A VYGOTSKIAN ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF SETTING IN LEARNING TO TEACH

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INTRODUCTION: INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM IN THE CULTURAL-HISTORICAL TRADITION

The cultural-historical tradition in psychology experienced a seismic transformation when, following the death of L. S. Vygotsky in 1934, Vygotsky's student and collaborator A. R. Leont'ev shifted the unit of analysis from individual, volitional, goal-directed, tool-mediated, and socially and culturally conditioned action to the mediated action of the collective. Bakhurst (2007: 63) observes that 'Despite his emphasis on the sociocultural foundations of psychological development, Vygotsky's thought remains centered on the individual subject conceived as a discrete, autonomous self'. Leont'ev turned his focus instead to the sources of the social and cultural patterns of action through which individuals internalize their understanding of the world. These recurring, routine actions contribute to collective conceptions of the trajectory of whole societies and therefore of individuals within them, and to the construction and maintenance of the cultural practices through which people and groups learn to help their presumed teleological destinations come about.

Vygotsky (1987) recognized and accounted for social and cultural mediation in his account of individual concept development. He nonetheless focused on individual internalization and externalization of patterns of thinking and the patterns of speech. These patterns reflect prior cultural practices and ultimately help individuals to construct them anew as they take on and reproduce their societies' ways of knowing. In his departure from Vygotsky, Leont'ev (1981)—the architect of what has generally been called *activity theory*—took a more orthodox Marxist perspective on human labor and cognition by foregrounding the social group rather than the individual.

This shift was not necessarily based on purely scientific differences. The ascent of Vygotsky in the world of Russian psychology coincided with the founding of the Soviet Union and its basis in a highly centralized philosophy based on Marxist assumptions regarding social class homogenization following from the demise of capitalism's class-based conflicts. The setting provided by the Soviet Union proved critical for the direction that science, including psychology, took between the early 1920s and early 1990s. First, as an explicitly Marxist state, the Soviet Union established a central and abiding ideology that suppressed the role of individuals, especially as they exercise capital-based control over one another. Vygotsky's interest in individual cognition did not fit within this perspective in spite of his emphasis on higher mental functions as developed through social transactions that are situated in cultural and historical practices for solving the problems presented by specific environments (Tulviste 1989). Vygotsky's foregrounding of the individual became increasingly at odds with official state ideology, a conflict that undoubtedly would have escalated had he lived to develop his research program.

Second, the Soviet Union's Marxist emphasis took a totalitarian turn soon after its leaders came into power, and they reinforced its ideology with a stunning brutality during Stalin's reign from 1924-1953 (see Cole, Levitin, & Luria 2006), a period that encompassed Vygotsky's career. Those who survived this era had few illusions about the perils of defying Soviet dogma. Zinchenko (2007: 213), for instance, observes that 'Vygotsky's commitment to Marxist beliefs did not save him from criticism. His works were banned, denounced, and declared to be vicious and even evil. He was lucky to have managed to die in his own bed in 1934'. Vygotsky, believe many commentators, would undoubtedly have met the same fate as Gustav Gustavovich Shpet, one of his mentors, who was dismissed from his academic positions on multiple occasions and subjected to 'brutal interrogation and execution in 1937' by Soviet authorities (Wertsch 2007: 184) due to his 'freedom and dignity and the independence of his thought from Marxist-Leninist ideology, which at the time was growing stronger and stronger' (Zinchenko: 212).

Vygotsky's death in 1934 coincided with a ban on pedology—Vygotsky's field of the study of child development—by the Pedology Decree of 1936, the execution of Schpet and others during Stalin's Great Purge, the decline of intellectuals and rise of the proletariat in stature, the elevation of Soviet paranoia following the rise of the Nazis in Germany, and the increase in violent repression as a systemic aspect of Soviet life. Even Stalin's successor and close associate, Georgi M. Malenkov, was disposed of within two years, eventually expelled from the party and sent to Kazakhstan to manage a hydroelectric plant for 30 years; life was lonely and perilous even at the top of the system. Reading Vygotsky and his colleagues was forbidden almost immediately following his death. Kozulin and Gindis note that 'discussion of Vygotsky's ideas

was practically impossible from 1936 to the late 1950s' (2007: 334), and Daniels reports that Vygotsky's book *Pedagogical Psychology* 'was considered to be so politically unacceptable to the rulers of the Soviet state that one had to have a special pass from the KGB that would admit one to the restricted reading room in the Lenin Library where the book could be read' (2007: 307).

