

Vygotsky and Literacy Instruction

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Classroom teachers many times have a disdain for theory and are known to grumble among themselves that research can be skewed to prove whatever people want it to. The most prevalent belief, though, is that research has very little to do with what happens daily in their classrooms. This unfortunate misconception robs teachers of a sense of professionalism and the confidence that the activities they know work so well in their classes have a strong theoretical base. Teachers many times do not have the terminologies, but they do have the concepts. However, what teachers know becomes devalued through state mandates, principals' memos, and district-sponsored workshops until they become convinced that they know nothing (Gilderleeve, 2004), until, as Emerson writes, "these ... voices which we hear in solitude ... grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world." Teachers who realize, though, that the "bones of theory support and make functional the body of practice," (Gildersleeve, 2004) and that "even if we can't name them one by one, theories ground and support our practice" (Gildersleeve, 2004) become empowered to achieve even more as they join the discussion of their profession and take part in sociocultural learning.

Lev Vygotsky's concept of sociocultural approaches to teaching can provide teachers the language for what they are doing in their classrooms (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 204). Vygotsky explored sociocultural approaches to learning and development in Russia in the 1920's and 1930's. He believed that learning is not a solitary event, but that it is a process occurring in a given culture, with symbolic tools and social interaction playing crucial roles (Kozulin, 1995, p. 68). Even though Vygotsky died of tuberculosis at 37 before he had a chance to fully develop his theories, which

were suppressed for over 20 years (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 192), his theories have had a strong impact on education in Western countries. For a number of reasons, though, misinterpretation has occurred. Western interpretation of Vygotsky's work has been done without access to his complete writings, as *Thinking and Speech*, his most important work was only made available in English in 1987. Vygotsky's thoughts are highly complex and because of the tendency to extract parts from his complete theory, confusion and misinterpretation can result. Wertsch (2000) identifies one source of contradiction in Vygotsky's theoretical framework to be the two traditions of the Enlightenment and Romanticism that provide the intellectual context in which he lived. Wertsch (2000) concludes that these diverse cultural tools he employed were not consistent with each other, requiring him to make intellectual compromises as he formed his account of human consciousness. This idea underscores Vygotsky's own belief in the importance of studying development within the context of a historical perspective. Studying human consciousness using a historical perspective or a dialectal method requires studying it in the process of change, and this state of change is basic to his theory (Mahn). Formal logic creates an artificial division or dichotomy between "mind versus matter, nature versus culture, process versus product" (Mahn) that was unacceptable to Vygotsky. Searching for a compromise between the strictly behaviorist approaches to human development and the psychological which focused almost entirely on internal processes, he based his theories on the concept that human development takes place, not in isolation, but in a cultural context of interaction with others. (John-Steiner and Mahn 192).

Vygotsky's work focuses on the transformation of early humans as meaning makers through the historical development of word meaning and verbal thinking for both individuals and humanity. He saw tool and symbol use as the key to the way consciousness transformed in early humans (Mahn). He formulated a law of cultural development that states that each part of a child's cultural development has two stages, first between people (social) and then within the child (intramental) (Mahn). It is important to realize, though, that Vygotsky never intended a dichotomy between external and internal processes. He viewed these processes as dynamic and interdependent.

Social interaction is essential to a child's development, according to Vygotsky. The child's mind develops through social experiences in which psychological tools are presented to him by an adult or more experienced peer in the course of a joint activity (Karpov, 1995, p. 61). Therefore, a child co-constructs meaning through social interaction and the role that word meaning (a psychological tool) plays in the development of thinking (Mahn, 1999). Social interaction begins at birth when the newborn is dependent on his caregivers, but the quality of this interaction evolves as the child grows. Vygotsky found that children initially show no difference between egocentric speech and communicative speech. By about age seven, however, they have differentiated between speech for others and speech for themselves (Mahn, 1999); this personal or inner speech makes possible internal thought. Vygotsky unified language and thinking with the concept of verbal thinking that views word meaning as a phenomenon of speech (Mahn, 1999). As children develop, they depend on others around them with more experience and begin to use words with meanings that have been established in

adult speech, creating improved understanding between the adult and child and facilitating further development and thinking.

