HOW DOES SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM ENABLE THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING TO FIND THE PATH TO SUCCESS?

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Mikezilla and Markzilla leave the lands of the Positivists and Constructivism, hoping that due to their intervention, combined with their general tendency to sit on the fence at every possible opportunity, they have brought about some reconciliation between the two nations.

They enter the land of Social Constructivism and, in need of a drink after their travels, they enter an inn. Here they're reunited with Beckzilla, who has been here all this time. She introduces them to the locals – a gregarious folk who learn through talking and sharing.

There's an ominous land on the horizon that could be the Zillas' next stop. Only, according to the locals (backed up by Google Maps), one does not simply walk there.

Looking back to earlier chapters, it's evident that working things out from first principles is not an effective learning strategy. From BeanDad's daughter struggling for hours with a tin opener to Luke Skywalker staring morosely at a sunken X-wing, learners need more support than an enigmatic, 'Do. Or do not. There is no try.' Most of the successful learners we have looked at have drawn on multiple perspectives and links to support them. Scrooge amended his understanding of the meaning of Christmas in response to the different views presented to him by various ghosts and spirits. Buffy solved problems by drawing on the skills of her Scooby Gang. However, it's not enough simply to have multiple people involved. *Come Dine with Me* contestants misjudged their abilities because they drew on too narrow a range of perspectives. The entire team that Arnie led was killed horribly by the Predator (see the next chapter) because Arnie failed to provide them with ways of learning together as a group. So learning with others is important, but it doesn't always work. This prompted us to look at an example of this in action in *The Lord of the Rings*, and to ask the question: **How does the Council of Elrond use social constructivism to plan the destruction of the One Ring?**

The Lord of the Rings: Council of Elrond

Let's start with *The Lord of the Rings*, the novel and film trilogy in which the Council of Elrond takes place. This is an epic fantasy that follows the travels of Frodo and his pals: Sam, Merry and Pippin. They're hobbits, little halfling people who've got great big hairy feet and like to have lots of breakfasts, which we can all relate to. They're brave and adventurous and they find themselves in possession of the One Ring, Isildur's Bane, the Great Ring to rule them all, which was created by the villainous Sauron who was (mostly) destroyed in a previous super epic war. With

a weapon of that power, there are only three options: use it, hide it or destroy it. After a long discussion at the Council of Elrond, Frodo and his friends decide on option three, then embark on a long quest to hurl it into the volcano where it was forged.

Along the way they meet old friends, colleagues, allies and enemies. These include Gandalf the wizard, cool but grumpy dude Aragorn, Legolas the elf, Gimli the dwarf, and Boromir – because one of the group has to be expendable. In this chapter, we join them at the point where they have the ring but don't know its true nature. Individuals from many lands have come to visit Elrond, one of the greatest elves, and each of them is saying in their own way, 'What's going on? I can see there's a war coming. I can see there's trouble brewing. I've got some fragments of a story, but I can't see the whole picture. I've come to Rivendell, aka Imladris, aka The Last Homely House, along with all these others, because Elrond always knows the answers.' And Elrond essentially says, 'Right, we'll gather together in a Council and we'll spend the morning sharing our stories.'

This is a part of the epic that comes between Dark Bits. The hobbits have come to Elrond through adventures. They've been attacked. Frodo's been stabbed with an evil knife and has just spent something like four days unconscious. But now he's recuperating in a blissful place. Everything's happy. The weather's nice. It's a lovely autumnal day. But soon they're going to have to set out on a dangerous and dark quest. This is an interlude with a calm-before-the-storm feel to it. And it's a period of massive exposition. The longest chapter in the whole book. Well, there's a lot to exposit.

The book itself is long – often published in three or even six volumes. However, it's only part of the much more extensive mythology created by its author, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, but grew up in one of the leafier parts of Birmingham, aware of the encroaching

industrialisation around him in the Black Country. When the First World War broke out, he completed his Oxford degree in English Language and Literature before reluctantly enlisting in a war that killed many of his closest friends. Invalided out of the army, he began work on a mammoth project, aiming to create a mythology for England. The project grew as he worked first for the *Oxford English Dictionary* and then as a professor at Oxford. He developed whole languages, complex genealogies and detailed caste systems, inspired in part by the *Kalevala*, a Finnish epic compiled from folklore and mythology.

