# What Does Vygotsky Provide for the 21st-Century Language Arts Teacher?

When you hear the name "Vygotsky," what comes to mind? For most people, the answer is undoubtedly "the zone of proximal development" (ZPD). And yet in his voluminous writing, the ZPD is only mentioned on three occasions, and then only for a few pages (Smagorinsky, 2011a). Vygotsky's work in English translation includes six volumes of collected works (1987, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999), two edited books that assemble his "greatest hits" (1978, 1994a), one book that abridges his doctoral dissertation (1925/1971), an educational psychology textbook (1997c), a coauthored volume on people and primates (Vygotsky & Luria, 1993), and three quite different translations of *Thought and Language* or *Thinking and Speech* (1962, 1986, 1987). Additional papers have been published in such journals as the *Journal of Russian and Eastern European Psychology* and *Soviet Psychology* and are occasionally available at www.marxists.org and other websites. Some work has appeared in multiple publications and/or websites (e.g., Vygotsky's 1933 lecture on play[1]). There remain six additional volumes of collected works that have not yet been translated into English.

Not bad for a guy who was debilitated by tuberculosis for much of his adult life and died of the illness at age 37. Satirist Tom Lehrer once said that he was often humbled by the thought that "When Mozart was my age, he'd been dead for two years." Vygotsky has often left me feeling the same way.

Vygotsky's career began nearly a century ago when, in 1915, he undertook his doctoral study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the age of 19, completing it at age 25 before beginning the series of laboratory experiments that occupied the remainder of his career. In 1936, two years after his death, Stalin banned his writing in the Soviet Union as part of his greater purge of any hint of dissidence or unorthodox thinking. Vygotsky's incandescent career took place within these bounds.

Understanding what Vygotsky has to offer to modern-day teachers can be a challenge. Vygotsky wrote in Russian, available now to the English-speaking world largely in varying and often questionable translations (Van der Veer, 1992). His career coincided with the formation of the Soviet Union that began in 1917. The Soviets' founding principles involved dissolving social class distinctions, redistributing wealth, and creating schools that served Soviet ideology through such vehicles as the Young Pioneers and Young Communist Movements (Vygotsky, 1993). The values, goals, and practices of the context in which he developed his ideas thus stand in dramatic contrast to the individualistic, free-market principles of the modern-day US and other parts of the English-speaking world where accumulating wealth is valorized in public policy and everyday practice. With culture being such a crucial dimension of Vygotsky's view of human development—his work is often described as "cultural-historical theory" or some variation thereof (e.g., Portes & Salas, 2011)—the manner in which his ideas are understood and implemented in

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[1]This lecture was published in at least two translations and on a number of occasions. The best-known version in English is published as "The Role of Play in Development" in *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1987). A different version was originally published in Russian in *Voprosy Psikhologii* in 1966, then translated by C. Mulholland as "Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child" and published in *Soviet Psychology* in 1967, reprinted in 1977 in *Soviet Developmental Psychology: An Anthology* (Vygotsky, 1933/1977), and added to www.marxists.org in 2002 with slight variations from the original. See Yasnitsky (2012).

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a radically different culture from those in which he produced them undoubtedly matters.

Of what value, then, are this remote Byelorussian teacher's ideas to English/language arts instruction nearly a century later? It is impossible to condense Vygotsky's expansive ideas into a single, relatively brief article. I will review areas that I see as relevant for the modern-day K–8 English-speaking classroom. These topics include the use of speech as a tool for thinking, the role of emotion in thinking, the social nature of thinking, an emphasis on meaningful activity, and ultimately what the notion of the zone of proximal development means in the setting of the language arts curriculum.

## Speech as Tool

School instruction tends to treat speech and writing as conforming to rules and other orthodoxies. Students who come to school speaking a version of English that departs from the textbook standard are often corrected—at times in mid-sentence such that their thinking is interrupted and their ideas are treated as secondary. As Barnes (1976/1992) has argued, students in school are expected to use *final draft* speech with all the wrinkles ironed out, an emphasis that tends to produce less talk. Students have fewer opportunities to use speech in *exploratory* ways, where they can stumble and grope their way toward an idea without worrying about how it sounds as it emerges from their mouths or pens.

Barnes's (1992) distinction ably describes one of Vygotsky's central insights regarding the use of speech. Wertsch (2000) observes that Vygotsky considers speech,[2] both oral and written, in two quite different ways. On the one hand, speech may serve what Wertsch calls a *designative* function, that is, as a *sign* to which one may attribute meaning. The printed or spoken word, when completed

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[2]I follow the convention used by Minick, the translator of the 1987 Plenum version of Vygotsky's 1934 volume *Myshlenie i rech'*, whereby *thinking* and *speech* replace *thought* and *language* so as to characterize these two concepts as active, dynamic processes rather than abstractions.

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## NOW ACT!

