

**An Examination of Constructivism as a
Technology for Marriage Enrichment Classes**

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Background and Focus

The focus of this paper is an investigation of the use and compatibility of constructivism as a technology for designing marriage enrichment classes. The paper will evaluate several examples of constructivist thinking and practice. The goal is to demonstrate how this philosophy/approach can provide a meaningful and compatible method for leading couples to a more productive and healthy relationship. The approach will be an elaboration on a number of key aspects of constructivist thought. These aspects will be considered in context with conclusions based on their suitability when employed in a non post-modern setting.

The environment for these classes is a medium to large church setting. Specifically, the ultimate goal is to develop the foundation for a program of learning opportunities for adults at West Portal Church in Saskatoon. This church has an attendance that averages from five to seven hundred people per week. The congregation includes approximately two hundred children and youth below the age of eighteen. The largest demographic are those people ranging in age from eighteen to fifty. Within this group, the majority are made up of couples with school-age children. This paper will seek to employ constructivist principles as a foundation for teaching marriage, relationship, and parenting skills. It is hoped that the research and suggestions culminating from this paper might have practical benefit for these people.

The congregation has entered a period of evaluation and restructuring. The leadership team has promoted the metaphor of a baseball diamond. Each base represents a major step in addressing the growth needs of the members and adherents. The second base is called Maturity. I am a member of the committee responsible for this base. We are charged with developing programs whose focus is training, knowledge and life skills. These programs amount to a broad-based attempt to help individuals cope with the experiences of their daily lives. As an evangelical community, this of course includes Bible education, but also considers practical aspects such as financial management, skills for raising children, and marriage enrichment. Our approach is to address the whole person from a foundation that God cares about every aspect of a person's life.

Of importance for consideration is the general shift away from the traditional Sunday school programming. West Portal employs a small group method called Care Groups to provide the means of addressing individual needs. Under the leadership of a couple, groups of eight to sixteen meet regularly in a home to study, share personal trials and victories, engage in social activities and provide support in their daily experiences. This is mentioned because the provision of instruction must fit into the overall administration and operation of the church.

West Portal Church members are a diverse group but comprised primarily of middle income families. The largest group represents families who are homeowners, dual income, and leading the typical busy lifestyle associated with these circumstances. Most would stress healthy family and

marriage relationships as a priority. Marriage is assumed to be a lifelong commitment. That is not to say that divorces do not occur (although rare) but it is an accepted principle that marriage is sacred and a vow not lightly broken. The environment for teaching and training within the church is somewhat unique. Since all its operations are self-funding, it is necessary to seek economies where possible. This suggests that volunteers perform much of the work within the congregation. Indeed, it is a fundamental value that participation in some way in the life of the community should be part of their experience. More on that later.

The facility is flexible. The building has a sanctuary seating between four and five hundred people. Steady growth has meant a move in recent years to double services. There is a gymnasium, a chapel area with room for one hundred people, and about a dozen smaller rooms of varying size. A church of this number is able to hire a fairly large professional staff. There is a total of five full and part-time ministry staff plus an office manager, custodian and accountant. Due to time constraints, the senior pastor and associate generally do not teach classes that are scheduled on a weekly basis. They do however teach some of the seminar classes that are regularly organized. Thus, they are available to assist on some occasions.

Philosophical Considerations

I have considered long and hard the implications of using constructivism as a technology. The main issue is a question of reconciling the post-

modernist underpinnings of the approach with the theist foundation of evangelical Christianity. Constructivism as a strategy is one thing, as a philosophy it is another. Indeed, the question seems to remain to which category it belongs. Wilson (undated) suggests that constructivism is more a philosophy, not a strategy and that it is a way of seeing the world. I would tend to agree. This certainly seems evident when one considers Vygotsky's explanations of the approach. Obviously someone in my position must be wary of the foundation for constructivism. Is there an external reality? I say there is. Can this reality be understood? Yes it can. This thinking runs contrary to the post-modern model. As evangelicals, we promote a position that recognizes the existence of revealed *absolute* truth. I must therefore wade carefully through this pool of constructivist thought. Having said this however, an examination of the practical implications for constructivist learning reveals a high degree of compatibility. This is particularly true when one examines the less radical views of post constructivism. The key is a matter of perspective and application. Illustrating this debate, Wilson quotes a humorous anecdote of a Floridian politician asked to take a position on the issuance of liquor license.

