

Social Constructionism: A postmodern lens on the dynamics of social learning.

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Abstract

It is widely accepted in many societies that we are all individuals, with our own thoughts and minds, our own abilities, emotions and personalities, our own free will. In the Western world our education systems are based on these ideas, as are our theories of education, our psychologies of behaviour, and our day-to-day communications. How else might we think of ourselves and each other? Social constructionists argue, and there is strong support from neuroscience for this, that we create our worlds and our perceptions of our worlds collaboratively. As our technologies of communication develop and become more ubiquitous, it can be helpful to consider how we might theorise their significance in the production of knowledge. What we think about who we are, and about what education is, are discursively produced. These underlying ideas, that we take for granted, have a significant impact on how we approach the use of technologies for teaching and learning, and how we interpret the interactions that result.

Paper

Some years ago, Geertz posited that it was not the world norm, but a peculiarly Western construct to conceive of each person as a “bounded, unique ... center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action” (1983, p. 59). He advised that people from other societies should be understood within their own constructs, according to their own cultural understandings. Yet conceptions such as the German tradition of *Bildung*, where each person seeks to cultivate their innate potential (Eldridge, 2007), have influenced European thinking for centuries. Western social scientists have succeeded so well in interpreting human functionings based on the construct of an autonomous individual that this view has become not only dominant, but also quite unremarkable, diminishing other possibilities as a result (Dachler, 2010). However, if we instead view our selves through a lens of inter-connectedness, this might reveal what otherwise could stay hidden. For example, teachers may perceive that the difficulties they face in meeting the learning needs of all their students can be interpreted not simply as their own individual inadequacies – discourses of personal failure – but instead as problems in establishing adequate learning relationships with their students caused by discourses of professional distance in conjunction with a focus on a common curriculum and objectivity in standardized assessments as an expression of discourses of fairness. Drawing on postmodernist writings, such as those by Foucault (1969) and Davies (1993), I use the term discourses to refer to these common ideas, these taken-for-granted ways of speaking and thinking.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his significant influence on the philosophy of the individual, Kant (1784), a scientist as well as a philosopher, argued that it is much more likely for us to become enlightened collectively¹ rather than individually. Nevertheless, the construct of the independent individual has shaped our thinking and our being, our sciences and our technologies, our languages and our reasonings, our interactions and our societies. This same construct, this notion, this discourse of the individual has the capacity not only to contribute to our modern way of life but also to constrain it.

When we replace the discourses of an essentialist, individual self with constructs that suggest we have multiple identities which are contextually interdependent; when we can acknowledge the ways we are shaped by our discursive environments; and when we situate ourselves not only in a physical environment but also

in a social ecosystem, then we can begin to conceptualize ourselves as inextricably interlinked with others, participants in a human network, a social ecosystem. Yet, in the same way as the Aotearoa New Zealand landscape and environment has been changing with the arrival of humans, and the endemic flora and fauna continues to be impacted (Clark, 2001), so too our human social landscape has been progressively changing, not least because of communications technologies from the use of symbols to alphabets, printing presses to the telegraph, and cameras to CCTVs. How people interact has been changing as a result, and the discourses that prevail now are therefore not the same as those that shaped our lives even a decade ago.

Lamarck (1809) wrote about organisms adapting to their circumstances², their local environments. When we think about discourses in the same way, we are applying an evolutionary way of thinking to the social ecosystem. For example, traditional ways of being and behaving mutate as new forms of discourse arise (Davies, 1991). Patriarchal assumptions mutate when confronted with feminist ideologies. Taken-for-granted constructs change as they are relocated from one context to another. The ideas that shape our day-to-day actions are influenced by the presence or absence of alternatives in the form of discourses which represent other perspectives, other ways to story our lives, other lenses through which we might view our surroundings, and other frameworks on which to build our views of our world.

