Radical Constructivism

Realities in Radical Constructivism

Commentary on Johnson’s “Footprints in the Sand”

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> Context • Johnson argues that because radical constructivism requires social constraints and therefore ontological assumptions, it is no different from constructive realism, which is comparatively mainstream. > Results • While the distinction between these approaches appears slim, our concepts are not independent of us, and may need to change in spite of established traditions. > Implications • Perhaps radical constructivism cannot be mainstream because it is essentially concerned with epistemological origins of concepts and consequently is not practical enough for the received consensus. > Key words • Epiphany, reality, social, testimony.

“Mystery solved,” is the concluding sentence in David Johnson’s article (2010, this issue). This is a good place to begin. The precision of the writing in Johnson’s rebuttal of radical constructivism (RC) indicates the significance of the topic, and how this topic has remained an important one for him for a considerable time. What is it about constructivism and RC in particular that generates so much debate? What is it also that impedes RC from becoming more mainstream? Part of the reason for the interest in this topic is that knowledge and knowing are relevant to survival. The quantity of debate stems from RC’s position on realities. Various traditions have contributed answers to epistemological questions. Johnson presents constructivist realism. The radical constructivist alternative prioritises the private moment of personal insight central to knowledge, emphasising that our knowledge of reality and others is limited. It is the implications of this that disturb. Quickly the personal is constrained by the social. However, Johnson’s insistence that the social constraints on personal constructions inevitably entail ontology follows from his realism; but this is not inevitable though he maintains this repeatedly in his paper. I think it is the challenge to commonsense realism that prevents RC from becoming mainstream. In what follows I will explain why I think this is so, and also why the RC view on realities persists.

Of course I know others are real and their views are important to the viability of what I think I know, but what I know of others remains my construction and my interpretation. I have an image of David Johnson from long ago, but I am not sure of my image; it carries an uncertainty. The image includes that David Johnson had an interest in and possession of a Honda sports car, at about the time when he first refuted von Glasersfeld’s RC, and was associated with a College or University in New Jersey. But I may be wrong: my image is real, but it is a construction. Again closer to home, my memory of my mother is faded and I was surprised to notice discrepancies between my mental image and a photo which came to light recently. She was real of course when she lived, and she is real in my imagination now, but what I know of her has matured in memory over time and changed. Years ago as a young parent, I surprised a relative by asking what my mother was like as a parent. My relative was astonished: how could I not know what my own mother was like? Of course I knew what she was like, but I was interested in other images, in memories of people of similar age to my mother because I was a young teenager when she died. Others exist, but what I know of them is my construction. If I am to make sense of the world, then my constructions must make sense to others; so others constrain my sense making, but the scope for misunderstanding on both sides is great. I do not follow why von Glasersfeld is accused of requiring ontology in RC because he posits others. Of course he posits others, but what he can know of them is limited.

Human societies have traditions and ways of knowing and ways of believing. A cultural consensus emerges and is conserved and there is acceptance of the consensus and recognition for those who support and justify it. Reality and the certainty that follows from accepting it is an important culturally experienced conservation. Certainty about reality is an important epistemological achievement. Johnson has willingly accepted the importance of construction in our understanding of reality. However, his paper is dedicated to showing the incoherence of the radical constructivist position by insisting that von Glasersfeld is inconsistent and that his theory requires ontological assumptions, especially by needing others who have an independent existence.

In psychology and education there are many different interpretations of constructivism. It seems that one might outline a set of stages or levels in acceptance of constructivist ideas. Johnson’s presentation of constructive realism includes recognition of the uncertain nature of knowledge, the importance of construction, and a focus on ontology in the sense that epistemically views are not purely epistemic but are “someone’s view of something” (Johnson 2010: 98). If one moves to a different level, RC prioritises the personal moment of insight as centrally important in constructing knowledge and the attendant radical implications are accepted.

So what is real and what is correct and what is known? I do not think that von Glasersfeld need to recognise that others exist commits him to ontology in ways that damage RC. As predicted, I have not been convinced by Johnson’s arguments. Nor do I think that von Glasersfeld’s position is incoherent, inconsistent or ambiguous, as Johnson claims. Von Glasersfeld’s distinction between knowing and ontology remains clear.
to me. At times, however, I wondered what exactly is the difference between Johnson’s constructive realism and RC? One of the unsettling implications of the radical nature of RC is the appreciation that ways we understand things might be turned on their heads. Does acknowledging independent others or objects merge RC into constructive realism? Why does the debate go on forever and what can RC learn from it? In what follows I present some suggestions in relation to this latter question.

The first concerns knowledge acquisition. Following Heinz von Foerster (1991), we can consider learners part of the world or apart from the world. RC accepts that knowledge of others and of objects is dependent on cognitive activity, so we are part of the world. Constructive realism takes the view that science comes to have closer and closer versions of the truth by constructing better and better models of reality, so the world is independent. There are a number of reasons why realism is popular, including that it appeals to common sense and that for so many everyday examples we know the product and aren’t concerned with the process. Why bother with the process: we know the product works? Indeed, attending to the process may interfere with the product as in the execution of skilled actions, including speech. Nor do passengers of an aircraft need to know details concerning the plane’s functioning. However, RC is not just about acquired knowledge; it is about acquiring new knowledge, and this inevitably emphasises uncertainty and constructing. So perhaps it is that RC practitioners are more focussed on the possibility of another more viable option and constructive realists want to be more practical!

Second, consider these vividly different explanations of the solar system. In the early 17th century most people still held that the Sun went around the Earth. This was the socially supported consensus, in spite of the work of Copernicus and Kepler in the 15th century. During his heresy trial in 1633 Galileo decided it was expedient to sign a document repudiating his views because his insight that the Earth went around the Sun was unacceptable to the Roman Catholic Church. New insights have humble beginnings, and there is a fragility about the emergence and viability of these insights. However, others are going to have to understand these insights before they become real and accepted. Different cultures have different realities, and in this context let us remember Humberto Maturana’s (1988) warning that using arguments that assume one reality involves trying to compel others with our reasons.

My third example is educational. Recently, Paul Harris and Melissa Koenig (2006) drew attention to the importance of testimony in children’s learning. While for years proponents of child-centred learning following Jean Piaget’s theories had emphasised the importance of discovery learning, the testimony of adults is another important source of learning that had been neglected by constructivists. This contrast between discovery learning and testimony is interesting because it contrasts two approaches to learning that are close but different and in ways are analogous to the contrast between RC and constructive realism.

Discovery learning is clearly within the tradition of RC with its emphasis on the personal construction of experience. Testimony on the other hand seems to provide children with ready-made truths. However, Harris and Koenig show how children integrate or interpret testimony into their thinking, rather than using it as a truth to be learned. Clearly, it is inefficient to leave children alone to learn by discovery, they need help and guidance from others who are often teachers and parents. However, the role of others and the testimony they provide is useful only to the degree that it is interpreted by the learner. Within educational settings, radical constructivist approaches to educational intervention try to prompt and facilitate those moments of personal insight where the learner realises – makes real – something that was unclear. What is empowering in learning is the personal epiphany not the testimony. So the apparent contrast between discovery learning and testimony does not in any way surrender ground to the realist perspective, though it may have seemed this way to some initially. Testimony, with its connotations of received truth, may be a powerful tool in learning but its usefulness depends on its transformation by the learner into viable constructions.

Finally, careful inquiry requires humility. Indeed, this may be another reason why RC is not mainstream: it errs on the side of caution; answers provide better soundbites.

References


Received: 25 October 2010
Accepted: 30 October 2010

http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/journal/6/1/100.gash