"If by whiskey, you mean the water of life that cheers men's souls, that smoothes out the tensions of the day, that gives gentle perspective to one's view of life, then put my name on the list of the fervent wets. But if by whiskey, you mean the devil's brew that rends families, destroys careers and ruins one's ability to work, then count

me in the ranks of the dries." (p. 14) (Reflections
<http://www.cudenver.edu/~bwilson/construct.html>)

Perhaps contrary to what some outside the evangelical community may believe, there exists considerable latitude for choice in one's lifestyle and attitudes. It is certainly true that what is accepted as reality includes certain fundamental collections of ideas. This is externally imposed and contradicts post-modern thought. These beliefs are prescribed and do place restrictions both on behaviour and how these teachings are communicated. Nevertheless, you will find people of every political stripe, economic position and strata of education in our community. The challenge for teaching in this diverse situation is to make the learning opportunities and outcomes authentic. This is precisely where the practical approaches of constructivism are so valuable. A community such as ours emphasizes apprenticeship and collaboration. The experienced father will provide advice to the young man holding his new baby. A woman who has experienced the loss of a child will provide comfort and companionship to someone living this out. Successful married couples act as models and mentors for others. This in large part is the model we employ for learning. It is effective because it is real. Compassion is something shown, not something stated. We place an emphasis on hospitality and we show this by opening our homes to people outside our personal circles. Dr. Larry Crabb, a well-known psychologist and author puts it this way.

Ordinary people have the power to change other people's lives. An older priest can revitalize a despairing younger colleague by pulling

the troubled man's head to his chest. A distraught father can touch his son with an energy that cuts through a hardened heart and awakens what is tender and true within the child. An adult daughter can offer something from hidden places within her to her ageing mother that releases hope in the elderly woman's heart, hope that can support her through her loneliness, confusion, and pain. (p. 31)

The point of these comments is to argue that training for successful marriage is exactly the kind of complex learning and teaching scenario for which constructivist principles are well suited. Marriage has been described as joyous work. It certainly is an institution that has grown more complex in recent years. The very nature of teaching for successful marriage suggests the need for an authentic and meaningful transfer of understanding into everyday practice.

More to the point, as a theist, can I employ strategies in line with constructivist principles and still be true to a contrary worldview? The answer, I believe, is a qualified yes. Wilson states that he is (suspicious of simple dichotomies like the idea that reality is either inside or outside of the mind.) He seems to suggest that there may be room for some accommodation. I doubt he would extend his worldview to accommodate mine but that doesn't preclude borrowing some of the essence from constructivist principles.

Employing Constructivism – *avoiding a shotgun wedding*

Two factors must be accommodated here. The first was mentioned earlier. Volunteers do most of the work done in a church and budgets are always an issue. Additionally, scheduling is constrained by other programming already in place. Two solutions present themselves. The majority of adults are already involved in the Care Group programming. Most of the groups meet mid-week, usually Tuesday or Wednesday. By offering learning opportunities one of these evenings, we provide an option without asking for a sacrifice of additional time. Requesting further time commitment in itself may be counterproductive to a goal of an improved marriage experience. We need to accommodate the reality of busy lives. Of even greater impact is the opportunity for location choice. The goal is to make learning as natural and real as possible. Care groups meet in homes. Surely this represents an opportunity to put the participants in a more comfortable and thoughtful frame of mind. Activities undertaken will be enhanced by the reality of the environment. The physical environment may aid in the development of context sensitive learning opportunities. Essentially, it may remove one of the barriers to learning.

