

The Association for Constructivist Teaching

September 2013 Newsletter, v. 4., n. 1

From the President:

Dear ACT friends and colleagues,

I am very excited to be writing for this issue of our newsletter. There are two reasons for my excitement, so let me get right to the point.

Jane Broderick, as usual, has done an outstanding job of creating a first-class product. This newsletter provides you exciting information such as interviews with board members, updates on our journal, and a look at publications by our members. Additionally, there is a feature from the field. After reading this issue, you will know why I am so proud of our newsletter.

The second reason for my excitement is our annual conference in October in New York City. The conference begins with the pre-conference on Wednesday, October 17th; preconference activities include visits to Constructivist schools. The conference runs through the 18th and 19th. We will host the conference at the Museum of Mathematics in New York City. This unique venue adds to our goal of being the “destination” for knowledge about the Constructivist movement. Besides traditional breakout sessions, this conference will feature “Museum Expeditions.” These are sessions which will use museum exhibits as the focus of the session. This type of experience certainly lends itself to great applications of the Constructivist philosophy. Adding to our great lineup of presentations will be our two keynote speakers. John Adam, our keynote speaker on Friday, October 18th, is a noted mathematician and astronomer. He has written extensively on the beauty of mathematics. On Saturday, October 19th, Cathy Fosnot will be our keynote speaker. Cathy, a founding member of our organization, is an internationally known author, researcher, and educator. For an exact listing of sessions and for more information on the conference, please go to our web site: <http://www.constructivistassociation.org/>. Also, feel free to contact me: jpelech@ben.edu.

This newsletter and conference are big sources of enthusiasm for me, and I hope that you also feel my enthusiasm. Hope to see you at the conference.

James Pelech, Ed.D.

President, Association for Constructivist Teaching

If your colleagues have not received this newsletter, please encourage them to join ACT online at: www.constructivistassociation.org

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BOARD MEMBER INTERVIEW *with Carolyn Black*, Principal, University of Houston Charter School; cfblack@uh.edu

By Jane Tingle Broderick, ACT Newsletter / Blog editor

JTB: Can you share a bit about your background and what led you into your chosen profession?

CB: I had always been interested in education. I was a high school teacher and taught home economics in a school where there was a Child & Family Studies program where you could teach children and childcare providers. I fell in love with it and wanted to learn more. So, I went back to school at Texas Women's University, where I earned my PhD and focused my research on children's understanding of death.

Upon graduating from Texas Women's University I taught at the University of Arkansas and then at San Jacinto College, near Houston, before teaching at the University of Houston at Clearlake. It was during the period in this latter position where I started taking classes with Rheta DeVries and completing an internship. I found the theory about learning, development, social development made so much sense.

JTB: Can you share about your research focus?

CB: Over time I continued to stay connected to Rheta as I entered into doing research on beginning teachers who were discouraged coming out of school into real classrooms. They were not getting to show their competence. I interviewed two sets of teachers for two years and learned that they weren't supported to be innovative. I realized I wanted to be a principal to implement these things I was learning so I could support teachers better.

In 1997 the University of Houston opened a Charter School for Kindergarten through fifth grade, with a goal of focusing on constructivist practices. I was the only one with the background and credentials in constructivism and was lucky to become the first principal. I have remained in this position for just over 17 years!

We had to establish ourselves. It is a small school that has been able to fit within the charter school system and the university structure. I am able to lead and assist teachers in each class, and encourage teachers to engage in innovative practices that involve teacher research.

Rheta DeVries implemented research at our site and we house samples here in "*The Rheta DeVries Reading Room.*"

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Currently I am doing research with a dance instructor. When the dance instructor from the university came with her students to teach some of ours we learned she is very constructivist in her approach. We planned a science – dance curriculum. I find that artists of any ilk have a more constructivist bent.

