Café Philo: a constructionist tool for encouraging democratic conversation

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Abstract

A café philo is basically a French intellectual activity that takes place in a café where every patron can suggest a philosophical topic that they wish the group to argue about, describe their own experiences relevant to the topic, to support or reject with a reasons. There is a Master of Ceremonies who calls on speakers, holds them to a time limit and perhaps interacts with them to clarify points. Either the MC or a rapporteur summarizes the discussion at its end.

Richard and I believe that this kind of event might encourage more people to participate in Constructionism 2012 conversations and do so in a place that is available to all.

We also believe that this activity might answer some of the critiques about our past conferences by encouraging a greater participation by everyone.

Keywords

Constructionist talk in a public place

Evaluating Constructionism 2010 - Paris

Several weeks after Constructionism 2010, I (Jim) decided to do an evaluation of "how things went". I thought that this might help in the planning of the next conference in Athens. Perhaps I should have included a formal evaluation form in the information pack that everyone could have filled out – or not. I may or may not have been correct in rejecting this, but I decided to use a more informal data gathering system: conversations I overheard or took part in; conversations that my student workers heard (they were all master's students who had spent much time with me talking about the nature, history, literature and people who have built constructionism); direct comments to me from both irate and happy conferees; questions and comments at the plenary sessions and at the Scientific Committee meeting; comments sent to me after the conference; and

lengthy discussions with Ivan Kalaš, Richard Noss and Chronis Kynigos.

As I mentioned at the opening ceremony in Paris 2010, I had hired a professional journalist who would write a report for me based on her take – as a well educated layperson – of all the plenary sessions, chats at lunch, the excursion and gala dinner. She has done this often at scientific seminars and has a PhD. And I have met with her several times and have her written report.

Finally, I read through all the conference papers and, probably, was the only person on Earth who watched the entire movie of the plenary events.

Here are some of the most-heard critiques:

- While most conferees were pleased with the change of name to "Constructionism", many questioned whether some of the new disciplines included in the conference were "really constructionist".

- Some conferees felt that *MIT folk* had too large a presence in the conference.

- Many non-English-mother-tongue conferees often felt that they were "disenfranchised" because they couldn't always follow the speed and jargon used by fluent English speakers.

- There was some criticism of the refereeing method and some people on the Scientific Committee questioned whether papers should be refereed at all!

- On rereading the papers, I noted that only a few speakers addressed the Conference theme: constructionist lessons for the 21st century and that we still lack definitions of the terms we use, especially in how we differentiate – or not – constructionism from all the other trendy pedagogical methods about. E.g. group learning, discovery learning, learning by designing . . .

- My journalist colleague said in her report that we "often come across as more of a cult than a group of learning scientists. You quote each other like quoting a kind of constructionist scripture while skirting the possibility of measuring the connections, if any, between constructionist activities (whatever they are) and deep learning (whatever that is). Where are the longitudinal and cross-over studies that even the so-called soft sciences attempt? In fact, where were all the students? I saw and talked to some wonderful young people in the workshops but never saw them on stage!"

- Because of the way we organize our conferences, the co-chairs have pretty much free hands to structure the event. This is bound to lead to some unhappiness from those who would have liked a different: conference theme, events structure, selection of plenary speakers and
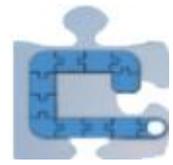
papers elicited. Because *Constructionism* has no secretariat or organization behind it, this criticism is hard to correct.

Finally, it struck me that many of these critiques might follow from the fact that much of our conferences resemble instructionist classrooms rather than the interactive and loud constructionist environments where everybody is in some kind of action, some kind of *talking*; conversations are going on and topics can change and grow into others as there is less fixed structure.

My favourite part of the Seymour "constructionist mantra" that we all chant is the last bit where he says the model building that we use to attempt to make sense of our world *is done most felicitously in a public place.* That is, as a back and forth conversation about personal modelling.

