

## Connecting Volunteers and Agents: A Social Constructionist Perspective

### Abstract

Extension volunteers benefit from participation in training activities. Furthermore, Extension personnel are best positioned to provide volunteers with relevant training. However, trainers neglecting relationship building and failing to attend to the communicative process may achieve unsatisfactory results. Social constructionism, a theoretical model for knowledge construction, offers a viable approach for relationship enhancement between agents and volunteers. Social constructionism frames a collaborative learning environment in which dialogue is the principal mode of discourse.

### K. D. Dillivan

County Director and  
Extension Agent  
Colorado State  
University Extension  
Dove Creek, Colorado  
[kim.dillivan@colostate.edu](mailto:kim.dillivan@colostate.edu)

## Introduction

The success of Extension programming is due in part to the dedication of a large ensemble of volunteers (Smith, Dasher, & Klingborg, 2005). For example, the national 4-H community included 538,000 adult volunteers in 2012 (National 4-H Headquarters, 2012). Numerous other individuals serve in various Extension capacities because they are passionate about community service. Absent this critical involvement, Extension would likely experience difficulty meeting programmatic objectives.

Although volunteers are highly valued, their good intentions alone do not guarantee fulfillment of learners' needs and Extension goals (Bolton, 1992). Volunteers require meaningful opportunities for productive training (Fox, Hebert, Martin, & Bairnsfather, 2009). Insufficient training results in ineffective programs and disgruntled volunteers (Cook, Kiernan, & Ott, 1986). As professional educators, county agents are well positioned to conduct assessments of volunteers and provide relevant training. Unfortunately, many county Extension personnel lack the experience necessary for effective volunteer management (Boyd, 2004).

## Agent Volunteer Interactions

Professional development competencies appropriate for Extension volunteers include communication, planning, subject matter, and interpersonal (Seevers, Baca, & Leeuwen, 2005; Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2007). County agents also benefit when provided leadership, organization, personal, and management

skills training (Boyd, 2004). These endeavors are significantly leveraged when relationship building between agents and volunteers is prioritized. Social constructionism is a paradigm for social engagement that offers a set of unique strategies useful for accomplishing these goals.

## **Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism emphasizes the importance of social relationships in the formation of knowledge, and it explains how these relationships function to construct knowledge (Payne, 1999). Social constructionists maintain that knowledge creation is a product of our day-to-day interactions with each other, and through our discourse and conversation, knowledge is created. A constructionist orientation posits that there exists no ultimate, universal reality; our reality is the result of a shared learning process (Duffy & Jonassen, 1991).

Social constructionists are concerned with the processes of how people jointly create new meanings and unique understandings. The world, as known, is " *constituted* in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it" [italics in original] (Potter, 1996, p. 98). Social constructionists emphasize the role language plays in social activities (Gergen, 1999). Language is social action (Gergen & Gergen, 1997), and language, like other non-verbal messages, provides structure and gives meaning to social relationships.

Social constructionism does not reflect an anything goes attitude (Shotter, 1993). Our limits of making sense are bounded by our history and culture. Therefore we cannot make knowledge anything we want it to be. Social constructionists simply recognize that an awareness of something is different from knowledge about it (Rorty, 1979). It is not that reality fails to exist (Burr, 1995), only that claims concerning the world are independent of reality (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002).

## **Relationship Building Using Constructionist Strategies**

As a theoretical approach framing professional development activities between agents and volunteers, social constructionism is important in several ways. First, because social constructionists assert knowledge is socially created, they emphasize what McNamee and Gergen (1999) called "relational responsibility." Being relationally responsible involves a consideration for others, actively cultivating trust, and understanding the importance of relationships.

A second reason is that social constructionists strongly affirm the influence that language, culture, race, gender, and social class have on knowledge creation. Because knowledge is situationally dependent, our understanding is determined by cultural, historical, and social environments (Gergen, 1985). Knowledge is socially relative because our values, beliefs, and preferences are socially relative (Burr, 1995). Therefore, a social constructionist approach invites everyone into the conversation. This position is particularly relevant given Extension's non-discriminatory philosophy.

## **Strategies for Social Knowledge Construction**

### **Dialogue**

Dialogue is a communication process whereby people collectively explore their individual and collective assumptions and predispositions (Barge, 2002). As a mode of discourse, dialogue improves the quality

of conversation by addressing the process of thought that produces it (Isaacs, 1999). Isaacs said dialogue is "about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together" (p. 9).

One central feature of dialogue is the suspension of assumptions (Isaacs, 1993). This is the temporary deferment of ingrained beliefs to facilitate the consideration of ideas that may be new, unfamiliar, or perhaps uncomfortable (Barge, 2002). To Barge, this suspension "is about vulnerability—opening one's mind to consider new viewpoints and ideas and potentially letting go of one's own ideas" (p. 169). The impacts from negative or false assumptions in the dialogue process are minimized if those assumptions can be identified and suspended.

## **Relationally Responsible**

Anderson (1999) developed communities of collaborative learners by adopting processes conducive to a collaborative atmosphere where people were involved in constructing knowledge. For Anderson, being relationally responsible entails inviting others into the process. She did this by creating space for participation by encouraging individuals to accept responsibility for their own learning. McNamee and Gergen (1999) advocated for a responsibility in relationships given that "meaning, rationalities, the sense of value, moral interest, and motivation" are all developed within relationships (p. 10).

## **Collaborative Learning**

To learn collaboratively means to share learning with other people (Doran, 2001). For Saltiel (1998), collaboration results in relationships that are dynamic, synergistic, and impossible to achieve with individual learning activities. Bruffee (1986) explained that collaborative learning fosters social knowledge construction.

## **Applications**

A social constructionist perspective emphasizes constructive communication, including questioning for understanding and clarifying and explaining responses. Group synergy results when participants actively listen, reflect on what is heard, and avoid unrelated topics and interruptions. By scaffolding onto what others say, each participant encourages the further exploration of a topic to create a commonly-held, shared understanding.

In Extension, a social constructionist approach represents a new way of relating between agents and volunteers, and has the potential to augment any educational activity, including training, mentoring, orientation, and assessment. For example, social constructionism can be used in subject-matter training where each individual has varying knowledge of the subject. But together participants can collaborate using dialogue to create a robust and complete group understanding. In summary, social knowledge construction results when participants respectfully and inclusively co-create both what is learned and how it is learned.

## **Conclusion**

An agent choosing a social constructionist approach would necessarily place more responsibility for learning in the hands of participants. The agent, therefore, assumes a new role as well—that of process teacher and facilitator. This means that agents provide opportunities for volunteers to learn

how to dialogue effectively and to position themselves as co-learners and as co-constructors of knowledge. This requires the development of a unique agent-volunteer relationship.

For some people the idea that relationships are the basis for what we come to know and how we come to know it is not easily assumed. Furthermore, the process skills needed for this style of relating are not widely held. The process of exploration of new ideas and paths to knowledge construction requires an open, inquiring approach. The agent who models the exploration process while seeking to develop a co-creator relationship will encourage a learning environment beneficial to all involved.

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