The schedule helps solve the problem of who should be the leader/instructor. Within our congregation are a number of people with professional counselling backgrounds and many who can provide leadership by example. In congregations such as ours, we place personal success before professional. We value proven experience. Our goal is to

create disciples. We want models of success for other to emulate. Leaders and teachers are expected to “walk the talk.” Nevertheless, when possible, we look for opportunities for these traits to work in tandem.

Constructivism places value in the motivation of the learners. Those who attend sessions demonstrate a level of desire solely based on their presence. Churches such as West Portal strongly encourage but do not require participation in learning opportunities. Further to the point, the majority of couples will be seeking to improve their relationships as opposed to saving them. Thus we can conclude that some level of motivation is present at the outset of classes. Participants will desire to take something useful away from the sessions. A schoolteacher recently expressed, “what ‘s the use of attending a PD (professional development) session unless you receive some handouts.” The point was easily understood. Unless she could walk away with something she could (immediately) put to use, there were better ways to spend her time. Participants in a marriage class come motivated to take something away that will deepen their relationships.

Another compatible aspect is inclusion of learners in the planning process. What is interesting here is how the nature of a church community blends well with this priority. Delegation is a necessary component of the operation of the church. The majority of members on committees and boards are lay people who volunteer time and energy to aid in its mission. They represent a cross section of the congregation whose individual priorities are shared with others. In this context those aiding in the design

of programming are the same people who participate in the finished product. There are of course limitations. Where in the end several hundred people will at one time or another take a marriage course, a handful of people may take part in its development. Essentially, a sample is used to meet the wider group's needs. This however is less of an issue than it may first appear. In my experience as a teacher of adults for over fifteen years, the students have a significant impact on the progression of any given class. Without necessarily leaving the focus of the class, I've often found us drawn in a direction based on the interests and comments posed by the participants. No doubt this happens to professors in university classes. In essence, the outline and content is in part developed and then directed by its participants. In this way, it is more real.

A third issue for consideration is that of the type of questions asked in the constructivist environment. Constructivism encourages open-ended questioning with probing follow-ups by the teacher to draw out meaning. This can be very valuable. A question such as the following may arise. "How does this affect your feelings about your spouse?" The question results in a highly personalized response. It is in how the teacher responds that divergence from constructivism may occur. The teacher's role may be to interpret for the student the implications of his or her answer. Due to the kinds of parameters existing within this community, some answers will be considered "wrong." For example, on the issue of sex, evangelical Christians generally believe that between married partners, "anything goes." We would counsel that if both parties are comfortable with it, and

both enjoy it, they should feel no guilt in the practice. There are however, necessary limits to this statement. Pornography for example, is considered inappropriate material. It then has no place even between married couples. This represents an example of an imposed reality and may conflict with constructivism on some level. I do not believe however, that it imposes unreasonable limits on the teacher's flexibility. An opportunity still exists to allow a student to construct a working solution that suits unique needs. Nevertheless, in this example, the post-modern underpinnings present a challenge to the teacher and student.

An interesting and related fourth aspect to consider is the use of semiotics. I wish to briefly speak to this topic. Symbols hold meaning for human beings. This is certainly true of those within the Christian community. In comparison to say, Roman Catholicism, the physical symbols we employ are quite spare. However the Christian tradition is full of symbols that carry a great deal of meaning. One of the most significant is the correlation between marriage and Christ's relationship with the universal church. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians said the following.

Wives, be subject your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ's also is the head of the church, He himself being the saviour of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her; that He might sanctify her, having

cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present to Himself the church in all here glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, just as Christ's also does the church because we're members of his body. Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respects her husband. Ephesians 5: 22-28,33

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Though a bit awkward and perhaps off-putting to the modern ear, these are very powerful images for the contemporary Christian. Paul's message is focused on the husbands. They are in a human relationship with their wives symbolic of the Saviour and the church. Paul is stating clearly that a husband's duty is to love and care for his wife. She is precious and worthy of a kind of sacrificial love represented by Christ's actions on their behalf. A teacher could easily draw out a discussion of practical implications. Words such as these fulfil the goal of challenging the learner's beliefs and understandings.