Through continued guided participation provided by social interaction with adults or competent peers, the child becomes more independent as he internalizes strategies and knowledge. Rather than viewing learning as a simple transmission of knowledge, though, Vygotsky observed that a constructive transformation takes place as the learner synthesizes his experiences and internalizes them (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 192). This construction and transformation is dependent on interaction with other humans and the cultural toolbox of psychological and physical tools made available to the learner (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 193). These tools create a mediated learning experience so that a mediator places himself between the environment and the child, selecting and interpreting objects and processes for the child (Kozulin, 1995, p. 68). Vygotsky's ideas are in contrast to Piaget's who viewed children interacting directly with the environment without consideration of any human mediators (Kozulin, 1995, p. 68).

Recognizing the importance of a human mediator in the learning process results in educational applications, including the concepts of zone of proximal development or scaffolding and learning activity. Vygotsky visualized the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined through independent problem solving and the level of potential development ... under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 86 quoted in John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 198). The mentor carefully builds a scaffold one piece at a time that leads the child to successful understanding and development of scientific concepts (Glassman, 2001, p. 9). The mentor creates a learning situation that is beyond

the child's reach independently and, with the mentor's help, the child works through and reconstructs his thinking so that he accomplishes something that would have been beyond his present ability (Glassman, 2001, p. 11). Whereas John Dewey believed that children should be allowed to discover doubt naturally through their individual interests, Vygotsky the doubt is "sown by society through complementary actions of the social interlocutor (Glassman, 2001, p. 11).

In the zone of proximal development, learning is a tool in the developmental process, learning leads development, and so teachers should take control in the educational process as one would a physical tool such as a hammer (Glassman, 2001, p. 12).

Learning activity, another educational application springing from Vygotsky's work, stems from his distinction between what he calls spontaneous and scientific concepts. Spontaneous concepts result from a child's everyday experiences and tend to be random and highly contextual; "they are capable of learning only when something is interesting to them and when they want it." (Karpov, 1995, p. 61). And although learning occurs, it is not the goal of the activity. Scientific concepts, however, result from structured activity that is systematic, logical, decontextualized (classroom learning) whose goal is to make the child a competent learner (Kozulin, 1995, p. 73). This theoretical learning is based on supplying students with psychological tools for solving problems. The use of these tools allows the student to internalize the underlying processes necessary for mastering the concept (Karpov, 1995, p. 63). Vygotsky stresses the importance of scientific concepts, writing "Instruction in scientific concepts plays a decisive role in the child's mental development....Scientific concepts restructure and

raise spontaneous concepts to a high level..." (Vygotsky, quoted in Karpov, 1995, p. 62) He also believed that scientific concepts should be given to students as precise verbal definitions rather than allowing students to infer them, in direct contrast to the discovery learning approach (Karpov, 1995, p. 63).

Davydov, one of Vygotsky's followers, agreed that the two concepts are the result of fundamentally different types of activities and labeled the type of learning that results in spontaneous concepts *empirical learning*, and learning that results from scientific concepts *theoretical learning* (Karpov, 1995, p. 62). Unfortunately, traditional school instruction often results in empirical learning because students have not mastered the underlying processes of a concept, and so use their own empirical learning to develop wrong concepts to deal with school subjects (Karpov, 1995, p. 62). Russian research has demonstrated that theoretical learning is more interesting to students, results in fewer mistakes by students, and actually facilitates their cognitive development (Karpov, 1995, p. 64).

Vygotsky's student Elkonin suggested that concerning learning activity, children move through four stages of development with changing dominant activities (Kozulin, 1995, p. 73). These stages call into question many of the educational practices in Western countries. Pre-school children in the first stage use role-play and other creative activities that prepare a child for taking the role of a student. This ability to perceive his own method of action as an objective entity is central to learning because it enables the learner to choose, operate with, and evaluate his own methods of action. In primary school, when most Western curriculum concentrates on socialization and general knowledge, formal learning should be the dominant activity. In the adolescent stage, interpersonal relations

become dominant, and if learning activity has not formed in primary school, it is twice as hard to form later because of the adolescents' interest in interpersonal relation. At the time older teens are geared toward career goals, many students are unprepared because learning oriented toward scientific concepts has been put off until high school (Kozulin, 1995, p. 74).

