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Teaching Social Construction of Reality in the Basic Course: Opening Minds and Integrating Contexts

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Social construction of reality theory (SCT) is such a broad based theory that it approaches a philosophical view. As such, SCT offers a new way of considering one's own and others' perspectives, a valuable asset for communication students. The theory is also a useful pedagogical tool for connecting the sometimes disparate contexts within the hybrid basic communication course. The rest of this discussion will 1) explore the theory and ways of introducing it to undergraduates; 2) argue that this theory has the capability of opening minds to new ideas and viewpoints, and 3) attempt to show how it can be integrated into and integrate the often self-contained units of interpersonal communication, group communication and public speaking.

THE THEORY

Social construction theory assumes that reality is a social construction and that language and conversation are the primary tools of that construction. Berger and Luckman (1966) emphasize the importance of language and talk in the creation, modification and maintenance

of everyday reality: language is the tool for socializing the child (primary socialization) and the adult into new subcultures (secondary socialization) (p. 121), the tool for understanding ourselves (as we receive information about ourselves from others and clarify our own reality in talk) (p. 36); the tool to attain shared definitions and understanding with others (p. 120); and the tool for realizing, interpreting, and producing the world (p. 141). Their perspective centralizes communication as the process which creates, modifies and maintains reality.

Gergen (1985) further explicates the assumptions of the social constructionist movement in psychology:

1. "What we take to be the experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood" (p. 266). This statement rejects positivistic ideas about how knowledge is acquired through the scientific method. When our view of the world is influenced by our cultural beliefs and our language, we are not *able* to study the world objectively.

2. "The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people" (p. 267). The second assumption reminds us that language is contextually and historically situated and, thus, is ever changing according to situational factors.

3. "The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes" (p. 268). This assumption addresses the intersubjective nature of

knowledge. As ideas are discussed and evaluated, they may be generally accepted or declined by scholars dependent on the power of the rhetoric employed rather than the facts discovered. The accepted ideas become "knowledge."

4. "Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage" (p. 268). The fourth assumption states that reality is "constructed" by patterns of communication, not just interpreted. In short, what is done, how it gets done, our priorities, our values, indeed, our beliefs about how the world and social relationships work are socially constructed through our interactions with others in repeated patterns of behavior. Given these fundamental ideas regarding social construction theory, I have derived some simplified statements which allow college students access to this powerful theory.

USING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN THE BASIC COURSE: A NEW LOOK AT SOME OLD IDEAS

Introducing social construction of reality

While most entering college students are unfamiliar with SCT, they are actually already familiar with many of its tenets. For instance, most college students accept that:

1. Our access to the world is through our interpretations of our experiences (everyone sees things differently).

2. Our interpretations of our experiences are biased by past experience (If we have been raised that "time is money," we will likely adopt this attitude without questioning it's source or utility).

3. Our past experience includes our language, our culture and our family of origin, among other things.

If they accept these statements, they should accept their logical conclusion:

Our access to the world is biased by our language, our culture and our family background (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1985).

This conclusion is one major tenet of social constructionism. To carry things a bit further:

1. Because we view the world in certain ways, we act as if this "reality" is true (we sometimes forget there are other interpretations, plus we have little choice since we have to act on what we "know.").

2. Acting as if this reality were true can "make" it true (this is your basic self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., because we believe a party will be boring, we act accordingly and our actions create a boring party — at least for us!).

This leads to a second major tenet of social constructionism:

Our behavior (including and especially talk) maintains *what we have been taught through past experience,* modifies *the world to fit our reality, and* creates *a world consistent with our reality (Berger & Luckm*an, 1966; Gergen, 1985). Take for instance the "mean world syndrome" which is essentially the idea that people who watch violent television come to view the world as a mean place. These people then interact with the world as if this were fact, treating people with distrust, always alert to someone who may want to hurt them. This treatment influences or modifies others' behaviors so they in turn react to the mean world individual with distrust and dislike. Thus, this individual has maintained his/her beliefs because they have modified the reality around them by the way they interpret and react to that reality and, in essence, created a mean world.

This simplified version of some of SCT's basic assumptions gives students an understanding of the role of communication in forming their self-concepts and their reality. Just as importantly, they have a more intimate understanding of why differences exist between people of different cultures and subcultures. When they can grasp why such differences exist, students can more readily accept that while other cultures/subcultures are different, different does not necessarily equal "bad" or "wrong." This is fundamental diversity training.

