EDITORIAL

Construction and Education

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Do we find ourselves in a socially constructed world? Do we construct our own world from our experiences?

A number of educational jurisdictions in our time have embraced *inquiry* as the official approach to teaching and learning. The province of Alberta in Canada is one of these. South Africa is another. And, perhaps most importantly for the future both of China and the world, so has China where the entire school curriculum is presently being re-written around inquiry approaches.

It is sometimes suggested that where there is inquiry there is *construction*, or perhaps *constructionism* and *constructivism*. It is usually tacitly assumed, and sometimes explicitly believed, that when a child is learning by inquiry she or he is constructing meanings for themselves out of their experiences in their inquiry activities. Generally this is what is understood by constructivism: the learner constructs their own world of meanings as they proceed through life.

On the other hand, the learner has to succeed in constructing meanings that are part of the social norm in which they find themselves. And it is also tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, assumed that such socially normative meanings are somehow *socially constructed* by the past and present of one's social world – by the humans who have gone before or by one's contemporaries. This is generally understood as *social constructionism*.

When one is caught up in talk of this kind it seems obvious that we live in both a socially and personally constructed world and it is hard to see that there are any possible alternative accounts of the way it is. It begins to appear obvious and inevitable that everything in the world is so constructed, either socially or individually.

In a straight-forward way we can see that most of the objects of everyday life are humanly constructed in a non-metaphorical sense.

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Books, tables, chairs, automobiles, clothing – are all simply and straightforwardly constructed objects that make our lives what they are.

When our ancestors' lived in caves 10,000 years or more ago none of these things had yet been constructed and their lives were quite different from our own. We characteristically purchase our necessary implements whereas they had to make them. Ten thousand years ago there must have been quite a few things, probably countably few, in human lives that were literally constructed. If they wore the skins of animals to ward off the cold, or of they lay on beds of animal skins, somebody had to make them. If they used implements to make fire, or clean and scrape skins, or knock animals over the head, these were literally made by someone in the family or tribal grouping. Perhaps every child had to learn something of the use of wood and stone to make useful implements for survival. In that sense a child had literally to learn to construct the important objects of everyday life. Most thought, so far as it was mediated by language and not just grunts and crude gestures, would have been immediate and concrete like Wittgenstein's builders in the first few sections of the *Philosophical Investigations.*

Yet in the lives of our not so distant ancestors much, perhaps most of the things encountered in their everyday lives were not in any direct sense made or constructed. If they possessed rudimentary language perhaps some of these familiar things were named by them. People might have had names. Certain places might have had names. Animals they intended to eat or had to live among might have had names. But in a society that makes certain things and in which the maker is always known, making and naming would be radically distinct things. Perhaps there was somebody whose job it was to name things – a wise woman, a witch doctor, a chief personage of the family or tribal group. But no wise woman or witch doctor would imagine that by naming they were actually making or constructing something. At best they were suggesting a common label for things in their immediate and important everyday world. The things so labeled were already important.

Perhaps the mountain in the direction of the sun's rising was dangerous, or had game that was edible, or perhaps provided the best wood for clubs or other implements or just for burning. That mountain clearly needed a name. For identifying the mountain, where exactly it began and where exactly it ended would not be of any family or tribal importance. Its presence would dominate much of their daily lives and would be an obvious feature imposing itself upon them. A nearby stream of water would be of similar importance and an obvious feature too.

Whoever made these objects now named it certainly was not a contemporary tribal member or ancestral member of the tribe. These were just natural features, omnipresent and simply found to be there and as they were, but definitely not made – unless, of course, by a god.

The distinction between what was made and what was found would have been primary to a human being before the rise of civilizations and the enormous expansion of the vocabulary of common speech, the enormous expansion of traditions. For meaningful objects are those placed in traditions, that is, in practices that are kept. A mountain placed in one's traditions of wood gathering or hunting or perhaps just used for climbing and gazing would have been a meaningful mountain – perhaps a mountain justifying its very own name.

But as one moves farther through the development of human civilization the everyday life of nearly everyone (especially those born and raised in cities) things found and not made become fewer and fewer. At the same time, identification of the thing made with its maker becomes rare. Perhaps this accounts for the astonishing value placed on paintings by individual painters in our own time. For the objects of everyday life are now not constructed in the old way by family members, by past tribal members remembered, or by ourselves.