In a socially constructed worldview, relationships are fundamental, since “what we take to be real is an outcome of social relationships” (Gergen, 2009a, p. 237). Rather than seeing the individual as the basic unit, axiomatic to social functioning and interpretation, it might be helpful, particularly with the growth of social media and online learning management systems, to reflect on the understandings that are possible when we see ourselves as collaborators, co-constructing our identities and behaviour in a dynamic dance with discourses. The performances of our emotions, our thinking, our behaviours, our values, and our beliefs impact on others with whom we interact, since “... virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution” (Gergen, 2009b, p. xv). The ways in which we learn to interact and respond to others are shaped collaboratively. Our memories are based not only on our experiences, but also on how those experiences have been reconstructed when we verbalise them (Marsh & Tversky, 2004; Pasupathi, 2001) – including when we rehearse them to ourselves. Drawing on Nietzsche’s ideas, Deleuze wrote, “... there is no being beyond becoming” (1983, p. 22). In a social constructionist sense, the individual is no longer a separate entity, but is a collection of identities that are constantly becoming. Moreover, the *self* is not separated from the *other*. Such a dichotomy makes little sense where each *self* is shaped by each *other*. Temple Grandin writes from the perspective of social isolation through autism, but argues, “... you can’t learn social skills by yourself” (Grandin & Barron, 2005, p. 7). The interconnectedness of our selves extends to more than other people, however, since “[p]eople discover their identities — their self-nesses — in more than just their human relationships” (Taylor, 2004, p. 138). The buildings we see and the places we live in, the foods we eat and the foods we avoid, the clothes we wear and the languages we speak, they all influence and shape us. We are continually being moulded, moment by moment. The culture that we live in shapes both who we are becoming and how we are becoming³ (Foucault, 1969).

What we learn is what discourses teach us, progressively, inductively. They insinuate themselves between what we intend to express and what we actually communicate (Bakhtin, 1981). We seldom notice when we give voice to privilege or patriarchy, though we may see in others how politeness, or its lack, draws us in or sets us back. Because we interact, because we share our sounds and our silences, our writings and the thoughts we can convey in such symbolic forms, we all participate in constructing not only ourselves but also each other. We learn to interpret according to the prevailing discourses and what passes for normal in the contexts we inhabit.

Over time, we come to believe that what we experience as reality in our own contexts represents much more than simply our experience. We believe that it is our world. Others are shaped by the same contexts, but with somewhat different effects: differences in time and place influence us; differences in physicality affect the ways we respond; and all our learning builds on what has gone before, which is necessarily

different for each person. Whatever capabilities we may have to step aside from some discourses, we only have agency to step into others. “Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognise that constitution and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted” (Davies, 1991, p. 51).

The concept of an essential self with personal responsibility and freedom to think, to choose, and to act is promoted wherever knowledge and learning are predicated on the notion of individuality. Yet a so-called autonomous being is never autonomous, “as the self is always contaminated with the rules or principles that structure society” (Devine & Irwin, 2006, p. 16). Nobody grows up devoid of a social context. Every person interacts. The concept of personality traits, fundamental to modernist approaches to psychology, attributes our functioning to innate qualities rather than being interpreted as learnings-in-common (Krull et al., 1999).

In a socially constructed worldview, our grammar of relationships, the fabric of our learning, offers patterns of positioning and agency mediated through language interactions. However, even in the modernist paradigm, learning is a function of our interactions, and is both dynamic and reciprocal (Gallese, Eagle, & Migone, 2007; Siegel, 1999). “All cognitive activity is co-constituted by organisms plus the physical consequences of action and sensation” (Leavens, Hopkins, & Bard, 2008, p. 189). Accordingly, dialogue becomes a vehicle not only for the learning and strengthening of existing discourses, but also for their mutating in response to the introduction and spread of alternate, immigrant ideas. In dialogue we maintain and challenge discourses through our interactions. As a result, our understandings of our identities in relation to others are modified. In dialogue we are the vectors, in an epidemiological sense, for the transmission of ideas, and are ourselves impacted in the process (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). It is noteworthy that in recent neuroscience research, “the extent of the listener’s anticipatory brain responses was highly correlated with the level of understanding, indicating that successful communication requires the active engagement of the listener” (Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010, p. 14428). Such positivist research supports the socially-constructed paradigm. It also emphasises the importance of dialogue.