Tolkien's deep love of languages is apparent throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Derivations of words are provided and the text often explains where different words come from. Key people, places and events have multiple names, depending on which elvish or dwarvish language is used. To take just one example, Aragorn, one of the main characters, is known by his genealogy (Aragorn II, son of Arathorn; Isildur's heir; Elendil's heir), his geographical origin (Man of the West), and his actions (Strider). He also has different names in the various languages created by Tolkien, including Dunadan (language: Sindarin); Estel (languages: Quenya and Sindarin); Elessar, Telcontar and Envinyatar (language: Quenya).

The mythology that Tolkien developed remained unfinished at his death but it permeates his work. More recently, much of it has been collected, edited and published – most notably in *The Silmarillion*, a collection of myths and stories about the 'Elder Days', the First Age of his imagined world. A better known book is *The Hobbit*, which introduces some of the characters who appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, and provides a detailed account of the finding of the Ring by Frodo's cousin, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins. One of the elements that made the book so successful, and created a set of belting movies, the 12th biggest movie franchise of all time, is the richness of this world – the sense that

life goes on for characters even when the reader/viewer's attention is not focused on them. For example, not only does the Council of Elrond take place in a moment of calm in the book, for anyone who has read *The Hobbit*, this is a chance to re-encounter familiar characters. Bilbo is there, living in retirement. Gandalf the wizard and Glóin the dwarf are familiar faces, as is elf-leader Elrond. Legolas is the son of Thranduil, ruler of the elves who imprisoned Bilbo and his companions in Mirkwood.

In the Council of Elrond, the hobbits and their companions are about to engage in a process of social constructivism that will shape the future of their world. So, before looking at what happens there, let's introduce social constructivism.

Social constructivism

We encountered constructivism in Chapter 10, where active learning helped Julie Andrews escape the Nazis (hoorah!). At its core is the idea that understanding is actively constructed by the learner. From the time we are born, we begin to develop our own understanding of how the world works. This understanding, and the way in which it is structured, varies according to context and the experiences that we have. This means that everyone comes to learning with their own ideas; everyone starts from a slightly different position. Constructivist approaches provide learners with activities, problems or experiences designed to add to that initial understanding and address existing misunderstandings. This is called constructivism because learners are guided to construct their own knowledge based on what they already have in their heads.

Constructivism focuses on the individual learner. You construct your own knowledge, and you build your own ideas. What social constructivism adds to the mix is that you build

that knowledge with other people and that knowledge is shaped by the perspectives of other people. To some extent, this is obvious and straightforward. People tell you things, they share knowledge with you, and you add that to what you know, what you've experienced. Even for people with no interest in social constructivism, education is typically seen as a relationship between pupil and teacher. Even when you're learning alone with a book or video, you're engaging with ideas shared and expressed by others. It's not impossible to learn by working things out from first principles yourself, but it's massively time consuming and inefficient.

So the idea of sharing ideas with others is familiar. But there are also much more complex things that you can do when you work together to develop knowledge. You can challenge people's ideas, you can critique their ideas, you can expand on their ideas. You can ask them to justify or explain their ideas. Social constructivism is about coming to a common understanding in your context of what the truth is at that point for you as a group or for you as a couple of people. Throughout our lives, this is what we do. We get ideas from others, from relatives, friends, school, the media and multiple other sources and we make sense of those in relation to our current knowledge.

Some of these ideas we simply assimilate. We test them against what we already know and then we either reject them, take them on board, or take a version of them on board. Where social constructivism can help is by pushing us that little bit further, not just relying on our own sense of what we've understood, but testing our understanding against others and building on those multiple understandings.

This means that language is an important tool in learning and that teachers have an important role in facilitating conversations. These are ideas that are very closely associated with the work of Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist who worked in the 1920s and 30s. His publications weren't translated into English until the 1970s, at which point his ideas really took off and people began to build on them. He wrote about language as a psychological tool that can be used to modify the course and structure of thoughts; a tool for constructing understanding within your head and also a tool for constructing understanding with others. He saw writing as another tool, one that humans use to control their memory and to refine their thinking. He was also interested in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the idea that you can do a bit more than you can on your own if you're working with a more experienced other who can support you to do something and then support you to do it by yourself.

