkins, 2007).

Research findings

Expected Outcomes

This research has a dual purpose: firstly to inform the educational community, in particular practitioners, working to implement change in the curriculum, and secondly to provide a framework for further research.

Specific intended outcomes include:

·   To promote clarity in understanding of the active learning discourse.

·   To enable practitioners to implement an informed and coherent active learning approach.

·   To foster a more critically reflective discussion of policy discourse.

·   To develop a framework for empirical research into teachers' perceptions of, and pedagogical practice in active learning for the primary and secondary education sector.