We try to implement opportunities for children to create and construct knowledge through movement around themes in science. Some boys in the fifth grade created a really exciting dance showing how hydropower turns into electricity. They act it out and dance it out, using body, time, space to apply the basics of force and motion. The kindergarten and first grade children are dancing about concepts of recycling. They use music, which we have found to be most reflective for their learning and constructing knowledge processes. Others are focusing dances on the attracting and repelling of poles; on crystals, and growing from seeds to a plant.

In recent years we were also involved in a Storytelling Project in which we collaborated with Karen Capo of Rice University, in Houston and Patsy Cooper from Queens College, NY. We were part of their pilot group and currently we have teachers who are mentors and residents in the project.

We have many other opportunities through collaboration across the University of Houston. Here on campus there is also a STEM project called STEP. Five of our teachers have training through this group. We have also collaborated with the speech therapy program, screening programs, the optometry clinic. On this campus there is a culture in which we help each other out.

JTB: Can you tell us about the ways you have been involved in service?

I was on the Board for the Communication Disorders Program on campus for three years. I have been a mentor to high school seniors in a program to get them to college, meeting with them in their junior and senior years. One of these students went on to attend college here at the University of Houston.

JTB: Anything else you would like to add?

I love my job and continue to be joyful as I continue to learn. I am committed to be a participant and facilitator with all at the school, at all levels, among children, teachers, administrators, interns, and parents. I love the community we have developed where I am privileged to be along on adventures with all students such as the 4th grade field trip to an historic site in Texas, or the 5th grade geological expedition to a rock cavern. Each year we have a senior's night where graduates return with friends.

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JOURNAL UPDATE

Amy Malkus reports that an issue of the Constructivist is to be published in October. Her vision for the journal is to try and move to publishing twice a year. Please submit articles for our next publication.

- Any members who would like to serve as reviewers can please contact Amy so that their names can be added to our list of reviewers: malkus@etsu.edu
- We ask our members to please submit articles and encourage colleagues to submit! Our goal is to build to publishing bi-annually, and build from there.
- Contact Amy with a proposal or submission advice: malkus@etsu.edu

NEW PUBLICATIONS *by ACT Members:*

Kroll, L.R. (2013). Early childhood teacher preparation: Essential aspects for the achievement of social justice, *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 34:1, 63-72.

Branscombe, N. A.; Burcham, J. G.; Castle, K.; Surbeck, E.; with Dorsey, A. G.; and Taylor, J. B. (2014). *Early Childhood Curriculum: A Constructivist Perspective, 2nd edition*. New York: Routledge. ISBN 9780415895279, 368 pages.

Kamii, C. (2013). Physical-knowledge activities: Play before the differentiation of knowledge into subjects (Chapter 3). In *Advances in Early Education and Day Care*, Volume 17 (pp. 57-72), *Learning Across the Early Childhood Curriculum*, edited by Lynn E. Cohen and Sandra Waite-Stupiansky.

Send info on your current publications as soon as they are in print to: broderic@etsu.edu

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FROM THE FIELD: *Introducing ideas and activities from ACT Members in the field*

Contributed by: Jennifer Strange, Pedagogista, Adjunct Professor at Webster University, NAREA Board Member, and Early Childhood Consultant, St. Louis, MO; Julie Albertson, Director and Pedagogical Coordinator for Community Day School and Christian School for the Young Years, Cape Girardeau, MO.

Documentation as a Tool to Increase the Visibility of Children with Special Rights

How can visible documentation support each child as capable, powerful and full of potential – especially children who may be dealing with social, emotional, cognitive and/or physical issues? This was one of the questions Jennifer Strange, an early childhood pedagogista and professor, encouraged Julie Albertson, an intern in the Graduate Certificate for Pedagogical Coordination in the Reggio Emilia Approach Program, to consider with her and other teachers during Julie's year-long internship at the Maplewood Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center in St. Louis, MO.