Vygotsky observed that, when we talk, we transform our thoughts into words. Even if in your head you're putting phrases together, talking to yourself, or carrying on an internal monologue, talking to others is when you have to make your ideas explicit. It's at this point you may see your ideas coming together, or you may begin to notice holes in your argument. There's nothing quite like realising you don't know something when you're trying to explain it to somebody else for the first time. In your head, you think you've completely got it. But when somebody says, 'Well, now explain that to me,' you stumble and run into problems.

Social constructivism represents a shift in how people thought about learning. In the past, people considered learning to be an individual thing that goes on inside your head. Social constructivists say it's much more complex than that. Learning is an interaction. It's a negotiation. It's profoundly social. This has opened the way to new understandings – there are theories in which learning doesn't even end up with the individual. The theory of distributed cognition, for example, takes things one step further and says that sometimes knowledge is embedded in a group, team, or network. But that's a theory for another episode,

another chapter and, as it turns out now we've reflected on our production schedule, another book.

If learning takes place only in someone's head, you can't see it taking place unless you have access to sophisticated equipment capable of observing a brain at work, as well as quiescent learners who are willing to be hooked up to that equipment. This is a difficulty that people have struggled with for a long time, which has led to the identification of various 'proxies for learning'. These proxies are things that indicate learning has taken place, or might be taking place. That's why educators and educational researchers are often interested in things like how engaged students appear to be, how much time they are spending looking at a screen or at a teacher, or how frequently they're accessing learning materials. It's also one of the reasons why so much time is spent administering tests, because these provide an indication of how much has been learned. Time-on-task and test results are both used as proxies for learning. Over a century ago, behaviourists were struggling with the same issue. To help them address it, they defined learning as a long-term change in behaviour, which meant they had to watch out for changes in behaviour.

Once you realise that a lot of learning takes place in conversations, especially now that a lot of those learning conversations take place online, using written text that can be preserved, you can see those moments where people change their views, change their perspective, perhaps say, 'Oh yeah, I understand,' rephrase something that they've heard before, or start using vocabulary that's specific to the discipline they're studying. This gives us a new way of looking at learning and seeing when that learning is taking place, which can be very helpful.

Even in science, although the positivist view is that there's an objective reality out there, humans are always interpreting reality. The way we come up with an intersubjective interpretation of what the world is, the way that everyone gets closer to a

consensus opinion about the world, which is as close to reality as we can get, is by socially constructing that interpretation through discussion, argument, challenges, and critiques – the tools of social constructivism.

There are many pedagogies that come under the umbrella title of social constructivism. For example, communities of practice (which we'll cover in chapter 16) are very much tied up with the idea that lots of people have ideas, knowledge and skills. When you put those together, they enable individuals to expand their own skills and knowledge. The community of practice is a shared space where we establish meaning. Social constructivism also adds another dimension to constructivist approaches such as active learning, experiential learning, and problem-based learning.

Despite the advantages of this approach, as with any pedagogy, it's not enough just to employ the bare bones of the idea and expect learning to result. Putting people in groups to have conversations won't automatically lead to learning – it's more likely to lead to bad group dynamics and off-task discussion. Some of the things it's important to pay attention to when designing social constructivist activities are: use of language, group dynamics, rhetorical moves, and student understanding of the pedagogy.
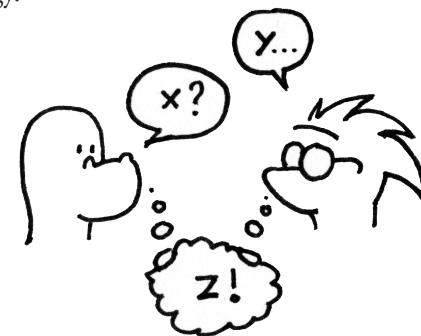
Use of language

When people try to have a learning conversation, some will have a lot of distance between them in terms of ideas. To some extent, this will be because they've got different ideas, but another problem may be that they're not using the same words to mean the same things. Part of the work involved in social constructivism is to come up with a common meaning for key words early in the process.