“To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. ... A reified model of the world is now being replaced by a dialogic model” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). When we engage in dialogue, our words shape how others respond to us, “[t]he word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280). It is not only the words we use: our tones of voice, ways of speaking, facial expressions and body language also convey meaning (Bakhtin, 1984). This is becoming more visible in the patterns of development in our communications technologies.

Whereas the phone has replaced much of the face-to-face dialogue between two people; and the pervasive media of newspapers, radio, and television for many people has replaced the traditions of oratory; so now is social networking on the internet becoming an enhanced alternative for meetings, where many different views can be expressed and evaluated, challenged and supported (Shirky, 2009). Yet there are significant differences from the co-construction of meaning involved in face-to-face dialogue. The asynchronous posting of text, images, and video delays feedback and also reduces it, because so many of the contextual cues disappear. Such uses of the technologies encourage transmissive rather than collaborative ways of thinking. In addition, many fear what is behind the technologies: the control of the data generated by our online interactions. This control is a new form of surveillance from both institutions of state and private enterprise (Vaidhyanathan, 2008). As well as surveillance, it also represents the reduction of our online identities to consumer preferences in an iterative spiral of algorithmic judgments, a progressive reduction of online horizons as a consequence of judgements based on where we have previously traveled. Our online selves inexorably develop with our browsing histories, while the controlling algorithms sustain the illusion of the individual self.

While our technologies may reduce our individual personas, they can extend our collective capacities. Knowledge is not something that is discovered and stored, but rather something that is created between us (Dachler, 2010; Gergen, 1985). This view troubles the dominant discourses about individuality. Both oral and written forms of expression are frequently attributed to someone’s personality and character rather than

the contexts within which they have learnt to operate. In our education system we find discourses of gender and ethnicity, privilege and deficit, competition and achievement, professionalism and responsibility, as well as, of course, teaching and learning. These ways of thinking, these ideas reified in the everyday language of schooling, are often unnoticed but have significant impacts on the lives and stories of teachers and students. Paradoxically, many parents strive to enrol their children in schools which are deemed to provide the best environment for learning, implicitly recognising the importance of *context* for the shaping of identity. Yet within those same preferred schools, the emphases on competition and individuality may be more obvious than in the less preferred alternatives (Bills, 2004; Hawken & Worrall, 2001).

Similar ideas persist with the discourses of curriculum. The focus on a formal curriculum, supported by summative assessments in a competitive environment, illustrates the influence of economic discourses on education policy and practice (Codd, 2005). However, the curriculum is not synonymous with learning, and it is not possible to separate formal and informal attributes of learning, since they “co-exist in all learning situations” (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2003, p. 64). What is evident, however, is that the collaborative attributes of informal learning are well supported by social constructionist theory.

If we look at learning and its production through a postmodern lens we can see that social interactions are always already providing forums for knowledge. The online digital communication technologies do not simply interpose a transmission medium, they also change the interactions. When we look through the dominant modernist lens, the taken-for-granted discourses of individualism render invisible the contributions made to learning by social interactions. We “disattend the pane of glass to look at the view out the window, so we generally disattend discourse. It is not until the glass fractures or breaks, for example, that we focus differently” (Davies, 1993, p. 153). We cannot focus on the social interactions implicated in learning while the discourses of individuality remain intact. The immediate challenge is therefore to “resist, subvert, and change” (Davies, 1991, p. 51) the discourses of the individual. In doing so, it will be possible for us to view more clearly the richness of the various learning interactions that matter: teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and student-student. The key could be to change the paradigm we use to interpret our world.

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Notes

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1. “Daß aber ein Publikum sich selbst aufkläre, ist eher möglich” (Kant, 1784, p. 34).
 2. “... l’influence des circonstances sur les actions et les habitudes de ces corps vivans, comme causes qui modifient leur organisation et leurs parties” (Lamarck, 1809, p. 2394).
 3. Les codes fondamentaux d’une culture – ceux qui régissent son langage, ses schemas perceptifs, ses échanges, ses techniques, ses valeurs, la hiérarchie de ses pratiques – fixent d’entrée de jeu pour chaque homme les ordres empiriques auxquels il aura affaire et dans lesquels il se retrouvera (Foucault, 1969, p. 11).