Leont'ev's (1981) turn away from individual mentation and toward the collective came about in this climate. Cole and Gajdamaschko (2007: 206) note that 'It is certainly plausible that Leontiev, like many others, sought to distance himself from ideas and associations that had led to the deaths of colleagues and friends. However, given the evidence, it seems more plausible to see his reformulation as an effort to place mediation in its cultural context'. Regardless of Leont'ev's motivation for shifting from Vygotsky's emphasis on individual internalization of cultural practices to the mediated actions of collectives, the bifurcated trajectories that their research took from a common point of origin has left the field of cultural-historical psychology with duel legacies, one centered on individuals' internalization of cultural means of mediation and one centered on larger groups working collectively toward shared ends. With activity theory often invoked for both of these foci, much confusion has followed regarding what constitutes a Vygotskian perspective, what sort of research represents activity theory, what a focus on either will do to frame and interpret research, and much more (Smagorinsky 2009). Although Engeström's (1987) activity triangle has been employed to associate many studies with activity theory, the degree to which the research indeed follows from his Marxist appropriation of Leont'ev, rather than a Wertschian (1985) appropriation of Vygotsky's emphasis on individual internalization of cultural practices and mediational means, remains open to question.

In this chapter I enter this discussion by looking at what I call the construction of setting in learning to teach. My work is more Vygotskian than Leont'evian, focusing on individual internalization of cultural concepts and practices and thus ways of thinking and acting on the world. Like Vygotsky, I see 'both the significance of autonomy and how we owe our status as autonomous selves to history, culture, and society' (Bakhurst, 2007: 74). As someone who has lived my whole life in the U.S., I have grown up with and internalized a conception of the individual as the societal exemplar. This orientation is inscribed in U.S. founding documents and is a central feature of much required reading in U. S. schools, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' and Henry David Thoreau's 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience', in which he argues that 'any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already' (see http://www.transcendentalists.com/civil_disobedience.htm). For people like me, adopting a Vygotskian perspective on the development of individual mentation makes good cultural sense and fits well with established schemata for viewing human activity.

Yet in the U. S. the term *activity theory* has become nearly synonymous with taking a Vygotskian perspective, a conflation that I increasingly find inappropriate. Whether this confusion has come about because people wish for their work to be affiliated with a 'hot' theory or whether it follows from a careless reading of the scholarship, it has become a common phenomenon in U. S. scholarship that claims a Vygotskian perspective (Smagorinsky 2009). In this chapter I hope to illuminate this problem and stake out a position in which I argue that for most cultural-historical scholarship conducted in free market capitalist economies, Vygotsky's

sociocultural theory of mind (cf. Wertsch 1985) provides a more appropriate framework than

Leont'ev's Marxist activity theory (cf**.** Engeström 1987).

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SETTING WITHIN EDUCATIONAL ARENAS

With this perspective established, I next turn to two constructs, *arena* and *setting* (Lave 1988), to

introduce the manner in which the setting of one's work as a teacher is an individual construction

that follows from an internalized perspective. An arena has properties that are indisputable.

These may be readily tangible, such as the walls, desks, computers, curricula, books, and other

physical materials that mediate and structure teaching and learning in schools. They may also be

less tangible, such as the speech genres through which disciplinary ideas are conveyed (Wertsch

1991).

Within an arena, individuals construct settings by interpreting the arena through their internal

representations of the situation. Thus, while two teachers may work at the same arena (e.g., a

school or department within a school), they may have distinctly different understandings of the

school setting based on their own goals, histories, and activities within the arena.