Jennifer Strange is an early childhood consultant and professor experienced in constructivist practice and in the Reggio Approach to education. Jennifer serves as a pedagogical coordinator or, pedagogista, at the MRH ECC, a diverse urban school for children ages three through eight years old. Along with Brenda Fyfe, Webster University Dean of Education, Jennifer has been involved in developing a graduate certificate regarding the role of the pedagogista in a partnership that includes Webster University (St. Louis, MO), Reggio Children and the Municipal Infant-Toddler and Preschools (Reggio Emilia, Italy), and Maplewood Richmond Heights School District (St. Louis, MO). Julie Albertson was the first person to receive this graduate certificate. Julie is a pedagogical coordinator for two early childhood centers in Cape Girardeau, MO, which her family has owned and operated for 40 years. The schools provide year round, full day programs for children birth through 5 years of age. They currently serve over 200 families in their community. The teachers at the schools have been studying the Reggio Approach for the past 20 years and have been in dialogue with Jennifer for the past six years.

The courses and internship for completing this certificate concerning the role of the pedagogista focuses on social constructivism, negotiated learning, creation of aesthetic and inspiring educational environments, expressive languages of communication, applied research and visible documentation.

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While these were all significant topics of learning for Julie, during her studies and particularly during her year as Jennifer's intern, the issue of visibility in regards to children with special rights became of particular importance to both intern and pedagogista. Jennifer had already been working with teachers in creating visible documentation of children with special rights and strongly believes this can support greater understanding in and respect for the potential and capability of each child. As Julie discussed the experiences of children with special rights from her own early childhood center in Cape Girardeau, Jennifer suggested they collaborate on a visible presentation to share with a larger audience. The objectives for such a presentation were to create a dialogue regarding the value of visible documentation in relation to the learning experiences of children with special rights/needs; to promote inclusion of children with special rights/needs and their families; and to help construct a new image of the child through careful observation and analysis of visible documentation.

These stories concerned children experiencing a range of challenges including autism, deafness, behavior issues, and speech development. Close observation, reflection, and dialogue about each of these children resulted in documentation of children's struggles, relationships, capabilities and successes. In presenting their work to colleagues, Julie and Jennifer noticed people visibly moved by these children and their stories, creating a powerfully thoughtful and active dialogue between them and the participants. In fact, many participants made connections to their own personal experiences in working with all children. As a result, Jennifer and Julie are now collaborating on further research and resultant writing concerning the importance of visibility for children of special rights.



"At school, I can fly high to the sky."
Piper, age 3, diagnosed hard-of-hearing/deaf from birth, flourishes in a constructivist language rich environment.



"Elijah has become a leader in our classroom. He is drawn towards building--whether it is building marble tracks with a small group or building with the natural materials such as sticks, rocks, and tree blocks. His oral language skills have amazed us--on a recent walk through the woods he told an elaborate story about deer, their tracks and where they go. He not only captivated his peers but also us as his educators."

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In the recently published third edition of *The Hundred Languages of Children* by Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini and George Forman, the chapter “The Inclusive Community” by Ivana Soncini has proved be particularly valuable to Julie and Jennifer in their collaborative work regarding children with special rights. In this chapter, Soncini—a member of the Pedagogical Coordinating Team of the Intuzione Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy-- explains the value and importance of documenting and sharing observations of the child with special rights:

It is extremely important that we document what happens at school for the children with special needs and share observations with their families. We need to produce photographs of the children in the educational context, images of how the other children relate with their child. Very often, there are certain things the parents are afraid to ask the teachers about their child—for example, how the other children view their child. Yet they are imagining what goes on and how the other children deal with their child. Very often they imagine a negative situation, and this is why they are afraid to ask. Our goal is to give the families the possibility to construct a new image of their child.

