My own experiences in education and my own experienced contrast between what I desired to know, learn and do, and that which I was supposed to learn and know has led me to a view of public education that is somewhat radical. In my returning to graduate studies this semester, however, has taught me that my own views and theories are not isolated, and in fact based in educational theory that travels in some cases back to the beginning of public educational theory. In specific, the works of John Dewey have inspired me, as have theories put forth by Joel Spring, and contribute to my support of a constructivist, learner-centric model for education.

Growing up in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1970’s and 80’, my educational experience was of public school, in a district that was middle-of-the-road, economically speaking, and whose educational practice strikes me as mostly traditional. My parents were working-class, with my mom staying at home and my father working several jobs to pay the bills, and yet there was a strong emphasis on education in my family. My father was the first of his family to go to college, and my mother was a 17-year-old high school drop-out, but who came from a family of relative means. We had lots of books in the house, and while my father was hardly home to engage with me on my academics, my mother read to me and taught me to read before I entered kindergarten. Once in school, I became a diligent student in order to gain my teachers’ approval, and excelled in all subjects. My grade school had a few Apple IIe computers, which I was able to use infrequently, but fortunately, my parents bought for me a personal computer in 1982, at a great expense to the family. I began a double life of education, that which I learned in my classrooms, and that which I pursued on my own regarding computers, through peer relationships, messages on bulletin board systems, computer magazines, and eventually I began to take computer classes at the local community college. Eventually, my need for a technology upgrade prompted me to ask my mother’s parents for a loan (as my family could not afford a new computer) that I would pay back with my paper route. My grandparents refused the loan, and also unconsciously inflicted a great harm to my young mind – I was told that I should not pursue computer programming, that there was ‘no money’ in that career, and instead I should focus on math and science, in which I was already shown great proficiency. Perhaps in 1986 to the uninitiated, this seemed like good advice, but it completely redirected my attentions away from what I had already shown great initiative in learning, and towards subjects that I learned because that was what I was supposed to do in order to be a functioning member of society. Looking forward to my high school years, I had an encounter in my junior year that taught me about a double-standard held between ‘smart kids’ and ‘regular kids’, that led to me cutting a lot of classes (over 160 days between my Junior and Senior years), while still making sure to complete and turn in homework, take tests, and otherwise be present for anything that would directly affect my grades. My teachers were unhappy, but I was in many cases getting the highest score in their classes, so they were loath to reprimand me for attendance. I was alienated from the endeavor of high school and only biding my time while I applied to colleges. I ended up getting into UC Berkeley as a physics major, but due to a combination of a lack of good study habits, and a growing realization of my disinterest in physics as a profession, I switched majors to Philosophy, and graduated college only to enter into the work force as an IT specialist working for an internet service provider. I had returned to the career of my childhood dreams, in spite of an entire educational career that attempted to lead me elsewhere, based on externally defined goals and curriculum.

I think due to my own personal experiences, and those anecdotally learned from peers, I am strongly in favor of learner-centric, constructivist educational models. If I had been only allowed and encouraged to follow my dreams as I had begun in grade school, there would likely have been no break in my career path, and my subsequent skills and knowledge in computer programming and software engineering would have been vastly more developed. As it turned out, I left my career as a software engineer in order to pursue a deeper passion – one of education. I believe that I could serve as a mentor for kids in the same situation as I had been in school, and could coach and help them to pursue their own goals based on their own interests. Whenever I was allowed to follow my own passions, I applied myself much more diligently and achieved great rewards, in accomplishment and in self-esteem. In fact, I am not only now serving as a tutor to multiple children, where the parents have allowed me to follow a learner-oriented agenda, I am also running an afterschool enrichment program that uses role-playing games (another passion from my youth) as a context for learning both content and non-cognitive as well as social skills to youth in grades 4th through 12th. Ideally, I will be able to develop my enrichment program into a curriculum that can be incorporated into other accredited programs and schools, or perhaps I might even create my own charter school as a result.

I’m brand-new to my graduate program, but I have learned a little bit of educational theory in my EDUC 417 class, which has greatly encouraged me. In specific, I have been drawn to the works of John Dewey, in his model of education being at the center of a community, and basing learning experiences in the service of solving real-world problems, with a learner-centric focus. I am also using his concept of integrated learning (bringing together a multitude of different educational subjects in service of a central project), by using the activity of engaging in a collective collaborative storytelling simulation/narrative (Role-playing games) and tying in aspects of a multitude of subjects (history, mathematics, creative writing, art, public speaking, dramatic arts, as well as empathy and social intelligence training) into the narrative ‘game’.

I also strongly support Joel Spring’s concept of teaching human rights as curriculum to our students as a means to preserve all educational opportunities in our society, and am looking for ways to incorporate those concepts into my own curriculum. This can likely be done through situational drama, and then linking the content of the ‘game’ to reflection and reinforcing it with direct instruction.

I am seeing a sea change in my community towards an openness to learner-centric models, and because I live and work in Marin County, there is a socio-economic environment that allows for disposable income to be spent on childhood enrichment programs. I am uncertain if the general population is yet ready for a radical shift towards constructivist teaching models, and the introduction of the Common Core State Standards has me feeling somewhat ambivalent. On one side, the standards support a model of teaching multiple methodologies to engender a greater understanding of the subject matter, and there is a focus on integrated learning that I think I am reading in the standards, but on the other hand, any set standards that expect a body of students to reach certain levels of proficiency at specific ages might create a standardization of curriculum that would work against a student-based educational model. My hope is to define my activities in terms of the CCSS, but to operate outside of the requirements of assessing my work against those standards, and instead focusing on my main project, the development of passion and direction in students towards their own goals.

My own goals involve improving my curriculum in my own program, and offering it as a CCSS-aligned activity to charter schools and public schools willing to work with me. I am seeking to develop my theoretical understanding of educational philosophies, and tying my own intuitions about the effectiveness of my approach currently based on personal and anecdotal experience to research in the field. As my own knowledge and experience grows, I expect the quality of my offerings to increase, and better serve the students with which I work and play.