Both Richard and Jim believe that a more interactive talking event at Constructionism 2012 might be both enlightening and community building; everyone is involved in topic selection and opinion giving. A constructionist community, we both believe, is something that we fear we are losing. We are not sharing and arguing about the ideas, thoughts, models that we have build over our lifetimes as constructionists. Without that kind of sharing what kind of community can we be? And, if Papert is right, how can we build effective models if we are cut off from the voices of colleagues? Reading is important but so is talking and listening in short intense exchanges.

Café philo at Constructionism 2012

Goal

As discussed above, many constructionist conference attendees felt that they had not heard those issues that they considered important or that the positions presented in papers and panels, were not sufficiently open to comment and debate. On the one hand, there always are animated discussions over lunch or drinks that went beyond the formal conference programme, but these voices were not always heard by the community - as a whole. On the other hand, conferences must be planned, and that lessens the liveliness and breakthroughs of spontaneous group talk.

Our goal, then, was to find a way to encourage any attendee who wished to suggest topics to debate to do so, and to design a space where this could happen in a democratic, spontaneous and fun way, with everyone there – while maintaining the rules of *politesse, order and clarity.* In the constructionist tradition, we will try to make an infrastructure that we could build upon, deconstruct and share.

One country's historical model: The Paris café philo

Since the 18th century, France has had a history of literary and philosophical meetings that were animated by debate, often held in a café like the Procope, with the likes of La Fontaine, Racine and Voltaire attending. Later, the American Benjamin Franklin attended. Most of us have heard of the circle around Sartre in more recent times, held, again, in a café.

In December 1992, at the café des Phares in the place de la Bastille, the philosopher Marc Sautet initiated an up-to-date café philo that was held each week on Sunday mornings. Anyone from any background or class was welcome and Sautet's charisma and flair kept talk both wild and *correct* (in the French sense, that is "polite"). Sautet died in 1998, but the café philo movement has continued and expanded both in France and elsewhere.

Most often the group determined the topic democratically, there was a *Master of Ceremonies* (MC) who kept the talk going, calling on people, restating clearly their responses so all would understand their point, and keeping individuals to a time limit. Most importantly the MC had to walk the fine line between keeping order and encouraging spontaneous – serious or wild – comments.

There was also a *rapporteur* who kept a record of the comments. Finally, at the end of the session, the *rapporteur,* or someone else appointed by her, or the master of ceremonies, who summarized the major points made in the debate and attempted to synthesize them in order state the *sense* of the session's talk. Richard and Jim will play both the MC and rapporteur.

The image of intellectuals talking, drinking and writing in Left Bank Paris cafés is one we all share. We hope to bring this form of collegial but animated talk to Constructionism 2012.

Café philo at Constructionism 2012 - specifics

- Our café philo will be organized as a plenary event so everyone can attend. It will last an hour.

- Richard has suggested several possible topics but anyone from the audience is encouraged to suggest others.

- All the suggestions will be grouped, if appropriate, into clusters, and these would be presented on a screen.

- The audience will then vote on which cluster should be explored first.

- The organizers of the session would then give a few opening remarks and review the rules

of verbal engagement

- Richard and Jim will take turns in calling on members of the community and limiting their talking time.

- If one topic cluster is exhausted, we will move on to the next.

- Finally, Richard and Jim will try to synthesize the remarks.

- Unfortunately, we can't have waiters serving coffee and drinks during the event nor can we sit on real French café chairs.

Richard's suggested topics

- What kind of a thing is constructionism? Is it really an "ism" at all?

- Do we have enough examples to refine the idea of constructionism. Or, to put it another way, What do we know about constructionist design now that we didn't know when SP mooted the idea?

- What do we know about how constructionist design maps into learning (of what)?

- Seymour's aura: how can we take matters forward without it?

- How important is theory in educational design experiments?

- How important has the idea of restructuration been since it was introduced by Seymour and Uri?

- What is Scratch (or NetLogo or …) an instance of?

- Can an event be deemed "constructionist" only if it includes technology? And, if so, what kinds of technology?

References

Google: café philosophique. You can also find the schedule of such events in France, probably in other countries, too. This will give you a fuller feeling of our proposal.