The experiences of one university supervisor with a group of elementary school student teachers

illustrates well how one activity setting is open to multiple construals (see Cook, Smagorinsky,

Fry, Konopak, & Moore 2002). The university supervisor, Imelda, was a native of the

Philippines and was working toward a Ph.D. in mathematics education. Her style of supervision

was to observe a class and then, rather than providing an assessment of the lesson, to ask the

student teacher how the lesson had gone. She planned these sessions to get the student teachers

to reflect on the lesson and think about how it had worked. Imelda said that American students do not like direct feedback and prefer a less critical approach, and that if she were in her native country, she would respond with a direct critical appraisal. Student teachers, however, consistently said that they would have preferred a direct critical evaluation of the lesson that pointed out their mistakes and suggested methods for improvement. Even, then, with a shared motive that the university supervision was designed to provide feedback and improve the instruction, this setting produced multiple and conflicting constructions that undermined this broad motive, even with only two participants and a relatively clear agenda.

Arenas with greater complexity are amenable to even more radical differences in the construction of setting. A student teacher or early-career teacher may be enveloped in multiple and competing traditions of schooling that may complicate any effort to construct the setting in a consistent way. In our research, for instance, we have found that early-career teachers are often caught between two general approaches that pull them in opposite directions (Bickmore, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen 2005; Cook, Smagorinsky, Fry, Konopak, & Moore 2002; Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, & Fry 2003; Smagorinsky 1999; Smagorinsky, Cook, Jackson, Moore, & Fry 2004; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson 2003; Smagorinsky, Gibson, Moore, Bickmore, & Cook 2004; Smagorinsky, Jakubiak, & Moore 2008; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson 2002). Broadly speaking, these competing traditions have been described as designative and expressive (Wertsch 2000), teacher-centered and student centered (Cuban 1993), product and process (Emig 1971), form and procedures (Anderson 1976), and others: one that invests authority in teachers and texts and emphasizes formal knowledge that is not open to

dispute, and one that invests authority in students and emphasizes strategies and means for learning that may be reapplied in new situations in a constructive manner.

In this chapter I will focus on a single arena in the southwestern U.S., Sequoyah Middle School, set in Edmund, Oklahoma, a northern suburb of Oklahoma City. More specifically, the arena centers on the English Department in this school; that is, the collection of teachers who instruct students in language, literature, writing, and related areas. Within this arena, Leigh Thompson began her teaching career amidst multiple centers of gravity (see Johnson et al 2003, for the full report). In the section that follow, I detail how these centers of gravity provided settings for her to construct as the context of her teaching, each with its own values and attendant practices. Through this review I illustrate how an arena has no static properties to those who experience it, but rather how it serves as the area in which various settings may be construed by different participants and stakeholders.

One teacher's construction of her educational setting

Leigh was a highly regarded graduate of the teacher education program located in her home state's most competitive university, and so presumably was among the most accomplished beginning teachers entering the profession in Oklahoma the year she began her career. As a middle school English teacher (grades 6-8), she was in the midst of a number of different and often competing interests that pulled her in a variety of directions and suggested to her how she should go about her work. These competing interests provided her with potential settings for her instruction and required her to orient herself to a relatively limited construction of the setting in order to teach in a coherent and consistent manner. Shortly I will review these settings and how

they exerted influence on her conception of how to teach middle school English, particularly the writing strand of the curriculum. First, however, I will provide some background on Leigh herself.

Leigh's Background

Leigh had been a successful high school student, flourishing in the conventions that dominate U.S. secondary education. In the area of writing instruction, she had produced many five-paragraph themes, which provides a template for student writers that includes an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Leigh accepted the logic behind this formula: that it teaches a fundamental structure that students can extrapolate to serve most expository writing needs, an assumption that has been widely critiqued by writing theorists even as it undergirds much high school writing instruction (Hillocks 1995). Leigh reported having been taught the five-paragraph theme almost exclusively in high school. She felt comfortable with this format and found it useful, saying that 'Overall, the five-paragraph essay really was helpful for me as a student to organize my thoughts'.

With this 'apprenticeship of observation'—Lortie's (1975) term for one's experiences as a student that establish a schema for one's understanding of what counts as appropriate and sensible school instruction—in place, Leigh then attended a university teacher education program that we characterized as being 'structurally fragmented' (Zeichner & Gore 1990): The dispersal of courses around the university, random order in which students enrolled in them, and variety of instructors who offered them did not allow for articulation across courses, leaving students without a sustained focus or a unified conception of teaching.

