

Reflections

The Institute for Creative Change was founded to explore and promote ways to enhance effective human change through a learning forum in which practicing professionals could experience the practical results of focusing change efforts on relationships, human systems and a strong emphasis on the future. Learning how to effectively create preferred or desired change with people and organizations has always attracted those whose passion and livelihood has been committed to generating these changes with those they serve in their professional roles. As relational theories of human behavior and change emerged, the Institute provided a learning community that invited collaborative learning and innovation about a process of change that targeted “betweenness” rather than individual selves.

We at the Institute experimented with many of the developing approaches to generating intentional change that populated the professional landscape during those years when postmodern change practices fired the imagination of creative professionals around the world. We also experimented with practical and effective methods for training other professionals to apply these new approaches constructively and successfully to their own change work with people. These emerging concepts, and the ways of thinking they required, frequently felt strange, confusing and, at times, quite threatening to practitioners who had been primarily schooled in more traditional modernistic change practice thinking and methodologies.

As we encountered these challenges in the training work of our Institute, we quickly recognized that learning the thinking had to happen before learning the professional applications of this thinking could occur. We also discovered that reading, lectures and conversations about postmodern relational approaches to change were just not enough to generate the learning necessary to employ this thinking in our professional work and our everyday lives. This was especially so as our conceptual thinking became increasingly more identified with social construction and the freedom it offered to consciously create our futures. We learned that what was critical for the learning we were promoting at the

Institute was an experiential learning that went far beyond an academic immersion in these very exciting but difficult to comprehend ideas. This experiential learning appeared to fuel the curiosity that we found necessary to expand on an understanding of the concepts and to feel free to experiment with practical applications of these concepts to our professional work with others.

Our learning experiences with social construction and its tremendous power for creating intentional change led to our designing experiential learning exercises of many different kinds. These became the core of our training programs. One of our most successful training ventures has been the Learning Labs that we began offering to a broad professional community nearly 20 years ago. Our development of the Learning Labs reflected our perception that our own continued learning about social constructionism was greatly enhanced when our learning community collaboratively designed learning exercises that would present our thinking and experience with change to others in a structured learning environment. We used real-life situations as the medium in which professionals and other interested people could safely and freely experiment with our ways of thinking. We found we learned more about creative change and we found that others could more easily understand what we were presenting when they could feel it and experience it for themselves within the context of situations with which they were all familiar.

With this process, new meanings about people and change emerge for all involved. The confusion and threat of the new thinking begin to dissolve and its benefits become more evident. Social construction becomes more palpable and understandable when it can be recognized and experience firsthand in our everyday lives. The relational nature of our human world and all we take for granted in that world becomes more apparent when we can experience it in learning exercises. The freedom of creating new ways of living and relating also becomes more evident in these exercises. These can be very exciting experiences for all involved. The applications are many, diverse, personal, and professional.

This collaborative effort on the part of all of us at the Institute for Creative Change has led to a learning community that we all highly value. We love to share what we are learning about social construction and change and the application of our experiments with it to our professional work and our everyday lives. Three years ago, we decided to put our work with our Learning Labs into writing so others could make use of these learning exercises in their professional and personal lives. We hoped our story would encourage others to explore and promote the powerful potentials for personal, organizational and social change that social constructionism offers us all. This book is the outcome of that decision. We believe that it can provide a guide for new learning that can benefit many beyond our own learning community. We also experienced while writing this book what we had learned when creating the Learning Labs it describes; that is, how our learning expands whenever we create a new medium for presenting the concepts and the practical applications of social construction and creative change.

Robert Cottor

I remember the time when Bob and Sharon Cottor had no interest in writing what they were teaching. I think they believed that change was always on the move. How could one ever capture change in print? It's likely to change again. I am not sure what finally brought pen to paper. I imagine their thinking changed after they contributed to a collaborative effort titled *Relational Responsibility*, a book by authors associated with the Taos Institute. Shortly after, our project was born. All these relationships creating selves and now we are writers too.

My training with the Cottors first began as a budding clinician some 15 years ago. I would have appreciated a book to help me understand the many concepts we were learning. Our only text was *The Tree of Knowledge*, by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987). At the time, I had great difficulty transferring their biological concepts to social living. However, my experiences in Learning Lab, where faculty offered participatory experiential forums enabled me to learn the social constructionist theory underlying their practice. In Lab, we would experience shifts in perspectives from

a dominant discourse to a social construction perspective, offering more possibilities than before. Faculty affectionately refer to Lab as a place in which we can experience *theory in action*, much like our clients will experience when we learn how to think, do and act as social constructionists both in our personal and professional lives. These learning experiences in Lab were so effective in translating a complex theory into an experience that we eventually became convinced of the need to document the manner in which we translated theory into action and hence, the idea for our book.

Nature is the metaphor I love to use when speaking of change and our process of writing together these past three years. The unfolding of nature is a magical experience and writing this book has been a magical process as well. The seeds of this book were created over the course of twenty years of hands-on Labs written and performed by faculty and practitioners in our learning community. The Labs evolved into chapters and we evolved into a collaborative writing team. We had perturbations to deal with along the natural drift and accepted those challenges as part of the natural process of writing together, remembering theory first and foremost. Nature unfolding is a complex and beautiful dance to witness, and as I reflect, so are we.

Judith Levin

If you are a dedicated Social Constructionist, this field book is a world-class learning experience.

If you are not a dedicated Social Constructionist, there is also a world-class learning experience for you, and you may enjoy the use of this map (there are many maps, and this is just one).

So why would I want to pick up this map and venture into this territory?

It offers an experience in how to expand our ability to make creative, responsible and positive change at home, at work, and in our communities.