With just this foundation in social construction and communication, the class can explore how initial realities become shared and/or modified realities within the contexts of interpersonal relationships, group experiences and public speaking.

Before exploring a specific plan for incorporating SCT into the basic course, we will look at ways in which

SCT informs the three basic contexts of the hybrid course.

Social construction in interpersonal relationships

Helping students understand that relationships are social constructions opens their minds to possibilities and questions. For instance, who decides if a relationship is friendly or romantic? Students dialogue about their experiences of the role played by people outside the relationship in defining the relationship. Asking the question: "Have you ever changed your mind about a friend or romantic partner based on something another friend or family member said?" is enough to help them understand how a relationship can be "reconstructed."

The concepts of redefining, literally talking ourselves into and out of, relationships, interpreting emotions, and interpreting causes of others' behaviors add to students' understanding of the constructive processes of relationships. Having students compare definitions for relational concepts and roles like married, engaged, going together, dating, girlfriend/wife/mother, boyfriend/husband/father can open their eyes to relational difficulties given the different expectations attached to these "common" words. Exploring the effects of relational history (family, friendship, romantic, and work relationships) allows students to uncover the kinds of relational attitudes and beliefs they may have and how those affect their present and future relationships.

Gender and cultural differences are two more challenges to creating a shared relational reality. For instance, men and women are socialized to act differently

in and have different expectations about relationships. Women tend to say "I love you" verbally and expect that in return but men tend to show love by doing something for their partner and expect that in return. Can we learn to live with the differences, do one or both partners need to change, or can we "reconstruct" the situation (interpret it differently)?

This co-construction of shared realities within personal relationships has been explored by scholars of personal relationships (eg., Duck, 1990; Dixson, 1995) and family communication (eg., Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Bochner,1995). Forming relationships with others is a process of codefining reality (eg., Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Bochner,1995), figuring out what things mean within the context of the relationship. Students can relate to ways of codefining such as symbols (rings, roses) and symbolic behavior (meeting parents, self-disclosure of intimate details, pet names).

Students enjoy discovering that they can co-create their own rules and meaningful symbols for relationships with their relational partners and that they can question established social norms for personal relationships. This is a good time to have students look at popular media to see how it influences their expectations of relationships.

Social construction in small groups

Small group communication is an area enriched by an understanding of SCT. The development of leadership, group norms, and group decisions are all processes wherein individuals try to merge their realities in order to function as a group rather than as several indivi-

duals. Traditional group concepts such as cohesiveness, groupthink, and group identity become simpler to comprehend and are instilled with more meaning within a social constructionist framework.

For instance, when a group co-constructs a reality about who they are as a group and what they should be doing (i.e., we are the team who does well and still has fun!), cohesion is generally high even if there is conflict regarding the decision(s) to be made. When the group's contructed reality includes an emphasis on the importance of the group and of getting along over individuals or decisions, groupthink is likely to occur.

Group roles are also social constructions and contribute to the creation of a shared group reality as does the co-construction of conflict behavior and conflict management strategies. For instance, whether it is acceptable to make personal attacks or conflicts must stay issue focused is the result of norms socially created by the group itself. Roles, cohesion, norms, groupthink and other group processes can be better understood and explained through an SCT framework.

In the syllabus I discuss below, team learning approaches to the course allow students the opportunity to experience group construction of reality. Students work, in the same group for several weeks, on learning projects designed to help them "discover" the principles of SCT and how to apply them in understanding themselves and their relationships. The team approach is an opportunity for students to analyze and evaluate group norms, themes, conflict strategies, identity and roles being socially constructed within their own classroom groups.

Social construction and public speaking

Often, public speaking is interpreted and taught as a set of skills necessary to keep from making a fool of yourself. The students' attention is riveted on themselves as the speakers in front of the audience. Their concerns are with self-images and grades. SCT moves the focus from the speaker to the connection between the speaker and the audience. We talk about public speaking in terms of constructing a shared reality/understanding with the audience about the topic of the speech.

The advantage of this shift is the emphasis placed on the audience in developing the topic, choosing supporting arguments, considering delivery, choosing an organizational method and determining an effective presentational style. Of course, texts and instructors already teach this idea. Social constructionism simply helps to emphasize the connection between speaker and audience. Rather than considering, "What are the best arguments I can find?" the student thinks "What are the best arguments to persuade this audience?"

