

— Foreword —

Some books invite you to pause and reflect on your practices; and their new language opens the door to new understanding. John Shotter's *Social Construction on the Edge* is such a book.

Knowing Shotter's work, I look forward to reading him and reacquainting myself with him in every book; to be fully open to his words and imagine how readers unfamiliar with his books might read them. Each book is not only a private conversation with the author, but a creation and discovery of each reader's own interpretations. His words offer a special *value* to all practitioners.

Shotter belongs to a group of social thinkers seeking a radical shift in how we view our world and the people who inhabit it. They question the classical world view, saturated as it is with theories about our lives and behaviors. Each of those theories describes categories, types and kinds of behavior; assumes a body of knowledge that's centralized, fixed, discoverable and re-discoverable; and reflects distant, dualistic and hierarchical relationships existing within static structures.

Practitioners with this world view are experts who carefully hone their insights about the human condition. But they often appear judgmental, pedagogic and patronizing in comments about how people live their lives or organize their practices and businesses.

In Shotter's world view, people are unique "individuals", actively engaged in developing knowledge rich in local relevance and fluidity. Language and words are highly contextualized and performative, relational and generative. His is a more inclusive, interactive approach.

But he doesn't simply follow the radical line. His books go further, inspired by the "specific *utterances* or *expressions*" of noted authors such as: Bakhtin, Garfinkle, Merleau-Ponty, Voloshinov, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein. In his books, Shotter allows us to us listen in on "conversations" he had with these authors' words over the years, and how they helped him understand and see things differently. Conversations, a generative process, that position him at the edge of social constructionism rather than at its center. Shotter's ideas, and their relational evolution, demonstrate critical theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome theory regarding the growth and transformation of ideas. I think Shotter might agree with editor Chrisopher Norris's (1989) comment that such bodies of work are "typically many years ahead of the academic disciplines and teaching disciplines that have obvious reasons of their own for preserving the *status quo*." (Practitioners like Shotter tend to be way ahead of mainstream theorists in terms of their practical wisdom and knowledge, acquired "in the trenches" of their practice while confronting unique situations, conditions and challenges that must remain abstract to theorists.)

Social Construction on the Edge, a collection of essays taken from

Shotter's presentations or revisions of his earlier writings, allows us to explore more deeply the notion of *witness* thinking, talking and acting he introduced us to in earlier works. It is dialogue, reflective interactions that celebrate *understanding* as a relationally responsive activity: always in process and never fully finalized. Such understanding arises organically from the relationship, what we do together.

Shotter organizes *Social Construction on the Edge* around six interconnected themes woven through each chapter:

1. "How we might come to know a unique other . . . *as unique*;"
2. "First-time, unique, irreversible changes, novelties, changes of a *qualitative* kind;
3. "*Developmental continuity*" and "*identity preserving*" as important characteristics of human beings;
4. The "chiasmic structuring of living meetings....when two or more living beings meet and begin to *respond* to each other;
5. What must be 'already there' in the "background of our meetings" that allows our "actions" to "have meanings intelligible to others;" and
- 6, "The nature of people's *initial stance or initial* attitude as they approach each other prior to their actual meeting . . . 'set the scene' . . . for how participants will react to everything occurring within *the event of their meeting*."

The threading may appear repetitious, but it is not. Each theme and its discussion occur within the context of a different account, a new exploration, a continued appeal for us to approach our practices in a way that attends to and includes the central focus of the book or its "edge:" the "spontaneous, expressive-responsiveness of our living bodies." That is, meaning-making and understanding begin in social exchange and are influenced by the background against which they occur. It serves as the glue that in Shotter's words, "holds us together in all our relationships, both to the other people as well as to all the other events occurring in our surroundings."

This is a book for practitioners, "for people who must work and act from within the midst of complexity, who must think in action, who must understand their world while moving around in it." It is a powerful summons to constantly reflect on our practices across diverse disciplines, contexts and cultures (psychology, management, education, writing or research etc.) and to craft them to better fit the expressed and unique needs of our clients and our consumers in this ever-changing world.