Because students could go through the program taking courses that were not in dialogue with one another, they did not engage in the kind of shared activity that gives an education program a particular culture and focus and potentially enables the development of a conceptually unified approach to teaching (Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson 2003). Further, the program was literature-based, offering no specific courses on writing pedagogy (see Tremmel 2001, for an account of this pervasive problem in U.S. English education programs). Like many early-career teachers who were successful with the repertoires of their own high school teachers and who then are provided insufficient conceptual reinforcement to frame viable alternatives in their teacher education programs, Leigh began her teaching career with instruction in the five-paragraph theme as her normalized conception of proper and effective writing instruction. She ultimately employed this structure with her eight-grade students, justifying her decision by saying, 'I also think it was helpful for my students who didn't know where to start' in composing their essays.

Leigh's student teaching served to reinforce the formalist emphasis of instruction in the five-paragraph theme. Mrs. Hoover, her mentor teacher, was highly rule-bound throughout her teaching, saying in an interview that

> We have to be the same and we have to show them that we try to be fair and that
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> we have to follow the rules. In a building of a thousand students we have to have
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> rules. . . . This is a very important stage, and it's a very good age for them to learn

certain values and morals. . . . We're having to show them there are certain things

that they need to be responsible for.

Mrs. Hoover emphasized grammar instruction and paragraph formation with her sixth-grade students. Rather than five-paragraph themes, Mrs. Hoover stressed the more compact tool of the five-sentence paragraph for her students, who she felt were not ready for the rigors of writing five paragraphs all in one theme. Rather, they focused on writing, as Leigh explained, 'a topic sentence and then three supporting sentences and a clincher sentence'. These paragraphs were evaluated on students' ability to follow directions and use correct writing mechanics, which Mrs. Hoover described as including such features as spelling, comma placement, and writing within the margins of the paper.

Remarkably, Mrs. Hoover's instruction took place in an open-classroom school, i.e., a school with no classroom walls, a design intended to encourage open-ended teaching, diversity in instructional approach, and attention to students' individual trajectories and learning practices. Tulviste's (1991) principle of *heterogeneity* helps to account for the ways in which, within the decentralized, liberatory, inquiry-centered environment suggested by the open classroom design, Leigh was apprenticed to view writing as a formal, authoritarian, rule-bound, linear process. Tulviste describes how overlapping social networks can present a learner with a variety of types of problems to solve, thus allowing individuals to develop a number of frameworks for thinking. Yet even with multiple frameworks available, individuals may construct a more limited setting under the influence of powerful mediators designed to produce particular social ends. Mrs. Hoover's mentorship provided a setting that superseded the school designer's intentions of

creating a context conducive to freedom of movement and expression and reinforced to Leigh the formalist nature of learning to write. This mentorship served as a key experience for Leigh in learning to teach writing and reinforced what she had learned from her apprenticeship of observation about the formalist quality of writing instruction.

Leigh's Construction of Sequoyah Middle School

Leigh accepted her first full-time teaching job at Sequoyah Middle School. Leigh said of this school, one of about fifteen schools she had considered for a job, 'This was about the only one I came out thinking, 'I would just die to have this job'.' When asked why, she said:

> I just felt like I could work with all the other teachers that I spoke with and they are the ones that I would be working with, and [assistant principal] Dara. I liked the area. I liked the look of the school, the things they told me about the school . . . just as far as the teachers being real supportive of one another, getting along. They had just implemented a reading/writing workshop which goes along with the English curriculum that they were implementing. . . . I just really can't put my finger on it, but I really liked the people that I interviewed with and was impressed with them. It wasn't really like an interview. It was more like a conversation which seemed to go real well.

Leigh's construction of this school matched that of others who experienced it. It had been named a Blue Ribbon School, which is awarded only to U.S. schools that reach the top 10 percent of their state's testing scores over several years or show significant gains in student achievement; many consider it to be the highest honor a U.S. school can achieve. My own impressions of the

school as a visitor were very favorable; I found that it had a comfortable and well-maintained appearance, minimum of disciplinary problems, and welcoming ambiance. As Leigh did in choosing it from among over a dozen other possible schools, I felt that it would provide an enviable location in which to undertake a teaching career.

