Radical Constructivism

The Generous Listener

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Contextual setting

Ernst von Glasersfeld (EvG) was invited to give a keynote speech in late July 2010 at the Cybernetics: Art, Design, Mathematics (C:ADM2010) conference organized by the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC). Although the keynote speech was scheduled for the evening, he arrived a few hours earlier and participated in some of the group discussions that took place during that day. This proved challenging since, due to his age of well over ninety, his sight and hearing were severely impaired – he described himself as “a quarter blind and three quarters deaf” during his speech later in the evening (Glasersfeld 2010b). I had previously learned to make do using pen and paper in similar circumstances with a close family member and wrote EvG short notes summarizing briefly what was being said when the conference community was being guided around the venue of the conference, the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. Since the guided tour often required silence, EvG also responded through handwritten notes and, following the conference, initiated an email exchange with me that lasted until his death in November 2010. I thus became, in the words of Jack Lochhead, probably EvG’s “last new correspondent.” At the time we met, I had hardly read any of EvG’s works. It thus baffled me that when I met him, he already knew who I was and immediately referred to a paper co-authored by me. The paper (Herr & Fischer 2010) discusses avoiding goal-orientation in design education. I had brought some offprints along and placed them on the conference book table, where EvG had picked one up earlier in the day. He expressed his appreciation for the constructivist epistemological assumptions underlying the paper, which led to a conversation on the notion of generos- ity. During the conference as well as in our communication following the conference, generosity formed a central idea in our exchange at three levels: as a conference topic, as the subject of EvG’s and my conversation, and as its nature. In the following, I discuss the notion of generosity in light of what EvG wrote to me and the publications by EvG I had read in the meantime (with particular emphasis on papers that he recom- mended or sent to me). I make use of two examples to illustrate the role of generosity in communication: that of linguistic exchange across language barriers, and that of making music together.

Generosity in linguistic communication across language barriers

Radical constructivist epistemology posits experience as the bedrock on which all notions of knowledge and communication are based (Glasersfeld 2010c: 20). When learning a language, children abstract and isolate discrete items in the flow of their subjective experience. With words being acquired through abstraction from experi- ence by each individual, and not through a pre-established code, linguistic communica- tion brings with it uncertainty (Glasersfeld 2010a). This uncertainty tends to remain unnoticed if we stay within the comfortable confines of those contexts to which we have become well-accommodated. Where communication, however, takes place in or across different contexts and where those who intend to communicate cannot rely much on previously established shared ex- pectations, uncertainty can become notice- able. EvG often reminds readers of his work that meanings attached to words are not only constructed individually, but that they are furthermore learned from experiences in specific linguistic and cultural environ- ments. For this reason, translating from one natural language into another is not a
trivial task. The connection to experience disturbs the notion of translation, as implied by bilingual dictionaries, in that experiences connected to words in a foreign culture are unlikely to match experiences in one’s own language (Glaserfeld 2010a). EvG derived many of his insights from being able to experience in and through several different languages: he spoke German, Italian, French and English with great sophistication. It is this experience that opened his eyes to the subjectivity and uncertainty that underlie linguistic communication, which contributed to EvG’s development of the fundamentally experience-based epistemology of radical constructivism. By focusing on experience and the ongoing feedback between individuals constructing their images of the world in and through language, and the constraints imposed on this process by that world, radical constructivism shares interests with cybernetics. The ideas of constraints and validity in radical constructivism are rooted in processes of feedback and exchange and replace notions of reality and truth in the realist framework.