The "fit" between this theory and the content of the basic communication course offers an excellent opportunity for enhancing students' communication understanding. It also offers a way to show that interpersonal, group and public communication are very similar in that they are all influenced by the social reality and expectations of the participants.

There are, of course, many ways of using the theory to enhance the basic course. One way would be to teach the basics of the theory and then systematically explore

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its applications to ideas, beliefs, and processes of self, interpersonal, group and public communication situations. A series of class discussions, small group exercises, individual assignments and journal writings could integrate this exploration with the concepts from the basic course.

Another approach, which I used, is to apply experiential, team learning exercises so students "discover" the basic tenets and explore SCT while learning the concepts required of the hybrid basic course.

Social construction and the basic course: An example

In a recently taught hybrid course based on SCT, the students spent several weeks in groups of four to five people working on team projects (See Appendix A for a description of all projects). The projects were designed to allow students to "discover" the basic tenets of SCT and test the ideas against their own experience. The discovery process incorporated concepts from the text and integrated the three primary contexts: interpersonal, group and public communication. The projects incorporated concepts by making the text a resource with various chapters or parts of chapters attached to each team project. Students are required to thoughtfully use five key concepts (from the list provided) in their project paper and speech. This approach integrates the contexts of communication because all projects are group/team projects. The first four require a team paper and a speech delivered by one member of the team (team members take turns giving speeches). The fifth project requires a group presentation. The content of the

projects involves looking at the social construction of self, relationships, groups, public speaking situations and societies. Thus, public, group and written communication skills are practiced in all projects. Interpersonal and intrapersonal communication are the foci for several of the projects.

For instance, Project Two discusses how who we are (our social construction of self) affects how we interpret and react to events (our social construction of reality). The project incorporates discussions of common perceptual errors and how they can affect communication in relationships, groups or public speaking. Talk about language (and its symbolic nature), nonverbal communication (and its ambiguity), and barriers to listening also pertain to this question.

Example from Project Two: Questions for students to answer: Does who you are affect your interpretation of events and how you behave (verbal and nonverbal communication)? How so? Explain and support from experience and the text the process which affects our interpretations and behaviors. What is the role of communication in this process?

Key concepts to consider: Under key concepts, instructors can include a list of concepts from their text (see Appendix, for sample terms from the Adler and Rodman text). An alternative approach is to connect each project with particular chapters from a text. Students can choose their key ideas from the assigned chapters.

While no single group will incorporate all of the key concepts listed, a required speech from each group provides the class with a larger sample of the material. If an instructor feels that particular concepts should be

considered by all, the concepts can be assigned or time can be spent formally (brief opening lecture) or informally (in discussion with each group) to insure that students are aware of the ideas.

This method does not ensure that all students will be aware of all the concepts presented in the text (although anything listed in the key concepts is testable material). Collaborative approaches generally mean a trade off between amount and quality. That students have *meaningful* discussions about concepts they find relevant and interesting seems to be worth the trade off. The rest of the material is accessible through the text or other groups' speeches.

As stated earlier, each team project requires an argumentative paper stating and supporting the answer to the project questions and including five concepts the students felt were important. The team speech is based roughly on the paper and allows the groups to share their findings with the class. As stated earlier, every group member is required to do one team project speech. To further develop their public speaking skills, each speech emphasizes a different aspect of public speaking: verbal delivery, nonverbal delivery, organization, material (arguments presented). This approach seems to offer better opportunities for students to learn public speaking than attempting to teach everything about public speaking before projects start.

Before the final project, the only lecture of the course pulls together what they have done so far and synthesizes their project answers into the two tenets of SCT (based on the tenets outlined earlier). A paper analyzing and processing their team project experience, incorporating text material and social construction

theory, helps students synthesize their learning about group processes.

Effectiveness

An informal discussion with the class revealed a generally positive attitude about the group experience with one consistent disclaimer: five individual group projects were too many. Therefore, I combined two projects to reduce the number to four (as presented in Appendix A).

Formal student evaluations and written comments also indicated that students felt this was a successful approach to the basic course. All except one of the evaluation items were above the school means for the course (that one equaled the mean). Those items assessing learning and teaching approach are reported in Table One.