A more contemporary, and constructivist example of symbols and of accommodating multiple perspectives was defined by authors Smalley and Trent in the book, *The Language of Love*. Gary Smalley in particular has been in demand as a speaker in the area of relationships. Their book struck a chord with many couples because it discussed how the same

words and actions carry different meanings for men and women. In it the authors discuss how the biological and social impact of gender lead to a varied understanding and appreciation of the world. Before their time and in different words they were affirming some parts of constructivist thinking. Their assertion, and one I am comfortable with, states that men and women construct different realities. In the book, the authors promote the use of word pictures that will carry special meaning to a spouse. In one example, Smalley recalls a comment his wife made to help him connect with what she was trying to communicate. Smalley had asked his wife to contribute a chapter to a book he was writing. She seemed to put it off. As the deadline approached he reminded her of the task and made an attempt at motivation by saying he would be happy to go over the document to remove any errors. Writing in any case, he stressed, wasn't that big a deal. His wife, uncomfortable with the request, had been unable to communicate her tension to him in a meaningful way. Smalley was oblivious. These were messages she felt were obvious. He describes himself as decidedly left brained, she right. Her attempts to make him understand using her emotional responses proved ineffective. She then communicated her message in a language he would understand and based on his experiences. She pointed out the window to the Squaw Peak hills in the distance. She went on to describe his request as akin to asking her to carry a twenty-five pound pack up the slopes. He was an avid hiker and had recently climbed this peak. He suddenly saw the symbolism. She had communicated her message with an example that fit his constructed

framework of understanding. This message could form the basis of an excellent lesson.

A final consideration is the opportunity for collaborative learning. Not all learning situations within a Christian community can accommodate this constructivist goal. Adults in particular who are new to the Christian community often have “constructed” ideas running opposed to the message and values of the church. These individuals need to be introduced to the dominant views found within this community. A classic example is “turn the other cheek.” Initially, this may be characterized as a top down approach or teacher to student flow. In contrast, teaching for marriage enrichment offers tremendous opportunities for learners to work together to collectively draw out and construct understanding and practice. As mentioned before, the role of the church is to make disciples. To do this a model of mentorship is used. Each is called to set an example for others to emulate. This is of course more than being a living, breathing mannequin for others to observe. It is an active, interconnected process of observation, evaluation, discussion and change. A proverb of Solomon puts it this way.

Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another. Proverbs 27:17

Perhaps in this scenario, constructivism is not really a new process, but a redefinition of an old one. A group of couples working together have the collective experience, with guidance, to develop solutions and

enhancements to the marriage experience. What works? What doesn't? How do I draw out my husband's lack of desire to talk? How can I balance my work life with my wife's need for my companionship? These questions, and many others, can find more meaningful answers in a collaborative climate.

Conclusions

I was surprised having done the research, to discover how constructivism as a technology, if not always as a philosophy, could be accommodated. Certainly problems remain. On a fundamental level, every teacher needs to be aware of the differing foundations that exist between the conservative theist and post-modern positions. It is troubling to me that even in the public school system we are faced with a pace that causes thinking to take second place to doing. Faced with time, economic and social pressures, even professionals find themselves just trying to cope. In a Christian community such as West Portal's, as with any community based, volunteer run, institution, such problems exist. Many will not have the background to appreciate the implications. Indeed for a community that holds to truth as being (in some cases) absolute, all contemporary approaches remain suspect. It will remain the domain of the "experts" to act as gatekeepers. The work on this paper and in the course that led to its writing has perhaps provided some help in me developing as one of them.

At the beginning of the paper, observations were made on constructivism as either a philosophy or a technology. It clearly is the former. Yet, even in an environment such as mentioned above, it can be a useful tool to meet the needs of couples. Marriage classes deal with issues of everyday life. This is the kind of subject matter that craves reality in its discussion. Constructivism offers some aid in achieving that goal.

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