But Shotter doesn't set out discrete methods, techniques, pre-structured steps or strategies. He suggests a practical *way of being* in the world, which is based on a collection of what might be called values or principles or what he calls "sensitivities" and "sensibilities." These are particular awarenesses and understandings about us, others and our interactions with each other, and about the surroundings and circumstances in which these occur that

serve as “guides.” Not guides as in guidebooks or manuals, but as help for us to assume a particular attitude or stance with which we approach, meet, interact and make-meaning with "the other" and with our environments.

Practitioners can see themselves as experts who know how people should live their lives, what they should inquire into and how and what they should learn, for example. It is a hierarchical perspective. Shotter advocates a more equitable stance in which the practitioner is engaged, involved and responsive. He proposes that we pay attention to and learn from how we respond with each other in every day interactions: our spontaneous and responsive lifestyle. This can help us participate more fully and openly in our practice as active participants, and act more human.

It's about *preparing for participation* rather than just doing the practice. Getting ready is an extra opportunity to think about our world, the people in it and our relationships. Each interaction becomes more humane, both in our practices and our everyday lives and relationships. Preparing in this way, Shotter suggests, enables us to become more spontaneous.

Reading Shotter, I reflected on the growing body of practices that we consider collaborative, conversational, dialogical and open-dialogue--mine and others. Several interrelated characteristics resonate with the reader: The practitioner's way of being – a way of being *with* – talking with, acting with, thinking with and responding with -- versus doing, talking and thinking for, to or about. I suggest that this way of “being with” can entail

a) leaving behind (or at least being suspicious of) theory-driven techniques and methods;

b) spontaneously responding to whatever is unique to the occasion and what it involves, versus being deliberate and reacting almost by rote;

c) being, engaging and acting in the moment as opposed to superficially analyzing and knowing ahead of time;

d) identifying seemingly small or large “problems” not as problems but simply as life challenges that are dissolved in language as we take action, or at least plan it;

e) the practitioner learns about the client or customer and honors their preferred way of being and telling;

f) being a genuine interested and curious learner, as the practitioner's approach becomes contagious and leads to mutual inquiry;

g) through mutual inquiry, through the witness dialogical process, beginning to consider questions as starting points and ways of participating in a conversation;

h) encountering each person and their circumstances, even if familiar or similar, as if “for the first time;”

i) once in “for the first time” mode, turning the invisible familiar into the visible unfamiliar and allowing ourselves to notice and discover the difference and uniqueness of the other person and their circumstances;

j) generating what is being created within the witness dialogical

process, and not bringing it in from the outside by an expert knower; and

k) not seeing what is created as a solution, a product or an explanation, but rather something unique, appropriate and useful for the current situation.

Lastly, understand the importance of simultaneously being a courteous guest and host to the other. In my own work, I refer to this described way of "being with" as a *philosophical stance*.

I meet many practitioners and people they work with from various disciplines, contexts and cultures. All face the unavoidable complexities and challenges of a changing and shrinking world in which social, cultural, political and economic transformations take place every day. The internet and new media are decentralizing information, knowledge, and expertise. The call is for democracy, social justice and human rights; listening to the people's voice or voices; engagement and collaboration. People want to influence what affects their lives; many having lost faith in dehumanizing or manipulative institutions and practices. They demand more flexible and respectful systems or services.

Practitioners wonder how to stay relevant, and help create a more humane world in which everyone is treated with respect and dignity. I believe the witness dialogical approach described in *Social Construction on the Edge*, and its wider context, can free us from restrictive theories and offer hope of new ways of seeing, looking, listening and being in our professional and personal lives. And of course, responding relevantly.

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P.S. Please do not skip the Prologue and Introduction: they *prepare* you for the reading.