

Peter Smagorinsky

# Vygotsky and the Social Dynamics of Classrooms

Stressing the importance of Lev S. Vygotsky's ideas about teaching and learning, Peter Smagorinsky challenges readers to form their own interpretations of the Russian psychologist's work. He highlights three points with implications for secondary school English teachers working to "cultivate a literate citizenry."

I recently heard someone suggest that the Bible is the most often quoted, least read, book on earth. I'd say that for educators, the works of Lev S. Vygotsky hold this position. At the risk of offending just about everyone, I would say that most references to Vygotsky do little beyond invoking his name without digging into his work, in which he attempted to develop a comprehensive psychology of the human mind in social context. His ideas have influenced several generations of thinkers in disciplines as diverse as education, rhetoric, psychology, and just about any field in which it is important to understand human development. Indeed, I have found Vygotsky's work to be the central influence on most ideas I've had about teaching and learning since I first read *Mind in Society* in the early 1990s.

Satirical songwriter Tom Lehrer famously quipped that he had been humbled by the thought that "When Mozart was my age, he'd been dead for two years." I've often had the same feeling when reading Vygotsky, known as "The Mozart of Psychology" both for his ability to compose final drafts on the fly and for his early death (Mozart at 35, Vygotsky at 38). More accurately, I've had this feeling when I have read *translations* of Vygotsky, which is not the same thing as reading Vygotsky himself. Because of my limitations with the Russian alphabet, I'm stuck with trusting the work of translators, whose interpretations of Vygotsky's language and concepts often vary widely. Vygotsky's 1934 *Думать и речь: Психологические исследования, aka Mysble-*

*nie i rech: Psikhologicheskie issledovaniya*, has been translated as *Thought and Language* and as *Thinking and Speech*, both of which omit the subtitle, *Psychological Investigations*. If translators can't even agree on the meaning of this brief title, imagine how precarious it gets when trying to translate, and in turn grasp, the extended text of Vygotsky's ideas.

And there's a whole lot of Vygotsky available to readers of English. His entire output has now been published, collected in six volumes and several other books, adding up to a few thousand pages of complex thinking and often difficult reading. From that extraordinary body of work, Vygotsky is largely reduced in the public mind to a few sentences he wrote describing the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In his magisterial consideration of human psychology, Vygotsky refers to the ZPD on only a handful of pages. You have likely read countless times that it comprises "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (*Mind in Society* 86). This phrase has been plucked in isolation from an early translation and repeated on countless occasions to justify all manner of instructional ideas, often in reductive ways and often in ways that work in opposition to one another.

The ZPD, however, is not as simple as it might appear to be to those who are familiar with the phrase but have not read the context in which Vygotsky described it. It is contested among those

who are widely read in Vygotskian theory. I begin, then, with a lengthy caution about accepting other people's interpretations of Vygotsky, mine included.

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Few people outside Russia and its former satellite nations have actually read his words, and even those who have do not agree on what it's all about. In spite of my limitations, I'll try to outline what I do think Vygotsky has to offer middle school and high school English teachers as they work toward the goal of helping to cultivate a literate citizenry. I have often thought that if I had been familiar with Vygotsky's work during my high

school teaching career from 1976 through 1990, I might have been more sensitive to the needs of the many students I taught whose cultural backgrounds were different from my own.

### **The Social Nature of Learning (and Teaching, Too)**

People referencing Vygotsky often say something like the following: "Vygotsky believed that all learning is social, which suggests that teachers should use small groups to promote discussions and therefore learning in the classroom." I advocate small groups as much as anybody. But I don't think that Vygotsky was saying that because thinking is social in origin, teachers should necessarily use small groups in classrooms. Vygotsky's notion that thinking has social origins involves a cultural and historical perspective on what it means to be "social." His work does not necessarily imply that teachers should use small groups; rather, it implies that even when people are alone, their thinking involves a sort of dialogue with others, including those long gone. Vygotsky begins his effort to understand thinking by trying to understand the context of thinking. He tries to understand how people and the things that they create—their buildings, their ways of structuring their world through speech, their routines, and everything else through which they bring order to their surroundings—help to shape the ways in

which they and others view the world. Note that the process is (at least) two-way: people's thinking shapes their physical and symbolic worlds, and their engagement with those worlds in turn shapes how they (and others) think.