Sample written comments included: "I liked working in groups because if I didn't understand something the people in my group could help me." "..the group experience was very educating." "I did learn a lot from this class, especially with group work which I hate." "What I liked the most about this class is we could approach the subjects from different angles." The few negative comments which need to be considered were: "I believe the group projects were hit or miss on whether you got a productive or unproductive group." "Add a few more lectures." "Develop a better method for writing the group paper." Generally, consensus was very positive about the learning experience.

Table 1
Items from Standardized Student Evaluation Forms

Evaluation item	Means for basic course on a 5-point scale	
	Social con-struction* section	All other** sections
Instructor:		
Stimulates interest in course	4.5	4.1
Challenged me to think critically	4.3	3.8
Emphasizes relationships between topics	4.6	4.2
Appropriate teaching strategy	4.8	4.2
Motivates me to do my best work	4.5	4.0
Explains difficult material	4.5	4.0
Oral assignments have instructional value	4.5	4.3
Written assignments have instructional value	4.2	3.9
Oral assignments related to course goals	4.6	4.4
Written assignments related to course goals	4.5	4.1
Assignments are interesting/ stimulating	4.1	3.8
Course among best taken	4.0	3.4
Improved interpersonal communication skills	4.6	4.1
Improved group communication skills	4.6	4.1
Improved public speaking skill	4.6	4.1

* 20 respondents

** 604 respondents

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However, whether or not students enjoy a course, while related, is secondary to actual learning. I assessed this learning with a traditional paper-pencil test. To be sure the test was a fair assessment of expected learning, I asked five colleagues who teach the basic course with the same text and guidelines to evaluate the test. Using 7 point Likert scales (1 being not well at all and 7 being extremely well with anything above a 3.5 deemed adequate), they evaluated the test's ability to measure recall (mean = 5.6), critical thinking (6), and the important concepts of the course (4.8). They also judged it to be an adequate sample of the information (4.5), not too easy or difficult (4.2 with 1 being easy and 7 being difficult) and relatively appropriate (4.4 with 1 being inappropriate). Thus, I judged the test a fair assessment of student learning of the required material.

Results of the test were consistent with student comments and demonstrated that learning had indeed taken place, with only one formal lecture! To assess student learning, I looked at each of three sections of the test separately as they measured different kinds of learning. Ten multiple-choice questions measured recall and recognition of logical fallacies, forms of reasoning, conflict styles, types of disconfirming responses and uses and abuses of language. Of the twenty-two students in this initial course, nineteen missed three or less (a C or above). Considering this is a freshman course required for every student at this almost open admission Midwestern university, this is better than would normally be expected.

Short essay questions measured students' understanding and ability to explain reflected appraisal, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, cultural or gender differences

in nonverbal communication codes, and perceptual errors and attribution processes. Of thirty possible points, seventeen of the twenty two students earned twenty or more (passing), again demonstrating their ability to learn this material within a social construction framework and a team approach.

The third section of the text was an essay question asking them to list and explain the two tenets of SCT (as stated earlier in this paper) and discuss how their perceptions of differences between people might be changed by knowledge of this theory. While all twenty two students could generally explain the theory and its application, they were a little hazy on the specifics. Seven students earned perfect scores, two more understood both tenets but were a bit off in their explanations. Twelve people couldn't specifically state the second tenet.

It was interesting that they did worse when tested over the only information covered by lecture. Although, clearly this could also be an artifact of the type of question used for assessing this knowledge. In conclusion, students learned the concepts we traditionally expect them to learn in the basic course. More importantly, they gained a new perspective about diversity through the application of SCT (even though they didn't remember the second tenet exactly.)

While these findings are generated from a case study approach, I have found similar results in subsequent terms teaching the course. This approach has also been successfully adopted by a number of faculty, associate faculty and graduate instructors at the author's own institution and a neighboring college.

CONCLUSION

The integration of contexts and SCT is not a radical transformation of the basic communication course. The content of the hybrid course remains essentially unchanged. Social constructionism offers a framework which can integrate the areas of the course for students in ways not adequately done by many textbooks. The hybrid course becomes more a hybrid course and less three/four mini-courses loosely attached to each other. More importantly, social constructionism offers a theoretical perspective which forces students to consider shades and tints rather than blacks and whites. If knowledge is essentially based in interpretation, then there exist few "truths." Therefore, uncritical acceptance of important ideas is intolerable.