We've seen that in *Pedagodzilla*, where it took us a few episodes to realise that Markzilla and Beckzilla were using the same words in slightly different ways. We had to argue that out, make our points to each other and try to come to a conclusion. Our initial maps of the Realm of Pedagogy weren't the same because we didn't agree on definitions of key terms, and we saw the relationships between ideas in different ways,

My understanding of social constructivism has shifted since doing Pedagodzilla. *I didn't realise at first that it's quite such an umbrella term, that it's so broad and it covers a lot of things that we've been discussing, like zone of proximal development and situative learning. I was considering it as a distinct sort of pedagogy and teaching style, whereas it's actually a whole broad way of looking at things.*

Another thing I've learnt during our conversations is that it's not the same as social constructionism. Social constructionism is the idea that a lot of the things in the world around us are socially constructed. They don't have a meaning or a value independent of human beings. Fashion is one of those. Good fashion and bad fashion only exist as social constructions. It's only because society agrees something looks good that it looks good.

So my advice is – don't get them mixed up. ~Mikezilla

As already seen in chapter 4, if you think of something as simple as the question, 'What is one plus one?', then most of us would automatically respond, 'Two.' But that's only because we assume the person asking the question is working in a denary system which counts: zero, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. They might actually be working in a binary system which goes zero, one, ten, eleven, in which case one and one would be ten. The answer 'two' also assumes that both of us are talking about numbers as abstract ideas, because if we put one apple and one orange together, we still have one apple and one orange. We'd have two items of fruit, but that assumes that we've both agreed that we can abstract the idea of "orange" and "apple" to "items of fruit". If one of us doesn't see the world in that way, they won't see that there's two of anything. So, there's lots of social convention built into how we talk about things which seem obvious. And that's because we take it for granted that everybody makes the same assumptions. That's why it's important to establish what we mean by the terms we use.

Group dynamics

To build knowledge, it's useful to have a diverse range of perspectives involved in the discussion. There's a balance to be achieved here. In most cases, you'll be aiming to construct knowledge that is useful and helpful in your context. That suggests that conversations with people who would normally be in your context will typically be the most fruitful. If you want to move further and explore new ideas, it helps to increase the diversity of the group. However, if a group is too diverse, participants will have no common reference points and will talk past each other. So setting up groups requires some thought about what you're trying to achieve.

It's also important to provide groups with some guidelines about behaviour and expectations. Some of these guidelines

are likely to relate to respect for each other, listening without interrupting, turn taking, and critiquing ideas rather than individuals. Some guidelines will be more related to process – ensuring everyone has an opportunity to present their opinion, deciding who (if anyone) will take the lead and who will record the discussion. Some preparation is likely to be necessary in order to ensure that everyone feels confident to speak. Reflection after the discussion can also be helpful in pinpointing problems, finding ways of addressing them in future, and thinking about the ways in which ideas were discussed and challenged.

Rhetorical moves
Educational researcher Neil Mercer studied multiple learning conversations and found there are three main ways in which learning discussions may go, if they stay on topic. The first is disputation. One person says, 'This dress is blue', and somebody else says, 'This dress is gold.' They restate their position in different ways (Blue! Gold!) or attack the other's position (You're wrong!). They fundamentally disagree. The conversation doesn't get them anywhere, and no useful learning takes place. Not surprisingly, these aren't the conversations you want to see taking place when you set up a social-constructivist activity.

Cumulative talk is more helpful. People keep adding pieces of information. This is useful, it moves everyone on and it's a learning discussion. It's important, though, to avoid groupthink, which occurs when a group reaches a consensus without critical reasoning and without evaluating possible consequences or alternatives. For example, a dominant student might propose an answer to the question the group is discussing, and then everybody adds information that supports that viewpoint and keeps quiet about other possible solutions.

The most valuable type of learning discussion involves exploratory talk. Students can be supported to develop and use the techniques that are necessary for this. Exploratory talk involves evaluating information, explaining ideas, asking for explicit reasoning, critiquing, challenging and justifying ideas. These are all techniques that students can be encouraged to use that will enable them to learn more deeply.

Student understanding of the pedagogy
Students often don't like group work. This isn't necessarily an issue – most of us don't enjoy the more laborious aspects of learning such as revision, exams and skills practice. In lots of cases, problems with group work aren't connected with perceived difficulty, but are linked to experience. Most students have had experience of group work that has gone wrong, where some people have free-loaded on others, where nothing got done or nothing was learned. These issues can usually be addressed by paying attention to group dynamics and the skills associated with group work, but it's also important that students understand why they are being asked to interact with others. If they know the reason for the activity then, even if they don't enjoy it, they are more likely to appreciate what they've gained from it.

