Transformations: Constructivism in Adult Vocational Education & Training

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For more than two thousand years, Western philosophy has struggled to find a way to substantiate the claim that experiential knowledge (doxa) could be turned into true knowledge of the world (gnosis). Most of the great philosophers have pursued this quest in spite of the fact that there were already among the pre-Socratics some who showed incontrovertibly that human knowledge can never be separated from the human ways of perceiving and conceiving. (Von Glaserfeld. 1991. Pp. 2).

| INTRODUCTION |

What I have come to know of learning and teaching has come from my experience working with youth and adult learners in non-traditional educational settings. Learning and training opportunities present themselves in all forms, whether through design or occasion. Constructivism has been a core component of my graduate experience at UBC. Learning more deeply about constructivism has revealed so much about how we as individuals view education, learning and our own successes within the greater context of society vs. how we as individuals interact, communicate and engage in life opportunities to share and gain knowledge.

In this paper, I intend to incorporate and reflect on the role of constructivism within my working realm, currently with adults within a vocational setting (their workplace) both in terms of education and training. I separate education and training because it was brought to my attention by von Glasserfeld that a distinction must be made between the two because “training aims and focuses on the trainee’s performance ie. observable actions. In contrast, teaching aims and focuses on the students understanding ie. conceptual operations” (von Glasserfeld. 1991. pp. 4). It is my intention to highlight how constructivism has and has not been incorporated, where there is opportunity to improve design and provide accompanying support that specifically speaks to the dynamics and unique qualities of adult learners within their workplace.

| CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY |

What constructivist theory tells us is that learning should be dynamic, learner-centered, account for prior knowledge and experiences, should promote dialogue, build relationships and be a social activity, explore learner’s interests, drive reciprocal learning between experts, learners and facilitators, be collaborative, pull from local and international realms, be synchronous or
asynchronous, and seek deeper learning and stress ownership over learning. Working with adults and youth, I have experienced great things including the creation of relationships and communities of people who experienced challenges collaboratively, who achieved successes together and who developed enough trust in one another to participate in open dialogue; in a traditional classroom format where didactic practice is principal, these qualities and experiences would not be possible. Having experienced these things for myself, both as a student, facilitator and teacher I can attest to the invaluable nature of an authentic learning experience, where I was empowered to explore and in turn took initiative and found an inner motivation. Through this acknowledgement and awareness surrounding constructivist learning opportunities, I continue to ask myself and others (those in education), how can we continue to posit traditional education models as a viable ideal for our children, peers and ourselves?

It is my career and life goal to return to working with at-risk youth in an environment where they are supported, encouraged to explore their interests and given opportunities to experience success without archaic boundaries and defined expectations.

| CURRENT PRACTICE |

As mentioned previously, von Glasserfeld speaks to a differentiation that must be made between training and teaching, and this has sparked interest for my work, as it requires me to reflect on the intention behind the courses that I have developed, the objective for participants and the structure of our workplace. I want to find out whether formatting the programming more from a teaching vs. training (or vice versa) is impacting participant success.

Currently, I attempt to adopt an informal space when facilitating training programs, and it has always been my hope that with this format there would be more comfort to participate, open pathways for communication, promote experiential learning and provide an equal playing field amongst peers and facilitator. Creating such an informal1 and unfamiliar space has proven to be problematic, particularly with participants who are unaccustomed to the norms and expectations

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1 For the purposes of this paper, informal is used to describe the learning or classroom environment to be open to discussion, incorporate schedule flexibility and content flexibility based on the participant’s objectives and capacity as opposed to informal in the sense that participation and attendance are optional, and that social protocols and respect are not minded.
of involvement and understanding of values and respect required; these directions are made explicit at the onset of the course, however it seems that because they are not rudimentary values previously taught, they become hard to remember and follow.

Current programming is based on a training model where observable actions and practical exercise are fundamental elements of the course and evaluation requirements. However, a common issue seems to arise with this formatting, in that many people are able to reiterate or replicate tactile exercises, but are unable to apply the principals and foundational knowledge that is the basis for the exercise. In much of the programming that I am involved in, the programs are meant to be supplementary materials and skills that are building on previous knowledge to expand skill sets. Looking at constructivist theory as it applies to incorporating previous knowledge, moving forward it would be most beneficial to have a way to evaluate and establish where participants previous knowledge and skills originate, what is maintenance in everyday use and where that person currently stands in terms of their knowledge base. In addition, constructivist theory would tell us that we want to expand and broaden knowledge networks and pathways, further developing understandings and relationships between concepts thus promoting deep and meaningful learning. Currently, assuming that all participants start from the same knowledge base proves to leave people behind, it causes others to lose interest and motivation and limits the ability to create further knowledge networks; those who fall behind lose interest and those who are advanced lose interest due to lack of challenge amongst themselves and peers.