Language development is an ongoing, dynamic process. Making implicit cultural understandings explicit in the language of school is helpful for all ages and grade levels. From preschool through middle school, activities that engage students' attention to both words and the larger context for meaningful communication mediate connections between oral language concepts and their understandings from everyday experiences and the curriculum content of school. Some activities to practice **with** students:

- Model and encourage thinking aloud for an authentic purpose, such as solving an identified classroom conflict.
- Document and display student discourse (talk and writing) *in process.* Refer to documentation and allow students to see the changes in their own thinking.
- Act out all levels of language (words, phrases, sentences, stories) using gestures, actions, pantomimes, charades.
- Create, illustrate, and compare concepts using pictures, models, and graphic organizers.
- Evaluate ideas for writing with students before conventions are graded.
- Make time for self-evaluation and or peer/teacher conferences.
- Compile synonym lists or charts as a community in multiple languages, when available.

Use these strategies before and during writing tasks to help activate contextualized memory for words in use. While students recall and identify words correctly if prompted, they may not use them independently in written products without significant and ongoing practice.

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and offered to represent meaning, serves this purpose. On the other hand, he argues, the process of articulating thought into speech—the *expressive* use—may generate meaning. In other words, through the act of moving inchoate thinking into a public, articulated form, the thinking itself may undergo change. This potential of speech represents the *tool* function. Speech thus can both represent an idea *and* contribute to the formation of an idea, and when speech is coordinated and orchestrated to produce a text, the sign function of its form may then serve as a tool for yet new thinking by either the speaker or others.

The sign function tends to rule in school, with "standard" versions of speech serving as the most acceptable forms for students to use. As Barnes (1976/1992) argues, when students' opportunities to speak are primarily encouraged only after their ideas reach a state of cogency, students often say very little because the process of articulation may take some time, and the production of completed thoughts might lag behind the opportunity to express them. Although Barnes is clear that "final draft" speech plays an important role in school, he is concerned that the exploratory function is allowed too infrequently. Teachers thus overlook the potential of classrooms to encourage the development of thinking through the relatively unfettered opportunity to use speech as a tool for generating new ideas through the process of speaking.

*What matters is using the developmental potential of speech to generate and explore ideas, rather than to always speak and write in ways that meet an assessor's approval.*

Oral speech,[3] however, is granted at least a certain leeway in terms of orthodoxy. The expectations for writing are greater, with students often bewailing the dripping red marks of correction that cover their papers upon their return from the teacher. Now, don't get me wrong; I do not think that anything goes when students put pencil to paper or fingers to keyboard. For final drafts, students should employ writing conventions that meet the expectations of their readers. But final drafts are only one version of writing. The notion of exploratory speech is central to the "writing to learn" approach in which writers are granted the opportunity to think through writing, no matter what that writing looks like at first glance. In this approach, not all writing is designed to be read as coherent by readers other than the author. Rather, the idea is to use writing as a way to think through a problem.

This value on exploratory speech implies the need to create opportunities for writing that is not graded. Students might instead write about a problem as a preliminary step to discussion, or write informally in journals or reading logs as ways of working through ideas independent of being graded on them, or write to generate ideas that they may develop into more polished pieces. This process of exploration might involve stretching ideas past their breaking point as a way of either extending an idea as far as possible or experimenting with ideas that may or may not pan out in the end. What matters is using the developmental potential of speech to generate and explore ideas, rather than to always speak and write in ways that meet an assessor's approval.

## Emotion and Cognition

If we ever needed proof that cognition and affect are considered to be separate functions by policymakers, the movement toward standardized testing should provide it. What could be more disaffecting than preparing day after day to be evaluated through multiple-choice tests on topics that nobody cares about? Although testing in the No Child Left Behind regime in the US is deferred until third grade, other tests are available to those just toddling through their first classroom door, even as a screening practice for admission to gifted and talented programs prior to entering first grade (e.g., the Kindergarten Test Study System LLC, 2006–2011). No wonder so many kids hate school. You just can't run from how you feel about it.

From a Vygotskian perspective, emotions are inseparable from thinking. Indeed, Vygotsky assumed that all aspects of human life are interrelated, including what goes on *within* a person, even

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[3]In *Thinking and Speech,* Vygotsky considers both spoken and written speech, thus the distinction here.

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if it is all connected to what is outside the person and so cannot be so neatly isolated. Vygotsky's doctoral dissertation (1925/1971) on *Hamlet* is titled *The Psychology of Art.* Much of his attention in this work of literary criticism concerned the ways in which art produces emotional responses in readers, listeners, and viewers that profoundly affect them. The greatest works of art, he argued, produce "intelligent emotions" in their beholders (p. 212). Emotion and imagination come into play during one's engagement with art such that "art complements life by expanding its possibilities" (p. 247). Thus, a person does not simply think about art, or respond emotionally to it, but has emotional reactions that, when reflected upon, enable a person to consider more profoundly the depths of the human experience.

Vygotsky was oriented to the word as the "tool of tools" (Cole, 1996, p. 108), which helps to explain his verbal orientation in focusing his attention on art primarily on literature. Regardless of the artistic medium, however, he considered one's emotional engagement with the work of art to be a central means through which art may elevate not only the human spirit, but the ability to think with greater clarity about the human experience (Smagorinsky, 2011b).

