

Constructivism, Cross-cultural Teaching, and Orality

by Phil Thornton

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Because new information is filtered through the pre-existing mental grid of the listener, real learning takes place most effectively when the potential learners (listeners) are actively engaged in the learning process rather than receiving new information passively. This constructivist approach to teaching/learning argues that people “construct” their understanding and knowledge of the world through real-life experiences, and by reflecting on those experiences.

When the potential learners encounter something new, they must reconcile it with their previous ideas and experiences. The result may be that they accept the new information and change what they believe and how they behave, or they may simply discard the new information as undesirable or irrelevant. In either case, with constructivist teaching/learning, the learners themselves will be active participants in the teaching/

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learning process. This is true simply because new information and discoveries have challenged them to question, explore, and assess what they know (or think they know).

This strong emphasis on the learner as an active participant in the learning process does not in any way devalue the role of the teacher, but it does modify that role, especially compared to a more traditional teaching style. In constructivist teaching/learning, the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator more than that of a dispenser of information. In the world of cross-cultural communication, this understanding of the facilitative role of the teacher is crucial, especially when it concerns

teachers from the West working in a non-Western cultural context. In such circumstances, it is critical that the teacher understand the hearer's preexisting conceptions and builds upon them.

It is true that I am guided in my perspective by a high view of culture. By "high view," I do not mean that culture itself is sacred. In fact, I believe that all cultures must come under the corrective scrutiny of the gospel. But I also believe that God has placed within all cultures the culturally appropriate elements and methods for successful communication, including communication of the gospel. In other words, God willingly "uses culture" as a vehicle for his message.

Unfortunately, in many cultures, "natural vehicles" (e.g., songs, proverbs, dance, drama, narrative) have been suppressed (if not buried) under the influence of Western educational pressure, and missionaries have not been immune to such error. The result has been that native peoples are often ashamed of those culturally-accepted instruments of communication and see them as inferior to those of the West. Constructivist teaching/learning can help identify and use

many of those natural vehicles for communication which have heretofore been lost or forbidden.

The constructivist approach to teaching/learning can remove some of those imposed obstacles and allow non-Western (and particularly oral) learners to rediscover culturally appropriate avenues for both packaging and delivering the gospel message. In a certain sense cross-cultural constructivist teaching/learning parallels the emphasis of appreciative inquiry in that it seeks to identify and use what a people do well, rather than eliminating what they do wrong (or, at least, what we think they are doing wrong).

The more traditional approach to teaching/learning in Western education, including that of pastoral training, focuses on the material (curriculum), beginning with the individual parts and building to the whole. Basic skills are emphasized, and typically there is a rather strict adherence to the fixed curriculum. The curriculum (material to be taught) is highly valued. The primary sources of learning are textbooks and workbooks. Teachers deliver information to the learners with learners becoming recipients of



Henna tattooing is a cultural practice that dates back over 5,000 years. Henna tattooing today is used as a popular form of expression for luck and happiness and can be found in many ceremonial practices, including Blessingways, marriages, births and battle.

information. The teacher's role is directive and rooted in his/her authority. Assessment is done through testing with a strong focus on "the right" answer. Knowledge is seen as static and learners work primarily alone.

In the constructivist approach to teaching/learning, the curriculum (material to be taught/learned) emphasizes big concepts, beginning with the whole and expanding to include all the parts. Student questions and interests are valued and guide the learning process. Learning materials are based on real life (that which can be seen, touched, etc.) rather than abstract propositions. Teachers dialogue with students, helping them to "construct" knowledge through discovery, rather than passively receiving information (i.e., the teacher's role is interactive).

In assessment, process is as important as product and is carried out in multiple ways such as observation, interviews, projects, and tests. Knowledge itself is seen as ever expanding with experiences, and the work of learning is typically done in groups.

For those of us who work cross-culturally with oral learners, we

must realize that the people with whom we labor are not blank slates upon which we will etch new knowledge. Nor are they less intellectually capable than their Western counterparts. (Consider the highly-developed Inca civilization, which existed for centuries without a written language other than the knotted strings which recorded numbers.) Rather, they come to learning situations with already formulated knowledge, ideas, and understandings.

While it may not be written down or much less analyzed, they will have a well-developed worldview which explains and integrates the experiences they face each day. This previous knowledge is the raw material with which we must work. It is the basis (the filter) for any new knowledge which they will create from the teaching/learning process.

For example, the Samburu of Kenya have a myth which explains how the Samburu people were first separated from God when the rope up to the heavens was cut. Since that time, according to the myth, the Samburu have searched for God in the rocks, trees, rivers, etc. (i.e., animism). This well-known myth provides fertile ground for seeing Jesus as the "rope back to God" (John 14:6).



This means that it is highly unlikely that I, as a teacher, will be able to communicate new ideas unless I “understand them.” *Rather than pour out new knowledge upon them, I must guide them in a process of discovery such that they choose to accept and utilize that new information.* Only then will transformation of belief and behavior really take place. It seems to me that this issue of culturally appropriate teaching/learning may be at the very heart of why there are so many Christians (at least that is their claim) and yet so little personal and social transformation in many places of the world.