Two terms help to account for why this attention to the environment of human development matters for teachers of English. The first is *telos*, a term that James V. Wertsch has used to account for the ways in which people develop an ideal destination for their society (*Voices*; "Vygotsky's"). If you conceive of school as a sort of society, it often has an official mission—a description of what its purpose is and where its students are headed. Yet if you have ever attended a school board meeting, or been to an English department meeting, or sat around the lunch table in the faculty lounge, or overheard a conversation about education at the hair stylist's, you already know that this stated mission is not necessarily shared by all students, faculty, parents, administrators, or other stakeholders.

In my experience, it doesn't take long for a discussion of education to elicit many often-conflicting goals for education. And each comes with a set of social practices to help its preferred outcome to be realized. At times these practices are explicit: Students are expected to be punctual, dress codes prohibit attire such as do-rags that threatens the adults' sense of order, and so on. At times these practices, however, are not stated, which brings me to the second term, *prolepsis*. Michael Cole has used this term to describe the ways in which people more subtly structure social interaction to promote a desired outcome. To reinforce a Western heritage orientation in students, for instance, a teacher might limit readings to those that present an American perspective; might promote competition by not using small groups and assessing all student work on individual efforts; and otherwise, through implicit means, might suggest that some beliefs and social practices are more appropriate than and perhaps inherently superior to others.

Maybe you believe that the Western heritage is the only legitimate approach to educating US students, and I won't try to dissuade you if you do. One inevitable aspect of taking a Vygotskian perspective is accepting its relativism. In other words, it is more descriptive than prescriptive. It helps to account for why people who grow up in the Deep

South of the United States tend to be Christians—just about everyone around them is, and they internalize beliefs of the Southern Baptist church. A Vygotskian perspective can help to explain how Southern Baptists come to think as they do, and how Sunnis and Shiites believe as they do, and Nazis, and dyed-in-the-wool Democrats, and hardcore National Rifle Association members, and organic farmers, and gangsta rappers, and others from social groups of myriad kinds. It is less clear on how to make judgments about the morality of various perspectives, since the emphasis is on understanding how people learn to think through their immersion in a social value system, and what the consequences are of acting according to those beliefs. As I read Vygotsky, his emphasis is more on understanding how people learn to think than on judging the kinds of thinking that people develop. A Vygotskian perspective can help explain the consequences of particular social organizations and practices, but moral judgments about those consequences, even concerning behaviors such as genocide or slavery, have their source in other sorts of beliefs. Again, relativism is inevitable from this perspective: one person's revolutionary is indeed another's terrorist.

But what, you are surely asking, does all this have to do with me as a teacher? I'll give one example that I hope has implications for how you might think about your teaching from this perspective. It is pretty well documented that African American students are disciplined in school in numbers that are greatly disproportionate to their percentage in the student population. If you look only on the surface of this recurring statistic, you might conclude that African American students are poorly behaved people. But a cultural analysis might produce a different interpretation.

A number of studies have found that, at least in some African American communities, the behavioral values of school are quite different from those that the students might practice in their home lives. In church, for instance, their congregation might be continually exhorted to participate in the service. Indeed, if the congregation is not sufficiently involved through loud vocal expressions and testifying, the preacher will shout "Y'all can't hear me!" to pump up the volume. Further, in public debates between White and Black citizens, Thomas

Kochman found that most Whites employ a dispassionate and logical mode of debating and problem-solving while African Americans are much more emotional and fervent. The result: the White participants think that the Blacks are overcome by emotion and are therefore illogical, while the Black participants think that the Whites are not sufficiently committed to their beliefs because they express them with so little affect.