| OBSERVATIONS: APPLICATIONS & ADAPTATIONS |

Von Glasserfeld develops the notion that “teachers should have a clear idea of what students have already known and understood so that they can engage students in activities that help them construct new meanings” (von Glasserfeld, E. in So, W. WM. 2002. pp. 3). As an on-site workplace educator, I thrive to provide authentic experiences in which to conduct training, as well as to observe and identify the existing knowledge base from the outset in order to create a learning space that will be meaningful and supportive to all learners. Unlike traditional education formats, the concepts or principals are transferred from teacher to student, whereas in a learner-centered format, previous knowledge and experience must be known in order to acknowledge the appropriate content, format and true learning objectives.
A unique aspect of my job is that I work and facilitate courses in the high Arctic, where many of the staff are Inuit. Inuit culture, ways of knowing and learning fall outside of the Western realm, and it has proven to be a real eye opener and challenge in terms of gaining experience and understanding for this diversity. I give the example of the Amauti coats that Inuit women wear; mothers carry infants and toddlers within the hood of their coats, where the child has a bird’s eye view of everything that is going on around them. They are able to observe all aspects of their mother’s daily life, social interactions, culture etc. This has proven to be a culture where children observe skills and develop craft alongside their parents and peers; tactile demonstrations and apprenticeship learning occurs from the onset of life. Having introduced courses to staff in the North, I have experienced challenges such as literacy related issues, exposure to and ability to navigate computer technology, an incapacity for students to interpret information from literature or oral communication and opposition to written and formal evaluation. This opposition challenges the foundations of Western culture, and of course, industry. Industry recognizes written testing and evaluation as a verification or validation towards certification and it is not always possible to replace one with the other. One of my objectives in developing courses and facilitating them has been to incorporate more culturally relevant material, learning strategies and as Vygotsky argued “an emphasis on the context of learning….the importance of the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place and how the context has an impact on what is learned” (Vygotsky in Huang. 2002. pp. 29).

| TEACHING & TRAINING: ADAPTATIONS |

In delving into qualities of constructivism within courses I develop and facilitate, the principal of radical constructivism is ever present; objectivity may exist but how is one to know because we utilize our experience and knowledge to construct what we know and our reality. In adapting programming and my own skills/ perception of what it is to know, how to share and how to perceive, my goal moving forward will be to critically examine the constructs that have been imposed on participants previously. For example, how previous knowledge is going to impact their participation, how to overcome barriers to participation, adoption of new learning strategies, and how one will attempt to mitigate their own experience of learning differently and recognizing that learning.
Martin Dougiamas encapsulated “constructivism as a lens for examining educational practice” (Dougiamas, M. 1998. pp. 4), and it is with this outlook that I move forward into my own realm; reflective, aware, critical and vulnerable to the perceptions, voice and participation of everyone as it is through this interaction that we are able to further develop ourselves.

I am a product of my generation, where post-secondary education has been seen to be of utmost value; I have 10 years of post-secondary education under my belt and I can say that it is only here, in my 4th last course of the MET program that I have understood in explicit terms Metacognition. I mention this in concluding simply because I can now recognize an awareness that I have had since I was young, of my own learning style, learning strategies, ability to reflect and think critically of exercises after the fact and ability to organize and prepare for formal evaluation. This may explain why I love school so much! This drives me to support my participants in recognizing their strengths and weaknesses in learning, what strategies work for them, where to use certain strategies and again, an overall awareness of this capacity.

| CONCLUSION |

After completing this paper, it has really shown me how I evolved as a Leader in traditional educational settings, but through me it has wielded a few skills and challenging behaviors that are entrenched in me, and are not conducive to constructivist teaching and learning. Such qualities include an inability or apprehension for students to challenge the fundamentals of programming (not always appropriate but need to be prepared to handle challenges), a level of control where the Instructor or Leader is responsible to delegate and sometimes dictate (this control can be very challenging to let go of), finite structure and organization of every single minute, document and predicted results as mandated my higher ups. These qualities were once heralded by my teachers and peers as being productive, efficient, smart and will allow me to go far. To an extent, some of this is true, however it really hinders us as adults to listen, cooperate and collaborate with our peers at a comprisable level, take criticism and to look outside of that structure to find valuable alternatives to teaching and learning. A journey indeed!

In conclusion, it has been and will continue to be my goal to have a critical awareness of my own perceptions of learning and creating learning opportunities as I have been heavily influenced by traditional, didactic models of education. These models are heavily supported and influential
within my workplace still and so this will result in a heightened awareness of these structures, how they influence the direction that I take in teaching and learning and the way that they influence learners.

It is the inclusive nature of constructivism that has drawn me in, the value that it recognizes in individual experience, culture, history and previous knowledge, and from my experience this value changes the trajectory of learners in experiencing success and what that success looks like. Constructivism promotes a transformational process in learners, and renegotiates the fundamental building blocks of learning to be learner-centered, interesting, individually applicable and interactive.


