

Constructivist Listening

Definition and perspective. The term *constructivist* is used because “from the constructivist perspective, learning is the product of self-organization” (1) and the goal of constructivist listening is to facilitate this self-organization. Constructivism is based on a view of intelligence as a flexible adaptive characteristic of human organisms—different from instinct, the ability to memorize, or the capacity to be conditioned to respond to stimuli.

Constructivist listening is based on the principles of constructivism and two additional beliefs. First, distress (the accumulation of emotions left from hurtful experiences) is a primary source of unintelligent and uncaring behavior. Second, the natural physiological processes of expressing emotions contribute to recovery from the effects of distress, making sense of experiences, and thinking more clearly. Constructivist listening is at its very core, a tool for empowerment, community building, and person/social change. It enables people to assume responsibility for their actions and feelings, to construct new meanings, and to change old behavior patterns.

Empowerment is the process of supporting people 1) to construct new meanings (to re-evaluate what has happened to them, why they are who they are, why they do what they do, and why they relate to people the way they do); and 2) to exercise their freedom to choose new ways of responding to the world. The two components are obviously related. Constructing new meanings and clarifying thoughts and feelings increase the likelihood of making new choices. Making new choices produces new information that results in the construction of new meanings. Both components are assisted by constructivist listening.

The emphasis on the expression of feelings is based on the belief that these processes reduce stress and assist in the construction of new meanings, that is, in making sense of the world. Proponents of the value of emotional expression see it as leading to heightened sensitivity, clearer thought, and greater creativity. The processes that are advanced as being beneficial to human functioning are manifested outwardly by crying, trembling, sighing, laughing, sweating, yawning, and talking. These processes assist in the construction or reconstruction of the meaning of distressful experiences as well as in the recovery from the physiological and emotional tension they produce.

Operational assumption and procedures. Constructivist listening is non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian. The constructivist listener aims to enable the talker to express feelings, construct personal understandings, and use their full intelligence to respond creatively to situations rather than rely on habit or rigid strategies. Because the process works best when the listener is not feeling attacked or defensive, the talker is not to criticize or complain about the listener.

Constructivist listening enables the talker to:

1. Reflect on the meaning of events and ideas;
2. Express and work through feelings that interfere with clear thinking;

3. Construct new meanings;
4. Make decisions.

The listener communicates interest, caring and acceptance by:

1. Focusing on the talker, maintaining eye contact, and when appropriate, holding a hand or touching an arm or shoulder;
2. Accepting the talker as capable of solving their own problems, the listener does not interpret, paraphrase, analyze, criticize, give advice or interrupt;
3. Asking thoughtful questions; and
4. Providing total confidentiality, because a person needs safety to be authentic.

Practicing constructivist listening. It takes some time and effort to learn constructivist listening. The best way to learn how to do constructivist listening, as well as experience its benefits, is in a formal structure where two people (a dyad) take turns listening to each other for a fixed and equal amount of time. Even though a group leader suggests a topic for a dyad, the talker is always in charge of his or her time. In a dyad, the talker has the opportunity and the responsibility to talk authentically about his other thoughts and feelings. The listener is there for assistance, to help the talker focus on feelings and to reassure the talker that the expression of feelings is beneficial.

Because it is easy to deceive oneself about whether one is truly listening, in the beginning stages of learning to be a listener is instructed to listen attentively and not ask any questions. Very early each person is given the opportunity to reflect on his or her role as listener in a dyad, and their past experiences in being listened to or not listened to. It is strongly emphasized that the role of questions are always for the benefit of the talker, not the listener. Talking regularly about perceptions of oneself as listener and one's feelings about listening to and talking about emotions is an important component of learning constructivist listening.

Reference:

1. Ernst von Glasenfeld, "Cognition, Construction of Knowledge, and Teaching," *Synthese* 80 (July 1989): 121-140 Quoted from p. 136.
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Adapted by Olivia Mercado, 020893, from Julian Weissglass, "Constructivist Listening for Empowerment and Change," *The Educational Forum*, Vol. 54, No. 4, Summer 1990.