In the case of group discussions, an issue might be that students kick back and say, 'Why should I listen to six wrong opinions? I want you, as the expert in this area, to tell me what the right one is.' In situations where there's a right answer, like 'What is the mass of a boson?', that's a valid point – a social-constructivist approach probably isn't useful. However, in most subject areas, particularly those based in the social constructionist domain, there isn't a right answer to every question, and the object of the lesson may be to explore ideas rather than to settle on a single one.

If a student introduces incorrect ideas or false information to the discussion, a teacher can intervene before a group goes too far wrong. But one of the advantages of social constructivism is

that people can challenge, and challenge is an important part of the approach. Justifying opinions is important. Producing evidence is important. So students who are familiar with social-constructivist approaches will be aware of techniques that can help them to identify factual errors quickly and explore alternatives.

Overall, as with other pedagogies in this book, it's worth explaining to students why you're using a social-constructivist approach, how it can help them, and what they may gain from trying it. It's also helpful to foreground possible problems and ways of avoiding them. Returning to *The Lord of the Rings*, participants in the Council of Elrond experienced both the advantages of the method and some of its downsides during their extended discussion, so let's return to the question: **How does the Council of Elrond use social constructivism to plan the destruction of the One Ring?**

The answer

The Council of Elrond involves about a dozen participants. They've come together from different places and different backgrounds, all trying to work out what's happening in the world and what they should do next. They spend four or five hours together talking and, basically, they spend a lot of time on exposition. There's a great deal of cumulative talk as they pile fact upon fact.

Elrond, the wise elf leader, recounts thousands of years of history and stories. As he's more than 6,000 years old, much of this is based on his personal experience. And, as his account covers so many millennia, it is both detailed and complex. Dwarves and humans explain what's been happening in their lands more recently, stories they've heard, and actions they've taken. Two of

the hobbits, Bilbo and Frodo, explain their connection with the Ring. Gandalf the wizard talks about the work he's been doing, the places he's visited, and the challenges he's encountered.

All the participants must be heroically bright, alert morning people, because when the Council ends, without even a coffee break, they seem to have taken all this information in. Although a lot of this information was known by many participants, only Gandalf knew everything, so a lot of information sharing was necessary.

The key thing is, they have a ring and, when they arrive at the Council, they don't really know if it's the One Ring or not. They know the dark lord Sauron lost the One Ring, the Great Ring of Power, to Isildur when Isildur cut it from his hand. But then, the story goes, Isildur was wearing it when he was killed by orcs. It seems that the ring fell into the Anduin River and was lost. So, just because Bilbo acquired a ring from Gollum in a cave under the Misty Mountains 3,000 years after those events, what evidence is there that this is the same ring? The Misty Mountains are nowhere near the Anduin. This is one of the points where the discussion shifts from cumulative to exploratory talk. The elf Galdor of the Havens asks for evidence: 'The Wise may have good reason to believe that the halfling's trove is indeed the Great Ring of long debate, unlikely though that may seem to those who know less. But may we not hear the proofs?' Boromir also has questions: 'How do the Wise know that this ring is his [Isildur's]? And how has it passed down the years, until it is brought hither by so strange a messenger?'

Prompted by those questions, Bilbo explains how he acquired the ring (correcting the false tale he told his companions in *The Hobbit*), and Frodo tells his part of the story. This still leaves a gap of several thousand years in the narrative, which Gandalf fills. To find out what happened to the One Ring, he travelled to the land of Gondor. There he found out that Isildur didn't die

from an overdose of orc arrows directly after obtaining the ring, he made it back to Gondor first, a story that Boromir confirms. Before setting off up north again, Isildur recorded that, when the ring was hot, the inscription within it started glowing. Gandalf heated up Frodo's ring and found the same inscription. *Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakatulûk agh burzum-ishi krimpatul*. One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

Put together, the stories establish the ring's provenance, and Gandalf's experiment with putting the ring in the fire at Frodo's home confirms their belief that Frodo is the current bearer of the One Ring. Challenges and questions have been met with explanations and explicit reasoning. False beliefs have been corrected – Isildur didn't die immediately after leaving Mordor, and Bilbo's original tale of how he acquired the ring was untrue. All the evidence lines up, and the story aligns with what everyone knows, so they accept they now have the One Ring. This leads to the question of what they should do with it.