Implementing Constructive Teaching/Learning

Practically speaking, when called

upon to teach cross-culturally, how can we, as teachers from the West, implement constructivist teaching/learning in a non-Western context? Let me suggest the following:

First, learn as much as you can about the cultural context in which you will work before you teach. This information will then be verified, modified, and added to in the teaching/learning process when the constructivist model is utilized.

Second, do not assume the role as a dispenser of new information or an authority. Rather, work with your listeners to help them connect the new information you bring with that which is already known/present in their culture. This presumes your familiarity with existing knowledge

and behavior in the culture and/or your willingness as the teacher to enter into the discovery process with your learners during the course of the teaching.

Third, do not assume that their understanding of terms used in the exchange of ideas is the same as your understanding. Seek to understand those terms from their perspective,



and then where needed, guide them to discover other possibilities.

Fourth, ask questions and entertain their questions even when they seem irrelevant to the topic at hand. Then, rather than give answers, work with them to discover culturally appropriate answers by applying God's word to those questions. An example of this process occurred as I worked with Samburu pastors in Kenya.

Several questions arose in our conversation about which I had little or no knowledge (e.g., Is it okay for the Samburu to drink blood—a common custom among the nomadic herders?). Rather than offer an answer (or even an opinion), I had the pastors launch into a discover process as a group (constructivist learning). After some time working on the problem,

they came forth with the following which would be applied to such practices:

- What does the Bible say?
- What is the Spirit saying to us?
- What do the elders say?
- Does it do harm to the individual or the community?

This “discovery” was much more powerful and on target than any answer I might have given.

Fifth, remember that the primary purpose of your teaching is not the dispensing of information, but rather helping your target audience learn and learn how to learn. As you create a safe environment where they can question and reflect on various issues, you are making them the experts in their own learning process. You are helping them identify and solve their own problems under the guiding influence of God's Spirit and the corrective instruction of his word. You are the catalyst, not the answer.

Concluding Thoughts

I realize that many who teach cross-culturally may disagree with the position I have taken in this writing. I acknowledge their concerns and agree that the preaching of the gospel inserts new knowledge and understanding into any culture. This is especially true where the gospel is relatively unknown.

But this does not negate the process by which the news of the gospel can be (indeed, must be) introduced if transformation of life and culture is to be

accomplished. Learning always moves from the known to the unknown. This means that the good news must speak to real-life issues in the target audience and they must see them. Likewise, any theory when taken to an extreme can do damage. The same would be true of constructivist teaching/learning if allowed to slide into total relativism. There is an absolute truth which no model should be allowed to destroy.

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Constructivist teaching/learning is especially important when working cross-culturally and with oral learners (those who either cannot read, do not understand what they read, or simply prefer oral methods for communicating important messages) because it allows them to define critical issues and work out solutions which are both biblical and culturally appropriate.

It allows them to use patterns of thought and behavior which are understandable to the people. It frees them from the myopic shackles which have all too often been placed on them by Western influence. It allows them to be truly indigenous and thoroughly Christian.

I am confident that we can always work in tandem with the Holy Spirit, the ultimate teacher. With his help and under his supervision, and by utilizing the best teaching/learning tools, all Christians can build a “firm foundation.” Seven hundred years before Christ, a Chinese philosopher by the name of Lao Zu spoke these words:

*Go to the people. Live with them.
Learn from them.*

*Begin with what they know,
Build with what they have.*

*And when the the work is done and
task is accomplished,*

The people will say,

We have done this ourselves.

The constructivist teacher facilitates rather than dictates. With the help of the Holy Spirit, he or she sits where his or her learners sit, walks in their shoes, and when all is said and done, leaves no foreign (Western) footprint. This is successful cross-cultural teaching/learning which brings real transformation!

Kraft, Charles. 2000. *Communicating Jesus' Way*. Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library.

Websites on Constructivism:

www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index.html
saskschoolboards.ca/research/instruction/97-07.htm
www.pbs.org/teacherline/courses/inst335/docs/inst335_brooks.pdf
www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/sa3const.htm
www.slideshare.net/nataliea/constructivist-teaching-methods

ⁱCharles Kraft refers to this as the identificational approach (the teacher understands the meaning and nuances the learners assign to the terms/actions) as opposed to the extractionist approach (which demands that the hearers understand the teacher's meanings/actions for communication to take place).

ⁱⁱWestern literate education approaches teaching in terms of concepts, ideas, issues, and problems. Illustrations from real life are given to prove a point. With oral learners, logic is neither understood nor prized as an argumentative tool, and principles are seldom extracted from the story. The story is the message.

ⁱⁱⁱBy "packaging," I mean how the message is structured; by "delivery," I refer to the multiple ways communication takes place such as drama, song, dance, proverbs and sayings, myth, legend, etc.

^{iv}Numerous resources are available online which further detail the differences between constructivist and traditional teaching/learning models.