It appears, then, that many African American students have been enculturated to believe that appropriate behavior in formal settings includes loud and passionate involvement. This engagement might come in the form of spontaneous participation that builds on and reinforces another speaker's contribution, including and perhaps especially the leader's;

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the ritualistic insults that are involved in what is variously known as "signifying," "dissing," "playing the dozens," "snapping," and other names; employing the conventions of African American English such as double negatives or perhaps even profanity to emphasize a point; and otherwise violating the norms of what middle-class White women—who make up the largest segment of the teaching population—believe to be appropriate in school. These violations often result in discipline. Frequently, after being disciplined for acting in ways that they believe are appropriate, African American students feel that they have been punished unfairly, thus creating even greater separation between them and the school that is trying to socialize them into a different set of norms than they have learned at home.

People working from a Vygotskian perspective have identified many situations in which students come to school with different norms from those expected in school and are punished or downgraded for it. If you believe that school is an instrument of assimilation, then you probably believe that correcting these behaviors is the right response. If you believe the message behind all those "Celebrate Diversity" posters, then you might find the situation in which students are punished for acting in ways that are acceptable in their homes and communities to be troubling.

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In sum: I have focused on Vygotsky's key insight that thinking is social in origin, and that people often assume that their cultural ways of knowing and acting are the norm, or the essence of human nature itself. They often judge people who have developed other ways of thinking through their immersion in a different culture as having lower character, as being poorly behaved, as being "behind" in their social evolution—in short, as being lesser people. This tendency, I think, is responsible for much conflict in the world. I would urge teachers to consider the consequences of efforts to assimilate all students to White, middle-class values through both explicit punishments and rewards, and through more subtle, proleptic means. Imposing one cultural set of beliefs and practices may contribute to the construction of negative behavioral and academic records for students from nonmainstream cultures, based not on their ability to engage with the curriculum but on their distance from the central culture's assumptions about what counts as acceptable behavior.

### Thinking and Speech

Vygotsky's work is relevant for classroom teachers because he identified important links between thinking and speech. For Vygotsky, speech is the primary "tool" in the construction of culture. Through speech, people express what is on their minds. They in turn help to structure a society through the ways in which their speech both constructs a reality and brings it to order so that others may move easily within it. Further, speech serves not only as this means of representing a world; the process of speaking itself often serves as a vehicle through which new thoughts emerge. Each of these roles of speech has implications for English teachers.

Many current interpreters of Vygotsky—myself included—have questioned the primacy of speech and have found that other symbol systems have a similar, if less-often employed, potential for ordering the world. But given the centrality of lan-

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guage to the language arts, I'll work with the idea that speech is, to use a well-worn phrase, the "tool of tools." Let's first consider the ways in which speech helps to construct an environment. Wertsch has synthesized the work of Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin to examine how a "speech genre" develops and in turn affects how people think (*Voices*; "Vygotsky's"). A speech genre is a particular packaging of conventions for communicating among distinct groups of people. For example, you probably employ different sets of conventions when talking to a baby, your

students in class, your lover, and your quilting group. You probably know how off-putting it can be to be the odd person out who doesn't know the jargon, the concepts, and other conventions of a particular community of speakers; think, for instance, of the last time you were at a party where a group of lawyers started talking to each other.

Speech genres are also in place in classrooms. Typically, in English classes, the teacher is positioned at the front with all eyes centered on her. (And this positioning, although not speech, is a convention within the genre.) Protocol calls for the teacher to initiate all discussion, decide who gets to speak, discourage talk that is not in order and germane to the topic, and reserve the authority to comment on any student's contribution. The speech itself has a formal quality to it; groping toward meaning during discussions is discouraged. The emphasis of the discussion is on working toward an accepted interpretation, often one originating in a college professor's lecture, a professional critic's essay, or the margins of the teacher's manual. Because of this formal emphasis, subjective responses are discouraged, as are idiosyncratic interpretations that fall outside the text's official, authoritative meaning as determined by literary critics.

