Social Constructivism: Developing Threshold Knowledge in Communication

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   The identification of social constructivism* as a threshold concept in communication derives from a number of sources: classroom observations in undergraduate courses, discussions with students around complex and difficult concepts in the discipline, ongoing conversations with other professionals in the field and, matching the construct to the five characteristics of threshold concepts identified in the literature (Land & Meyer, 2003). Recently, Hassel, Reddinger, and Slooten (2011) explored the social construction of gender in women's studies as one of four threshold concepts in that discipline, but, communication as a field is yet to be included.

   In 2006, a group of communication scholars attending a National Communication Association Conference identified seven core principles of social construction:

1. *Communication is the process through which we construct and reconstruct social worlds.*
2. *Communication is constitutive; communication makes things.*
3. *Every action is consequential.*
4. *We make things together: We construct the social worlds we share with others as relational beings.*
5. *We perceive many social worlds existing simultaneously, and we continue to shape them. Other people's social worlds may be different from ours. What we inherit is not our destiny.*
6. *No behavior conveys meaning in and of itself. Contexts afford and constrain meanings.*
7. *Ethical implications and consequences derive from Principles 1-6.*
   Leeds-Hurwitz, W. Socially constructing communication. (Hampton Press, 2009).

   Because social and personal experiences are interdependent and crucial for conceptual shifts to occur, this research pays careful attention to the evolution of a teaching-learning environment consistent with contemporary notions of sociocultural learning theories. The focus for the SoTL research centers around the concept of social constructivism and entertains the following question:

   In what ways do undergraduates enrolled in an upper-level Communication class demonstrate conceptual and identity change related to the idea of social constructivism when the curricular design follows the key principles of the theory? In what ways do students demonstrate identity transformation while taking the course?

   The project was designed to collect qualitative data primarily through course artifacts produced as requirements in the course. Included in data collection and analysis are pre-test/post-test, blogs, three identity papers, and focus groups. Gee's (2000) analytic framework for identity and changes in identity as well as his discourse analysis (2005) process were used. Major conclusions were:

   - Social constructivism is indeed a troublesome form of knowledge for many students in this course
   - The relationship between language (i.e. dialogue) and knowledge/identity construction is an understanding that requires ongoing reflection and deconstruction
   - One-on-one coaching and scaffolding (in person or mediated) increases the likelihood of students "getting" social constructivism and, perhaps, other core disciplinary concepts
   - Achieving dialogue with peers and instructor correlates positively with shifts in understanding of the identified threshold concept

- Transformation requires a number of conditions, among them are authentic experience and personally critical moments

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* NOTE: The terms *constructivism and constructionism* are both used in the literature on learning. While both terms refer to the active construction of knowledge as individuals interact with their worlds, the origins of the terms are different. Jean Piaget is credited with the term *constructivism* while Seymour Papert extended Piaget's use of the term. Papert states: "Constructionism – the N word as opposed to the V word – shares constructivism's view of learning as "building knowledge structures" through progressive internalization of actions…. It then adds the idea that this happens especially felicitously in a context where the learner is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity…." (Papert, 1991, p. 1). While K-12 educators have tended to retain Piaget's use of the term *constructivism* and expanded it in other ways (particularly adding the language and social elements available in Vygotsky and Freire's theories and research), others have maintained and built on Papert's terminology. Following my own historical and intellectual tradition, I have retained use of the term, constructivism, in this context.