Constructed things are in the first instance constructed out of elements that are themselves not constructed. A found rock of a certain kind turns out to be easier than some to skillfully chip away until it forms a useful tool, an axe head, or a knife for our family or tribal purposes. But the rock from which the tool is constructed is not itself constructed. It is found.

This distinction between finding and making is part of the thought of existentialist philosophers in the 20th century: Heidegger, Sartre, Camus. For them it is important that we find ourselves in the world and begin to make of it what we can. But this making, this construction, is always made out of elements that are themselves *found*. Though of course much of what one finds, or encounters, as a small child is encountered as "just there" though perhaps arranged by or chosen by others for our delight or use: a teddy bear, a teething ring, clothing. Things found might have been previously constructed things. Happily the first thing most of us encounter is our mothers be-nippled breast or breasts. Something found but not constructed.

It is also possible to extend the usage of construct to include things that are only metaphorically constructed. We are often told that human

beings construct *concepts*. And the task of every child who would become educated is for that child to construct the right assemblage of concepts. But how unlike making a club or a bow and arrow is making a concept. Labeling, in the sense of naming, is clearly unlike making a bow and arrow. But what if we wish to have a concept to enable us to refer to the swords *Excalibur* and *Great Beastie*? Before there is a concept "club" or a concept "sword" there are likely to be named clubs and named swords, just as there likely were named tribal or family members before there was a concept family or tribe or even the name of a family "the Smiths," the "Zealandonii."

The metaphor of constructing, extended to concepts, is soon forgotten as a metaphor and is taken literally by modern analysts. After all this sword, Excalibur and that sword, Great Beastie, are the elements that make up the concept sword, just as this piece of wood and that stone make up an implement for bashing brains.

Indeed, the great construct comes to seem to be human language. And certainly the greatest of human creations is human language. And here the metaphor of social construction make sense, or seems to make sense, in a grand manner. How else could a language possess hundreds of thousands of spoken words and their written symbols? How else, except accumulation over countless generations, could such an astonishingly flexible and useful instrument be developed. And all our sciences are now seen as suburbs of language, suburbs constructed over many generations.

Of course a child finds itself in a world of language in much the way a hawk finds itself in a world of flight. The world of language is as natural for a human being as the world of air currents, updrafts, and downdrafts, and the visual tasks of detecting prey at great distances are to a hawk. Would we want to say that a young hawk constructs its meaning of the world in which it finds itself? Perhaps it is a better metaphor to suggest that a hawk negotiates its way into that world of flight. A young human, too, appears to slowly at first, and then more quickly, negotiate its way among the world of other human sounds and actions. It finds itself in a world of others speaking to it and being spoken to. It finds itself in the context of many actions and ways of doing things and slowly "picks up" what the others are doing. At some stage in childhood it will literally construct something out of elements, perhaps a tower of building blocks. But until it reaches that point the notion of construction has no purchase. Before it does the world is one of things found and negotiated, not things made. And certainly not things made

by the child her or himself. Is it the same with human language throughout childhood?

Does a child ever literally construct a word, or more extensively, construct a fresh thought? My daughter referred to my wife and I at the beginnings of her language capability as "Ee ah." My name is Ian and my wife is Gunilla. She found that whenever she uttered, more likely hollered, "Ee ah," (a sort of subset of sounds in each of our names) that one or the other or both of us came running. This is more or less exactly B.F. Skinner's "operant conditioning." Is it better expressed as personal construction of a child? I don't know.

But the rest of her rapid language growth did not have that behavioural character. It was more like Wittgenstein's phrase "light dawned slowly over the whole." For example, her first complete sentence came when at a little over a year or so she reached down from her chair (seated on the table) and scooped up a handful of butter which she stuck in her mouth. Both my wife and I were startled and said to her not to do that. And she replied with her first complete sentence "But I like it," an attitude she has stoutly maintained ever since. Where did the sentence come from? Not by tiny construction tasks leading to the inevitable construction of a sentence in English. It seems to me that is more likely put: "and then it appeared."

Before educators rush out to find personal construction tasks everywhere in the inquiry based education of children some more reflection of a fundamental kind ought to go on.

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