Yet there are other ways of talking about books. Think of the book clubs that adults often form. The speech genre is usually quite different: People laugh a lot, they digress with stories that in some way are inspired by the reading or discussion, they use the discussion to think through new ideas, they co-construct meaning by building on one another's thoughts, they eat and drink, everyone has the same access to the floor, and it's OK to cry. Not surprisingly, they enjoy these discussions a lot more than the typical high school kid enjoys a typical literature discussion in class—they attend these sessions of their own volition and often view them as important social and intellectual occasions.

Often, I'd say, literature discussions in school don't work because they are not interesting to the students and end up being lectures more than discussions. The formality valued in school is not conducive to encouraging students to think on their own. Rather, their role is reduced to filling in the gaps of teachers' interpretations—gaps that the

teacher leaves open for predetermined information. And so the formal nature of the ways in which literature tends to be discussed in school—the speech genre governing school discussions—actually works against students' willingness to engage with literature inspired by the enthusiasm and interest that motivate adults when they read voluntarily on their own time.

Vygotsky's view of speech as serving a developmental role in thinking helps to provide a different approach to talking about literature. This view has found a footing through the "writing to learn" movement, in which people use writing as a tool to discover what they have to say. Central to this approach is the idea that writing for the purpose of learning has a playful or experimental dimension. While playing with ideas or language, people can try out ideas that they might eventually reject, or that change their thinking about their topic, or that morph into a newer, perhaps more compelling idea. When classrooms are structured so that both writing and speech are exploratory, experimental, and playful, different genres come into play.

Both writing and talking to learn are more inviting to students because they needn't fear being wrong, for the idea is to generate ideas, not to express intact ideas in immaculate form. As a result, talking and writing shift from working largely from within acceptable forms—writing five-paragraph themes, arriving at or accepting the teacher's predetermined interpretations, speaking only if called on, answering with fully formed ideas, and so on—to playing with the edges of what's presumed acceptable. Often, small-group discussions allow for such generative, constructive, experimental, developmental speech because there is no officially dominant leader such as a teacher, no central person to direct the flow of discussion, and less formality to limit how kids can think and speak about a topic. Yet it's possible that whole-class discussions could take on these qualities if the teacher recognizes the value of more spontaneous, exploratory speech and encourages students to use it in class.

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## In Brief

I have touched on a few points that I think follow from taking a Vygotskian perspective on teaching and learning. With world enough and time (and space), I could elaborate others, and no doubt another writer would have emphasized other aspects of Vygotsky's large and deeply complex project. I conclude by emphasizing a few points that seem to be agreed on by the majority of people who have read Vygotsky carefully: that thinking is a product of cultural practice and so people from diverse backgrounds often frame social situations and how to act in them differently; that thinking is mediated by cultural tools such as speech, which again may be employed differently by people whose backgrounds have reinforced particular ways of using them; and that exploratory, playful, experimental uses of speech can serve an important role in the development of new ideas. If I'd understood these points better as a high school English teacher, I think that I might have contributed more to a broader spectrum of students' learning. I hope that by exploring these ideas in this essay, I have helped you consider ways in which you might reconsider some aspects of your teaching as well.

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## READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Smagorinsky details the importance of discussion in the classroom and how crucial it is for students to understand their audience during those discussions. "Finding Common Ground: Using Logical, Audience-Specific Arguments" presents a hypothetical situation to students. They then generate arguments from opposing points of view, discover areas of commonality through the use of Venn diagrams, and construct logical, audience-specific arguments to persuade their opponents. Students also have an opportunity to role-play with classmates to refine their arguments. This activity further reinforces the idea of knowing your audience in discussions. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=938](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=938)