Various solutions are proposed. Elrond's counsellor, Eréstor, suggests handing it to the carefree ancient being Tom Bombadil because Frodo has already explained that the Ring had no power over Tom. Gandalf believes the Ring has no significance to Bombadil, who would forget it or throw it away, so that idea is dropped. Galdor of the Havens wonders if the elves have the strength to protect the Ring. Elrond says they don't – and he's in the top five most powerful elves, so he should know. Galdor's other solutions are to send the Ring over the sea or to destroy it. Glorfindel suggests they should cast it into the deep, Eréstor proposes hiding or unmaking the Ring. Gandalf and Elrond identify problems with all the solutions suggested by these elves.

In the end, there are two preferred options. Eréstor, Galdor and Glorfindel have been convinced by the arguments of Elrond

and Gandalf that their suggestions will not work. Boromir is in favour of wielding the Ring and using its power to defeat Sauron, while Elrond feels the only possible solution is to send the Ring into the fires of Mount Doom in Mordor. Boromir challenges Elrond's proposal: 'Why do you speak ever of hiding and destroying? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need?' Gandalf and Elrond have answers to this – the ring corrupts, and is a danger even to the Wise. As both Elrond and Gandalf are secretly the bearers of lesser rings, they do have experience in this area. Boromir appears to concede the point but clearly remains doubtful. Ideally, they should discuss his idea further in order to reach full consensus, but time is short, and the Council appears to be in agreement. This failure of the Council to reach full agreement stores up trouble for the future because, as readers later find out, Boromir tries to take the Ring at one point because he wants to use it to defend his homeland of Gondor.

Overall, though, the Council of Elrond is an example of social constructivism working successfully. A disparate group, including humans, hobbits, elves, dwarves and a wizard share a huge amount of information from their different contexts and experiences, bring together a range of perspectives, look for justifications and evidence, offer challenge and critique, propose various solutions and together construct a shared understanding of what has happened and what is to be done. In the long term, this knowledge and the actions based upon it lead to victory. However, the Council is not a total success – the arguments that are made are not strong enough to convince Boromir and that difference of opinion has fatal consequences.

So, in an ideal world, what could the Council have done better? One improvement might have been to think more carefully about who was represented. In this case, Elrond is limited to those present in Rivendell at the time. As Rivendell is

an elvish valley, elves are perhaps over-represented on the Council. Elves are immortal, so their perspective is longer term than that of humans like Boromir. In addition, Elrond is their leader, so they tend to defer to him. It takes very little argument to convince the elves that their plans for the Ring are unworkable.

More expertise might have been useful. The three elven rings are worn secretly by Gandalf, Elrond and Galadriel, so Galadriel could have been invited to attend and share her perspective. Her absence underlines the fact that the Council is entirely male. As all societies in Middle Earth appear to have been highly sex-segregated, females might have brought ideas around peace and reconciliation, trade and treaties to the table, as a counter to those related to power and destruction.

The Council also excludes some of those who were most directly concerned. In the end, nine individuals make up the Fellowship of the Ring, setting out with the joint intention of distracting Sauron and destroying the Ring. The Fellowship includes four hobbits, but only one of those, Frodo, is formally invited to the Council. Sam is there only because he sneaks in. Merry and Pippin, both of whom eventually volunteer for this dangerous mission, aren't present at the Council and so miss out on the debate that's so vital to their future.

In general, Elrond does a good job of keeping the Council on an amicable footing, because many of the attendees have reasons to be antagonistic to each other. Historically, elves and dwarves have never seen eye to eye. Aragorn appears to those who do not know him as a dusty tramp. Boromir, like others in the novel, is at first doubtful of this stranger's status. As events progress, he's inclined to be jealous of Aragorn's heritage. The hobbits are an unknown quantity, but the general feeling appears to be that they have little knowledge or status. Sam is an interloper in a secret council, and Bilbo is revealed to have told an elaborate lie to his erstwhile companion, Glóin. All these antagonisms appear to have

been overcome, but the make-up of the council does mean that the voices of Gandalf (who has the trust of the three hobbits and Aragorn) and Elrond, who has the trust of the five or more elves in the room, are likely to prevail. Boromir, who is introduced as 'a man from the South' and 'the stranger' has less status and no allies.