We do not ask students to reject or accept a particular perspective, but to question. Students who do this are, by definition, more open minded, better critical thinkers, better consumers and better members of a democratic society.

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APPENDIX A

TEAM PROJECTS

Each project requires a *written argument* with an answer and support from the text and your experience and *an oral presentation* to the class.

Papers should be 3-5 pages long, double spaced. They should address all questions asked for that project and include at least 5 key concepts. Don't be afraid to use headings.

Speeches should be 5-7 minutes long, with notes using extemporaneous delivery style. Each member of the group is required to present once. The speech should reflect the answer in the paper but not attempt to relate the entire paper.

Each student should come to class on prep days ready to participate with note cards prepared to help the group form the arguments and prepare the paper and presentation. On any given day, I may collect and award points for prep notes.

PROJECT ONE

Questions to answer

How did you become who you are? Did any person influence you? Did any place influence you? Does historical time influence you? Determine what kinds of influences make us what we are and support your answer using your experience and the text. What is the role of communication in this process?

Key concepts to consider

Self-concept, reflected appraisals, significant others, individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures, personality self-fulfilling prophecy. Types of delivery: know characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of four types of delivery. Persuasive speaking: Persuasion, types of propositions, direct vs. indirect persuasion, steps of the motivated sequence, three rules when using evidence, deduction (syllogism and enthymeme) vs. induction, sign reasoning, causal reasoning, reasoning by analogy, three C's of credibility

PROJECT TWO

Questions to answer

Does who you are affect your interpretation of events and how you behave (verbal and nonverbal communication)? How so? Explain and support from experience and the text the process or lack thereof which affects our interpretations and behaviors. What is the role of communication in this process?

Key concepts to consider

Perceived self, presenting self, fact, facework, front vs. back region, high vs. low self-monitors, attribution, six common perceptual errors, cultural differences in perception, language is symbolic, meaning is in people, equivocal language, abstraction ladder, stereotyping, fact-inference confusion, emotive language, euphemism, equivocation, gender differences, low-context vs. high context cultures, Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, message overload, psychological noise, physical noise, faulty assumptions; Functions of nonverbal communication: re-

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peating, substituting, complementing, accenting, regulating, contradicting (mixed message); Nonverbal communication: kinesics, eye contact, paralanguage, haptics, proxemics, Hall's four distances, chronemics, territoriality.

PROJECT THREE

Questions to answer

Does who you are and how you behave affect how others behave and who they are? Explain and support from experience and the text the process or lack thereof which affects others. What is the role of communication in this process?

Key concepts to consider

Critical listening, seven logical fallacies, empathic listening, judging, analyzing, questioning , supporting, paraphrasing; Nonverbal communication. . . is ambiguous, is culture-bound; Seven reasons for forming relationships, interpersonal conflict, five styles of expressing conflict, gender influences, cultural influences, win-lose vs. lose-lose, compromise, and win-win; Group, rules, norms (social, procedural, task), roles (task, social and dysfunctional); Audience types, demographics of audience, attitudes, belief, value, analyzing the occasion, audience expectations; Guidelines for delivery: appearance, movement, posture, facial expression, eye contact, volume, rate.

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PROJECT FOUR

Questions to answer

Define shared reality. How is a reality co-constructed in a personal relationship? Can we deliberately co-construct a shared reality? If so, how? If not, why not? In small groups? In a public speaking situation? What is the role of communication in this process? How do we co-construct conflict? peace?

Key concepts to consider

Notes from instructor on shared reality and co-construction;

Communication as process, functions of communication, transactional model, self-disclosure, social penetration model, Johari Window model, characteristics of effective self-disclosure, guidelines for appropriate self-disclosure, confirming vs. disconfirming messages, Gibb's Categories with definitions, group, ideal group size, task orientation vs. social orientation, hidden agenda, general speech purpose vs. specific speech purpose vs. thesis statement

FINAL PROJECT: THIS IS A TEAM PRESENTATION!!

How does communication create societies (consider the effects of media for this one)? Define and discuss the ways in which societies and cultures are socially constructed through communication. Given this knowledge, what do you now know about other cultures and their

"goodness"; "rightness" "wrongness" compared to the good ole' USA? Is the "American way" one culture?

ESSAYS

Group analysis: Analysis of team. Considerations of how well the group worked including a discussion of roles, decision making processes, norms, cohesiveness and the social reality that your group constructed. Was it a shared reality?