Rheta DeVries, a leader in the constructivist education movement, said that the first principle of constructivist teaching is “to think about how children are thinking and feeling.” Jennifer and Julie are continuing to deeply consider how all children are thinking, feeling and learning but, in particular, they are committed to making visible the thoughts, feelings and learning of children who are too often invisible. Soncini supports this idea of observation and documentation that can also result in visible documentation:

Work with a child who has special rights is considered to be a shared educational task involving the parents, the child’s classroom teachers and the *pedagogista*. This means that, like all our work with children, we begin with observation and documentation. Observation and documentation are always fundamental, but they are of particular benefit with regard to children with special rights (*The Hundred Languages of Children*, Third Edition).

Through this shared work, Julie and Jennifer have experienced the use of visible documentation of children with special rights in developing the support of:

Belief in the potential and capability of each child

- Valuing careful observation and documentation to honor each child through the practice of teacher as researcher
- Honoring a wide variety of children’s expressions as an important means of communication
- Recognizing the individual within the group experience as well as recognizing the groups understanding concerning each child
- Participation of the child, family and teachers - “Participation gives value to and makes use of the hundred languages of children and of human beings. Participation generates and nurtures the feelings and culture of solidarity, responsibility and inclusion” (from *Indications Preschools and Infant Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia*).

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Finally, Ivana Soncini says this about constructivism, documentation and children with special rights:

I believe that children with disabilities have the right to live in a school that allows them to intersubjectively construct a positive representation of self—a representation that is in continuous evolution. When we refer to the philosophy of observation, to the process of documentation, we also refer to constructivism, in which knowledge is built through interaction with others.

The Story of Piper and Elijah

The story of Piper and her brother, Elijah, both of whom were diagnosed hard of hearing/deaf from birth, was one of several stories made visible in their presentation. Elijah and Piper's mother, Rachel, had been driving the children two hours a day each way for two years to attend a private school for the deaf. After two years of this lifestyle the family was feeling tired and stressed. The children started seeing a local speech therapist, LSLS Cert AVT/SLP, who was adamant that children with hearing loss needed good hearing/speaking peers in order to flourish. She introduced the family to Community Day school and the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. After much research and visiting the school, Rachel, enrolled both children in the school. There was a strong collaboration and commitment between the mother, teachers, speech therapist and director to support the children in this new environment.

Classroom teacher Jessica Job said, "At first we didn't know what to expect, we never had a child with hearing loss in our classroom before. We were unsure of how the children would adjust to one another, not only Elijah and Piper but also our other children. When they first joined our class they seemed shy and unsure of our environment and expectations. They entered the classroom rigid, expecting a very structured routine. At first Elijah was very protective of Piper. He was constantly checking on her and not leaving her sight--Piper was Elijah's security. After a while they began to branch off from one another. Elijah and Piper have become their own people."

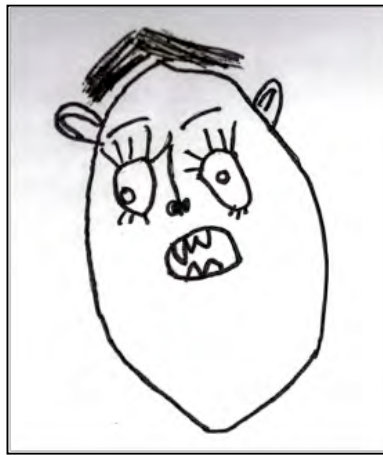
After six months in the classroom Rachel noticed a drastic improvement in their speech, language, and all around ability to communicate. She said, "Learning to listen in noise is a challenge for Elijah and Piper, but it is also a part of life. They are learning to really key in on their environment, social and emotional cues of others, and develop lasting friendships along the way. Because of the Reggio Emilia approach, they are learning to be self-sufficient, which is what I wanted for them from the start. The school is their tool and the children are the driving force to their enrichment."

Rachel and Jessica collaborated with Julie and Jennifer to include this story in their presentation. In presenting this work to colleagues, people were visibly moved by these children and their stories, creating a powerfully thoughtful and active dialogue between them and the participants.

Jennifer and Julie appreciated the opportunity to share their work on visible documentation at the 2012 ACT Conference.