To summarise the answer to the question: **How does the Council of Elrond use social constructivism to plan the destruction of the One Ring?** The Council participants do this by coming together, by bringing different pieces of information, by talking through what they know, by offering challenge and critique, by asking for clarification, by asking for evidence, and by reporting on investigation and experimentation. The group and the discussion aren't perfect but they achieve their aim. Without the Council, the different factions would not have been able to develop the shared understanding and purpose that were necessary for victory.

Tips for practice

The introduction to social constructivism above introduced some of the elements that are important when using this pedagogy.

- Establish early on what terms mean and the context in which they are used.
- Provide students with guidelines about behaviour and expectations when engaging in learning discussions.
- Support students to use different strategies for exploratory talk, including evaluating information, explaining ideas, reasoning explicitly, critiquing, justifying and challenging ideas.
- Keep your pedagogy transparent – explain to students why they are having these learning conversations and what they can hope to gain from them.

In addition: be aware of the different types of learning discussion (disputational, cumulative and exploratory) and encourage your students to engage in exploratory discussions that are going to lead to deeper learning. Be aware of the characteristics of exploratory talk, introduce these characteristics to your students and support their use.

When setting up groups or conversations, find a way to include a variety of voices and think carefully about which voices may be excluded or silenced. If group members aren't included, or are actively excluded, they won't learn as much as they could and they may go off in the wrong direction

Monitor and reflect on the activity and encourage learners to do the same things. Take into account how the conversation has gone, and how information has been shared. Look for flaws in that process. Important information may have been sidelined or overlooked, or someone's view may have been given priority based on their status rather than on their arguments. Encourage learners to ask for evidence in support of information that is offered and, if there is conflicting evidence, to decide on criteria to help them establish which is most likely to be accurate. For example, Gandalf reports, based on hearsay, that the men of Rohan have been paying tribute to Sauron. Boromir, who knows these men and their priorities, challenges this story but his status in the group is low and nobody follows up on his challenge.

This connects with work on decolonising the curriculum and critical pedagogy. It's important to think about who is involved and where your decision making is coming from. You can have a very diverse set of people in the room but if you don't value the perspectives of some of those people, or their ways of thinking, then you limit the conversation rather than enriching it and challenging accepted ideas.

Although the diversity of the people in the room leads to a more enriched set of perspectives, those differences in perspective can lead to very different interpretations of the meanings of words. One of the reasons why the Council of Elrond works is that everybody's speaking a common language. Although there are age-old conflicts between the dwarves and the elves which neither side agrees on who started, there is no point at which people argue over the meanings of words. But with the podcast episode this chapter is based on, for example, if we hadn't established between us the meanings of the terms constructionism, social constructionism, constructivism and social constructivism, we wouldn't have been able to have a meaningful conversation. So, don't underrate the language. Instead, if you're facilitating a learning process make that the first step, ensuring everybody is on the same page with regards to what they're talking about. Sometimes that can just be a quick two- or three-sentence summary of a concept that means people can use it in conversation and aren't going to get thrown by the terminology.

With any form of social interaction in learning – problem-based, inquiry-based, collaborative – it's important not to assume that students know instinctively how to form a group and have a valuable conversation. It's not an innate skill to be able to engage in brilliant learning conversations. Most students have had the depressing experience of being shoved in a corner with random people and told to solve a problem. The result is that they spend most of their time trying to sort the group out rather than trying to solve the problem. This sometimes happens because teachers have been introduced to the idea that discussions and interactions are good, but haven't thought through exactly why they're good. As a result, they assign group work without knowing how to support people engaging in that work. Things go more smoothly when you help students to set some rules for group work and learning conversations, define some boundaries, decide points at which they'll check on progress, make plans for dealing with conflict, and come up with strategies for involving those who aren't contributing.

Mathom and other references

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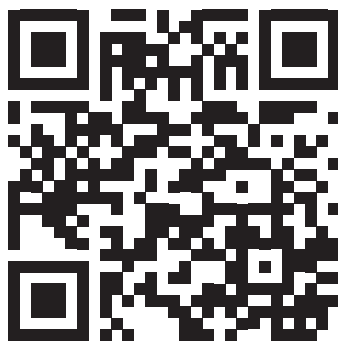
Haven't edited the podcast for this one yet...

grrrrr

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