Two central geographical features of this book are focused on below:

- Encountering the core **Basic Assumptions** chapter
- The **Learning Lab** section.

I. Trailhead Orientation: Social Construction theory is the equivalent of yoga for the mind. It invites us through different conceptual postures to try on new forms of thinking about how we create our pictures of truth and reality. It invites us to explore how we make meaning in our careers and lives. Social Construction thinking is a skill that, once mastered, allows for the maintenance of an open mind far beyond our previous abilities. An open-minded stance within the continuous process of change in our lives provides distinct advantages for effective solutions.

II. Approaching the Basic Assumptions Chapter: This chapter is a masterpiece distillation of knowledge over forty years in the making. It is an integration and creation of the best theories, of how we make meaning and thus how we explore the best options for change. For someone new to the understanding of Social Construction, this chapter may well challenge the foundations of how you think about meaning-making and change, but it is worth the anxiety. It is an opportunity to view sacred cows from another angle. Assume this chapter will be a great challenge. Go at your own pace.

An Example: Here is the first sentence under *The Social Construction of Meaning* section: “We assume that meaning, reality, knowledge, truth, values and morals are all socially constructed through our relating to others and our participation in our relevant communities and cultures.”

How’s that for an opening stretch? No matter what the science, no matter what the absolute truth, no matter what the quality of research, it is the understanding between you and I that will build our version of reality as well as our reaction to it. Between you and I, we construct our reality from an infinity of possible ingredients of meaning, including the realities of hard science.

So why is this such a big deal? Wherever there is an opportunity for dialogue, there is an opportunity to make change. We build our relationships together. If the relationship is in difficulty, has become boring, or needs a good spring cleaning, we have the option to remodel it.

Social Construction Theory is considered a postmodern way of thinking about the world. Modern thought is considered to come from the Age of Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it was believed there were universal realities that could accurately be identified outside and distinct from the observer. Social Construction cautions that the observed and the observer act on each other.

The right answer is certainly something we all long for. “Just get to the truth.” “I asked a simple question, I want a simple answer.” “If it ain’t broke, don’t try to fix it.” We all tend to be conservative about change; we believe it takes a lot of energy to change (while ignoring the energy it takes to *not* change), and change can mean uncertainty. Yet for all the yearning for the truth, we all have examples of the failure of the truth, or of the current standard of excellence: the black-and-white legal decision based on *the law* that blocks out the experience of multiple and mutual responsibility, the best scientific medical treatment plan that didn’t work when an alternative therapy did, and the negotiation that was successful because all the standard assumptions were tossed out for starters.

Another Example: A mind stretch of yogic proportions in the theory chapter, and this time to the point of anxiety for some, is the challenge of the idea of the individual self. Yes, there is a definable biological felt sense of self we experience. But how do we explain differences in our business self, our family self, our neighborhood self, our sexual self, and our spiritual self?

The chapter says about individuality: “We assume that what we call individual selves is, actually, a construction of many diverse and overlapping ‘selves’ which are as multiple and complex as the significant relationships and social contexts in which we participate.”

There is often fear with this challenge of the one true self, but there's the potential for many responsible and plausible manifestations of self in the dialogues of our relationships. This is an invitation to see how the one self expands into many for great flexibility in response to the world.

III. Steep Grades in the Basic Assumptions Chapter: Anticipate some sore mental muscles, some blistered concepts, some frustration, and some great breakthroughs as you negotiate these steep trails. You will bump into many mind expanders in addition to the examples given above. If you find yourself weary and out of breath trying to integrate all that theory, *take a break and do a Lab*. The theory chapter and the Lab exercises are the two primary driving forces of this book. The theory inspires the Lab, and the Lab allows the direct experience of theory in action.

IV. The Labs, Doing it! There are twelve Lab exercises. Pick one that interests you, and do it with a group at your work, school, church, or in your network. You will have a hands-on transformative experience of this creative meaning making work. It is infectious. After one good workout, it will be hard to drop this pursuit of contextual understanding of reality as a living, ever-changing process. After doing a Lab, the movement back and forth between theory and application will be easier.

Fire-starting Kit: You need at least one other seed person (an ideal minimum might be four total) to plan the performance of the Lab. In addition, you need at least six participants, so you can break out into small groups many of the Labs require. With a group of ten people, including your seed or starter group, you can experience Social Construction in action.

The small seed or starter group, sometimes formed as a learning community, should read the Lab you have chosen on their own from stem to stern, jotting down notes and questions. Then you need to meet and coordinate your understanding of how you will perform the Lab as you are relationally constructing that process. When you present your Lab, explain to your participants that this is being performed in the spirit of an

experiment and an experience. There are no right or wrong answers. Support each other in exploring how meaning is made and how creative change can be generated.

Pausing by the Social Construction Trail, a Moral Challenge: Social Construction has been attacked as relativistic, as lacking a moral compass, as denying fact and truth. A veteran of Social Construction trails knows that to be humble is a good thing. The understanding is not a denial of some absolute truth, but an acknowledgement that human biology is not omnipotent. We know that all of us have imperfections of perception and insight. This knowledge pushes us to act in a relationally responsible manner. We should never assume we have a total handle on the truth, but just a little piece of it from our perspective. So we honor all perspectives and try to craft mutual understanding of our living process that keeps the greatest number of voices singing in the chorus of our being.

Alan Asher

Words about writing

This book...

Coming together.

Four. Representing multiple voices.

Honoring history, others, ourselves.

Push, tug, pause, weave.

Invest...time.

Reflect, respect, discuss, create.

Accommodate, assimilate, record.

Relationships, responsibilities, valuing, sustaining.

Play, sort, unfold.

Living theory.

Push, tug, pause, weave.

An invitation...

Proud.

Enjoy!

Cindy Weiser