If each experiencer constructs his world in isolation, one however immediately wonders how those encountering each other through language can still bridge this gap. EvG (ibid) argues that understanding becomes possible through approximation or sharing of different individual conceptual worlds. This sharing or approximation is where generosity seems to be a basic necessity. Anyone who has ever travelled in a country in which he or she did not speak the native language will probably agree that understanding takes considerable amounts of goodwill on each side. Goodwill here describes the generosity and benevolence to assume that the other person with whom one is attempting to converse is making sense – even when one is not yet able to discern what that sense could possibly be. To someone who speaks two or more languages at a high level of sophistication, such as EvG, these gaps in linguistic communication are unlikely to disappear, but remain as an awareness of the characteristic flavors of thinking and speaking that each language entails. The more languages one speaks fluently, the less bilingual dictionaries seem adequate as the appreciation of language and thinking flavors eludes simple word substitution. The European languages EvG spoke are relatively closely related and challenges of translation do not seem a big issue. I cannot but wonder about the particular sensitivity necessary to construct an entirely new epistemology from the experience of speaking and thinking in these languages. In my exchange with EvG, I recounted my personal experience of learning Chinese, where any attempt at approaching this task as a simple substitution of words helped by translating gadgets is quickly frustrated – readers may themselves try translating a Chinese text using online translating websites to share this experience. This frustration may, however, also lead to a renewed genuine engaging with the other with whom one is trying to communicate: aware of the lack of formal reference frameworks, understanding can again arise from the sensory manifold generated by the attempt at reading facial expressions and gestures, listening to sounds as carriers of sentiment, and by making drawings on paper. In this sense, inadequate bilingual dictionaries may even be conceived of as adequate as they show the gap in linguistic communication that needs personal encounters and experiences in order to be bridged. Learning Chinese, which as a language is quite simple yet very different from European languages, requires one to learn a new way of experiencing the world. It is this encounter with a culture of thinking and speaking very obviously different from my own that makes me understand and value radical constructivism as a framework of thought that accommodates difference. EvG welcomed my account as a confirmation and extension of his own experiences and expressed his regret that as a child he was never able to learn an “oriental language.”

Generosity in accommodating the other

Along with keeping an open mind, willingness and tolerance, enjoying difference and supporting variety as well as trust, Glanville (2001) identifies generosity as a quality underlying the ability to listen. Referring to Nichols (1995), Glanville emphasizes that it is listening that allows conversations to arise. Conversation in this context transcends linguistic exchange and refers to the process of permitting, supporting and encouraging interactive exchanges that give rise to delight as well as novelty. Glanville (2001) thus considers generosity central to human experience as well as a desirable human quality. When describing communication from a radical constructivist viewpoint, EvG argues against the conception of language as a system of references to an external reality and often refers instead to Wittgenstein’s metaphor of language as a “Vorstellungsklavier,” a piano of which the keys are ideas.
Employing the metaphor of music to illustrate radical constructivist epistemology may lead to even more thoughts on conceptions of language and meaning as well as the role of generosity in conversation. Wittgenstein's piano with a keyboard of ideas makes reference to several conventions, such as a conception of what constitutes a piano as well as an established musical tonality and notation system. From the view of radical constructivism, however, every person can be assumed to keep on constructing an individual musical instrument from childhood. It is difficult to imagine that the instruments we bring along when we come together in communication are similar in many ways. At the time of such encounters, each “musician” has become an expert playing a unique instrument. It may be that the types of instrument, the sounds they produce, the notes these sounds are performed from, and the way they are played are all different. Once two “musicians” come together to play, they will need considerable generosity not only to accept that the other’s music is indeed music but also to see how it may be played together with one’s own. Similarly, considerable generosity is required to allow one’s own ideas and perceptions to widen or transform the scope of one’s own music enough to accommodate the other’s music. Without generosity on the part of both musicians in this encounter, making music together becomes impossible. Radical constructivism as proposed by EvG allows for conceiving of encounters between people without relying on predetermined rigid constraining frameworks that could be referred to. It allows experiencers to meet others within their own experience, and it allows understanding to arise from a generous appreciation of experiences that may not always be comfortable. In addition to my mentioning of generosity as a necessary ingredient of communication, EvG added “and flexibility” in our hand-written conversation at C:adm2010 (Fig. 1). When considering the metaphor of two different musicians with different instruments and conceptions of music meeting to make music together, the notion of flexibility applies to the ability to re-consider and expand one’s notion of music to accommodate the other’s music. I believe that this is an illustration of EvG’s radical constructivist notion of “conceptual accommodation,” albeit in a slightly different sense. The notion of constraints in radical constructivism seems to suggest that encounters with experiential reality are necessarily limited because we can only experience on the basis of our own past constructions, and that this “constrains” the experiencer in some way. The musical analogy, however, shows how accommodation in the sense of flexibility may also be understood as a personal enrichment, and as encouraging the learning of new ways to appreciate.

**References**


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**Appreciating generosity**

Words are empty until they become appreciable through own experiences. This insight as it is expressed here remains empty, however, until it is attached to personal experiences and appreciation. It is one thing to write about generosity, it is yet another thing to experience constructing together in conversation with a constructivist ready to engage the other on generous terms. I deeply appreciate the experience.