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The drawings are self portraits the children made of themselves.



A quote from Jessica, the classroom teacher, “Piper has become more independent in the classroom, not relying on Elijah's help. She is intrigued by various expressive languages, such as painting and working with clay. She is also beginning to talk openly and freely with both peers and adults.”

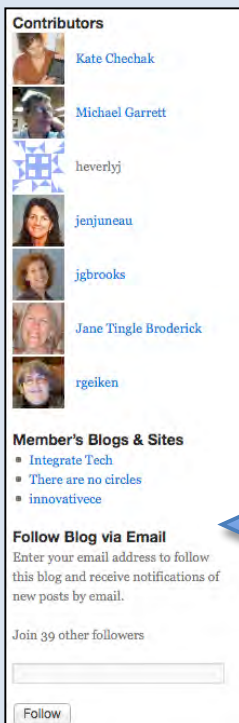
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COMMITTEE REPORT

Conference Committee

Conference Chair Joanne Falinski and Jackie Grennon-Brooks – News on this in our next newsletter & in our Blog Updates: <http://constructivistblog.wordpress.com/>

Conference Program Committee

- Jim Pelech and Jennifer Thompson
- The 2013 program for the preconference and conference at MOMATH in NYC is available on our website: www.constructivistassociation.org

Communications Committee

- **Newsletter / Blog Editor:** Jane Broderick; broderic@etsu.edu
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- **Bloggers:** Jennifer Thompson, Jackie Grennon-Brooks, Mike Garrett, Kate Chechak; and Jane Broderick posting the ACT Board Member Interviews and ACT Updates;
 - *The Newsletter:*
 - Publishes in PDF format the ACT Board Member Interviews, From the Field articles, and updates on ACT committees and other business
 - Is sent to members, as well as being posted in an archive on our website's members' only page.
 - The Blog publishes the ACT Board Member Interviews, From the Field articles, President Updates; and blogs on technology in education, elementary science, and science.
 - Only members can be blog authors; blog content will be reviewed by our blog editors: zmdg11@goldmail.etsu.edu & broderic@etsu.edu

Membership Committee

- **Chair:** Ryan Nivens; nivens@etsu.edu
- New members continue to register! We have 67 current members whose memberships are not expired. This includes the 10 people with lifetime memberships. 20 people's memberships are due for renewal at the time of the conference or the month after
- Pay for membership online and encourage your friends to join our group: www.constructivistassociation.org

Thank you all for your support in the work of ACT ~ the ACT Board

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Our Mission: is to enhance the growth of all educators and students through identification and dissemination of effective constructivist practices in both the professional cultures of teachers and the learning environments of children. It is also to advance educators' understanding of Piaget's constructivism as a scientific theory that explains how human beings construct knowledge and moral values.

Membership: is open to anyone who is interested in the field of education. ACT Members are classroom teachers, administrators, supervisors, consultants, college and university personnel, students, parents and retired educators. They live all over the USA and in Mexico, Japan, Australia, Canada, Brazil, and China.

Benefits of Membership...

THE ACT QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER ... interviews, articles on practice, and book reviews

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST...An educational e-journal and journal archive

ANNUAL CONFERENCE...discounted registration fee and early notice of call for presenters

AFFILIATION...with an association committed to supporting you. To join, please fill out the [membership form](#) on the membership page of our website: www.constructivistassociation.org

WEBINARS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ... *started in 2011 – dates to be announced in our newsletters and online.* We plan on three per year, free to members and for a fee to non-members

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2012 Annual Conference will be hosted at the Millennium Centre, across from East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN. Download the Call for Proposals and Registration forms at: www.constructivistassociation.org

Our Journal: *The Constructivist*

As we continue our reviews for the next edition of *The Constructivist*, we encourage you to consider sharing your experiences and inquiries with us. Whether in the area of practice or research, we welcome your submissions.

- Contact our editor, Amy Malkus, at malkus@etsu.edu for more information.

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