The State Curriculum and Assessment

Leigh's teaching was affected by two state mandates. One was the slate of language arts objectives that middle school students were expected to accomplish as part of the state core curriculum. In the area of writing, the curriculum required 'Narrative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive paragraphs and longer compositions that establish and support a central idea with a topic sentence; supporting paragraphs with facts, details, explanations or examples; and a concluding paragraph that summarizes the points'. To many interpreters, this structure suggests five-paragraph themes, even for narratives.

This core curriculum objective was aligned with the second mandate Leigh faced: the eighth-grade writing test that required students to write an essay on a given topic, which the scoring rubric treated as a five-paragraph theme. This assessment became a central consideration in Leigh's writing instruction, leading her to conclude that instruction in five-paragraph themes not only made intuitive sense but helped students perform well on the state writing test, an assessment that eventually would reflect on the quality of her school and of her own teaching. In constructing the setting of her teaching, then, Leigh came to the inevitable conclusion that teaching five-paragraph themes constituted effective writing instruction. Early in the year, she acknowledged that 'They are going to be taking this writing test. They are going be going on to

ninth grade. If I don't do my job at this point, they are going to be hurting. . . . I [teach] according to what's mandated by the state. I'm teaching to the test'. Leigh's acceptance of both the reality and the merits of the state writing test guided her instruction in writing.

Entry-Year Committee

Like all first-year teachers in the state, Leigh was supervised during her first year of teaching by a state-mandated entry-year committee consisting of one school-based administrator, one school-based mentor teacher, and one university-based professor. I was appointed as the university-based committee member, allowing me to combine my site visits for the research with my required classroom observations for the committee, a dual purpose that I believe enriched my work on each. I visited her class on four occasions, interviewed Leigh before and after each observation (each recorded), recorded two of the three committee meetings, and conducted interviews with Dara and Katherine. I also maintained communication with Leigh via telephone and email during the year to discuss her teaching and occasionally sent copies of articles that I thought would stimulate her thinking about instructional issues. My mentorship was designed to help Leigh work comfortably according to the school's priorities while encouraging her to teach imaginatively within that framework.

The administrative member, Dara, was one of three assistant principals in the school. She was a former English teacher with an M.A. in English education who liked a 'noisy classroom':

> I get nervous when I walk down the hall and it's quiet, because to me, without even
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> peeking in one door, what I can only imagine is that a teacher is somewhere—maybe at

her desk or someplace—and kids are doing worksheets. You know, that's just my imagination at work. And when I hear a certain level of noise, I know . . . that's the sound of learning.

Dara, recognizing Leigh's anxiety about the state writing test, did not discourage her from teaching the five-paragraph theme. At the same time she encouraged her to see beyond its limitations. During a feedback session following one of Dara's visits to Leigh's class, Leigh told Dara that she was 'worried about this writing test'. Dara replied:

We had like a 99% pass rate the first year. I read the kids' little essays . . . and my gosh, I can't even decipher them, which leads me to believe that for 99% of our kids to pass, there must be a really lenient rate of assessment. So don't get, you know, don't get [inaudible]. By teaching them a real formula kind of writing that they can access when they need it, which is when they'll need that, that's the best you can do. . . . On the other hand, I don't want them to think that's the only way to write.

Dara downplayed the importance of the five-paragraph theme on other occasions as well. She recognized that teachers at her school with large student enrollments at times felt pressured to use formulaic instruction to reduce the demands on their time:

I was talking to a teacher [who] has 140 kids, and she's concerned about their proficiency for that test, and just beyond the test knowing how to write, and I was just trying to share with her ideas of how she can teach them the real basics of a five-paragraph essay

without writing a five-paragraph essay. Things like have them write the outline of it or just the kernel points of the whole essay, and give them a day and have them write the thesis, give them the thesis and have them write the supporting points.

Dara encouraged the teacher to teach the organizational principles of the five-paragraph theme without dedicating excessive time or attention to the actual writing of five-paragraph themes. As she said to Leigh—who at one point worried that 'I'm not even sure what I would do for another type of essay'—she preferred that students get experience with many and varied kinds of writing in their English classes. Dara's goal for students at Sequoyah, rather than to prepare for the state writing test, was for students to be 'comfortable with their language, so I'm comfortable with teachers taking it from different angles'.