Vygotsky's work has many applications to literacy instruction, especially since he viewed language as the primary tool for development. Bruner writes in his introduction to one of Vygotsky's works that was translated into English that "Vygotsky's conception of development is at the same time a theory of education." (Wells, 2000, p. 53). Historically, Vygotsky was concerned with the daunting task of promoting the development of literacy and scientific concepts in a country with millions of illiterate people following the Russian Revolution (John-Steiner and Meehan, 2000, p. 34).

Presently, studies are defining reading and writing as social, cultural practices (Landis, 2003, p. 286). Elizabeth Moje found that students "participated in certain literary practices because of their relationship with the teacher." (Landis, 2003, p. 287). A group of high school students used strategies like SQ3R because they believed that their teacher considered them to be important for success in reading comprehension.

English teacher Carol Lee (2000) also teaches within the zone of proximal development alluded to in the above example. Lee bases her approach to teaching literary analysis on the importance of recognizing and honoring what underachieving African American students know in signifying dialogues. Through what she labels Cultural Modeling, Lee extends the analysis of signifying as a conceptual tool and so the students' knowledge of signifying is transformed over time from a spontaneous concept they apply

only to oral concepts into a more scientific representation of literary tropes (Lee, 2000, p. 214). Lee concludes that the level of problem solving “bridged the informal knowledge that students employed independently in circumscribed settings and formal literary constructs that were applicable across multiple settings.” (p. 223)

John-Steiner and Meehan (2000) write about the importance of Vygotskian sociocultural theory to the study of creativity (p. 46) and instruction of gifted students. They see a dynamic tension between the social and individual in creative work (p. 35). By focusing on transformation, classroom activities such as cooperative learning become important for participation and construction of new knowledge, as well as the practice of creative apprenticeships. These mentoring relationships allow for learning within the zone of proximal development. Teachers verbalizing and sharing their style of thought with novices renews the mentor as it creates shared knowledge for the novice (John-Steiner and Meehan, 2000, p. 37). Contrary to the stereotype of the lonely genius, writers such as the four women who wrote *Women’s Ways of Knowing* found that by creating a community of writers, they were able to build on each other’s ideas (John-Steiner and Meehan, 2000, p. 45).

Creating communities of learners in the literacy classroom can be strongly supported with Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach to development. Writing conferences that allow writers to discuss developing texts with their peers or teachers create opportunities for strategies to be made overt and accessible to students (Wells, 2000, p. 78). Collaborative approaches to reading such as book clubs and literature circles allow for shared knowledge to be constructed, as well as mediation by competent peers that will

enable less capable readers to comprehend more than possible on their own (Wells, 2000, p. 77).

These learning communities can also be focused on inquiry learning where real questions of interest to students are posed with the teacher as a coinquirer who scaffolds the research process for students (Wells, 2000, p. 64). These approaches view education as a transforming process rather than one used to transmit basic knowledge. Additionally they result in both individual development and society (Wells, 2000, p. 82).

Simply organizing units of study that involve collaboration will not ensure active participation on the part of all students. In one study the best interactions occurred in classrooms where students participated in curriculum-making and felt part of a close-knit community (Freedman, 1994). Student choice does not contradict Vygotsky's belief in the mediating influence of the teacher because an effective teacher can lead students to make curriculum choices that will be successful while still allowing for input from students. There is a need, however, for additional research into the type of social space in the classroom needed to promote a high level of involvement, as well as ways of accounting for student involvement (Freedman, 1994).

Although developed nearly a century ago, Vygotsky's theories seem to support many of the effective literacy practices being embraced by teachers who are working to make learning real and relevant for students who, for the most part, see school as irrelevant to their lives. The role of the mentor/mediator is especially needed today as adolescents increasingly feel the need to respect a teacher and know that she cares about them before they will be highly involved in classroom activities. The concept of learning as a transforming process speaks to the need for students to become critical problem-

solvers in a complex, changing world rather than receivers of transmitted facts that may become outdated before students leave school. One of the biggest problems that our students will face is how our world community can learn to live together in peace, respecting each other's diversity. Belonging to a collaborative learning community under the direction of a teacher/mediator while in public school could be a good first step.

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