Katherine, Leigh's assigned mentor teacher, was a twenty-eight-year veteran of teaching, and Leigh was the fifth novice teacher she had supervised. Mentor teacher Katherine appeared to be more wholeheartedly approving of how Leigh prepared them to write five-paragraph themes. At the year's final entry-year committee meeting Katherine lauded Leigh's teaching by saying that

> I know that she has done an excellent job of teaching writing skills because in my class I
> have my eighth graders do three assignments that involve writing a formal five-paragraph
> essay. And I always have my kids tell me what team they're on, and the students that
> have had her for English do a super job in writing paragraphs and writing five-paragraph
> essays. So I know she's done a really good job of teaching writing skills.

Colleagues

In addition to Katherine, Leigh worked with other colleagues as a member an eighth-grade

teaching team, which consisted of four core teachers, supplemented by a special education,

Spanish, and lab teacher who served all three teams. Leigh turned to her middle school team

colleagues particularly for help with classroom management. More critical to her construction of

setting were the two other eighth-grade English teachers in her department. Leigh typically

sought advice from other English teachers for pedagogical or curricular assistance: 'The

problems with the actual English curriculum and that kind of thing, I'd go to the English

teachers. . . . They gave me a lot of ideas. A lot of the units I did I took from them'. These

colleagues greatly influenced Leigh's decisions about how to teach writing.

Leigh revealed the kind of guidance provided by her colleagues when discussing her instruction

in the five-paragraph theme:

> When they [the students] take the eighth grade writing test, that's what they [the
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> assessors] look for is the five-paragraph essay format. And that's something that I've
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> talked a lot to the other two eighth-grade English teachers about, and so they've helped
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> me on that. But they just said, 'Give them lots of practice. Have them practice writing
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> this essay as much as possible' . . . because that's kind of the structure they look for when
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> people grade these writing samples that they have to give.

Leigh's conformity to this instructional norm undoubtedly helped relieve the tension of being a first-year teacher entering an environment with established expectations. However, the motive of this new setting, which included the pressures produced by expectations accompanying the state writing test, also contributed to her experience of new tensions. Two recurring terms in Leigh's accounts of teaching the five-paragraph theme in preparation for this test were *pressure* exerted on her from without and the resulting *stress* she perceived in her colleagues and experienced herself. In an interview conducted in late September, she said that her students needed

> to learn to write because eighth grade takes that writing test in the spring, and that's a big thing with this writing test which all the teachers stress about. . . . I want them to focus on being able to write an essay. You know, giving me a thesis statement and backing up your thesis statement, and just your basic old boring essay. . . . I think more and more I'm focusing on structure so that they can write that.

By January, only weeks before the test took place, the pressure intensified and Leigh was feeling the stress to prepare her students:

> I don't feel like I can spend any other time on any other type of writing right now. I have all these other things I want to do as far as writing, but up until they take this test, I don't feel like I can do anything else. . . . I'm just trying to get them ready for this test. And I've told them a hundred times that's my goal and we need to work on this.

The pressure to teach to the test confined Leigh's instruction to the five-paragraph theme. She deferred any other more imaginative writing instruction till after the state writing test:

> I feel like I can't do as many fun activities and different activities. And maybe once I've, like I've said before, maybe once I have some more teaching experience and know what to expect with this writing test a little more and know what works and what doesn't as far as helping them write, then I can vary a little bit. But I think definitely because just like I said, I'm going to let them do some more creative projects in writing after this writing assessment test is over. Right now I feel like I'm just pounding it into them. It kind of stresses me out. This whole writing test stuff.

Leigh revealed that the stress she experienced came through her interactions with her colleagues. She said, for instance, that 'I've never heard like if they do awful, that you're going to be fired or anything like that, but I've heard it reflects on you. . . . One teacher commented to me, she said, 'Well, you're lucky you have honors kids because your tests will be higher than mine'.'   In contrast to Dara's assurance that her students would pass the test even if she did not dedicate her writing instruction to the five-paragraph theme, Leigh's colleagues impressed upon her the precipitous nature of the test scores in terms of their reputations as teachers and the importance therefore of teaching to the test.

> The pressure of the writing test mainly came from my 8th grade English colleagues. I think they explained to me how important this was, so I naturally assumed the stress. The scores . . . are reflected through the school as the results are published annually through

the city newspaper. Our school has a history of doing extremely well in the writing test so that was always a nice reward to see the 98-99% passage rates. . . . My colleagues also taught the same writing method—there are three 8th grade English teachers at our school. They all felt the same pressure I'm sure. I didn't feel much pressure from the administration. . . . I'm not sure I ever discussed it with them, [though] I did discuss it with Dara my first year.

Although Leigh's colleagues may have pressured her to join them in teaching to the test, it seems there were forces acting collectively on Sequoyah Middle School's teachers to uphold the standards of their school and maintain the high passage rates the community had come to expect. One issued from the surrounding pressure from the state and community to teach to the test, which influenced the eighth-grade English teachers to emphasize the five-paragraph theme to the exclusion of other writing. This expectation in turn contributed to Leigh's gravitation to departmental norms when her colleagues impressed on her the importance of teaching the five-paragraph theme as a means to producing the highest possible test scores.

Leigh's construction of the setting, while of her own devising, appeared to follow from the greatest sources of pressure she experienced. The combined influences of state writing test, community values on high test scores, and faculty response to those influences appeared to supersede whatever effect Dara's encouragement to minimize the impact of these factors had on her decision about how to teach writing. Leigh's construction of the setting, then, led her to adopt particular goals (achieving high test scores) and pedagogical tools to achieve those goals (exclusive instruction in the five-paragraph theme) in her teaching at the expense of Dara's

priority to allow students to develop broader writing repertoires with greater joy and personal fulfillment.

DISCUSSION

This chapter has taken a Vygotskian perspective on Leigh Thompson's construction of the setting of her early-career teaching in the arena of Sequoyah Middle School. I have focused on the different trajectories her teaching might take given different constructions of her setting and the pressures she felt to adopt one to guide her instruction. In conjunction with her own 'deep processing' (Craik & Lockhart 1972) of the five-paragraph theme through her apprenticeship of observation as a successful high school student and formalist emphasis during student teaching, Leigh foregrounded the state writing test and the stress induced by her colleagues and concern for her students' progress through the test-driven system to view the five-paragraph theme as an appropriate means of instruction for her eighth-grade students. She constructed this setting in spite of explicit guidance from her most immediate and influential school administrator, Dara, to teach in less authoritarian, more 'noisy', more student-centered ways. In Leigh's construction, the motive of the setting was oriented to producing passing scores on the state writing test scores so that her students could proceed to ninth grade and her school would show well in district comparisons. This construction was overwhelmingly mediated by her colleagues' continual referencing of the exam and the attendant pressures that Leigh felt to have her students perform well on it.

A Vygotskian perspective focuses on Leigh's internalization of this value through her volitional, goal-directed, tool-mediated action in the social context of the English department at Sequoyah

Middle School and writing testing mandate of the state of Oklahoma. In contrast, an activity theory analysis would focus on the action of a collective, such as the eighth-grade English teachers, as mediated by an artifact such as the writing test or the five-paragraph structure. Or, in Engeström's interpretation, an activity theory approach might introduce a new artifact such as his mediational triangle and study collective action around using that artifact as a way to 'expand' learning through collective action toward the goal of changing, and presumably improving, group processes. Foregrounding the collective would require a very different sort of data collection and analysis and different unit of analysis than were employed for our study of Leigh and others in this research.

My purpose is not to assert that one focus is superior than the other, but to argue that research grounded in the frameworks provided by Vygotsky and Leont'ev produce attention to different units of analysis and thus different interpretations. A Vygotskian analysis might indeed conclude that I have internalized from my U.S. setting a tendency to focus my attention on individual mentation, although with greater attention to sociocultural mediation than has been found in previous U.S. approaches (e.g., the information processing paradigm, which in general has focused on 'in-the-head' cognition with less attention to how that cognition is socially mediated; see Smagorinsky 1998).

Vygotsky and Leont'ev have on occasion been set at odds because of their different units of analysis. I see no reason to pit their foci against one another, and urge researchers working in the cultural-historical tradition to simply accept that the two orientations produce different sorts of research and to align themselves referentially with an appropriate framework for their goals and

interests. The goal of research ought to be to produce insights rather than to establish that only one means of investigation and analysis can yield useful understandings. What a researcher regards as 'useful' should in turn determine what he or she decides to study and how those investigations should be conducted and interpreted.

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