Art, however, is but one type of experience in what Vygotsky referred to as the "drama of life" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 219). Vygotsky's sense of drama concerns people in relation to both others and themselves. Drama emerges through relationships with other people in social settings. Dramatic tensions are also present within the individual, suggesting that the development of personality is a consequence of the personal and social dramatic conflicts a person experiences in everyday life. This drama necessarily involves the expression and regulation of emotions in conjunction with what has often been treated dualistically as the separate realm of cognition, as in the tradition of Enlightenment rationalism. In Vygotsky's conception of human development, cognition and affect are intertwined. How we think and how we feel cannot be separated.

Vygotsky (1994b) employed the Russian term *perezhivanie* to characterize the phenomenon of what I have called *meta-experience* (Smagorinsky, 2011b; Smagorinsky & Daigle, 2012)—the manner in which people experience their experiences. Consider the student who, early in school, is corrected frequently because of his or her use of English. This child may then associate speaking in class with powerful feelings of shame and embarrassment, which short-circuit future attempts to contribute to class discussions. This shutdown in participation has many consequences. First, it will deprive the student of the opportunity to use exploratory speech in classroom settings to reconnoiter the content of the curriculum, limiting what is available cognitively in academic work. It might then cause reactions by other people who characterize the student as lacking intelligence in ways that the student in turn accepts, resulting in a phenomenon known as *dysphoria*: feelings of inferiority based on how one is treated by others. These feelings in turn influence how one thinks about school and schoolwork, with emotion thus shaping thinking, which in turn reinforces the emotions.

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Vygotsky's attention to affect as a central aspect of cognition suggests the importance of inclusive treatment of diverse students. In his work in the horribly named field of "defectology"—the education of children who lack typical biological functions in some way—he was passionate about the need to eliminate feelings of inferiority by having children participate to the greatest extent possible in conventional cultural activities so as to develop the self-esteem that would make positive contributions to a sense of well-being. This "secondary disability" of feeling inferior, he argued, was far more debilitating than the original source of difference, a point he argues throughout his writing on defectology (Vygotsky, 1993). In making this case, he was not simply advocating for a feel-good curriculum, because much difficult work is involved on everyone's part to provide such an inclusive environment

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for people of difference. Indeed, the re-education of teachers for addressing difference is central to resolving the problem of students' feelings of inferiority in school.

Education that concerns people of difference, wrote Vygotsky (1993), "must cope not *so much with these biological factors as with their social consequences*" (p. 66; emphasis in original). This emphasis suggests that people should know how to treat others respectfully in order to promote *feelings of inclusion* that enable them to become productive members of society. I have attempted to apply this principle in my own work to issues of mental health (Smagorinsky, 2011c, 2012a, 2012b), which by all accounts is a major area of concern among youth today. Hjörne, Larsson, and Säljö (2010), in considering the well-being and social adaptation of students in school, find that "deviant" student behavior is typically explained by "causes inside the child, rather than describing and analyzing them as contextual and relational problems" (p. 87). Understanding mental health relationally shifts attention to the ways in which the settings of education are constructed.

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One way for teachers to alter the typical dynamics so that they promote understanding, rather than producing ill treatment (such as bullying) and the feelings of inferiority that these cruel actions engender, is to structure classrooms to promote empathy. I have described such a classroom activity (Smagorinsky, 2002) for secondary school classrooms that could be adjusted for elementary school students. The class could begin by identifying an incident in the school or community that involved a conflict between social groups. Students could then form groups in which they play a role based on the participants in the conflict, including members of the different social groups, people in authority, and other stakeholders. Each group would then be responsible for creating a narrative of the incident from the perspective of their character, an activity consistent with the approach of *process drama* in which students act in response to complex scenarios as a way to work through perspectives, feelings, and solutions from different characters' points of view (O'Neill, 1995). The medium for presenting their narrative could be decided by the groups: they could write a story using their character as narrator, write and possibly perform a play depicting the events through the eyes of their character, draw or create a computer-based animation of the events, or develop some other form for their presentation to the class.

Student groups would then present their narratives, giving the class an opportunity to see the same event played out from different points of view. Following the presentation, the whole class could consider a series of questions through which they imagine how each person viewed the conflict and the degree to which they have empathy for the other perspectives, based on each group's narrative. Note that a primary goal of this approach is to shift the discourse from good/bad or right/wrong to understanding a range of perspectives and how people feel about their relationships. That is, a primary goal of this activity is to change the environment in which students relate to one another.

Students could follow up this activity in a variety of ways. They could write personal narratives about experiences they have had with peer group pressure or group conflict, with an emphasis on understanding how antagonists feel about how they are treated by others. Students could also work at taking different perspectives in their study of literature. Through both role-playing and writing, students could try to see the world through the eyes of different characters in narratives involving conflict or difference, and retell the story from the perspective of another character from an opposing group. By deliberately taking the perspective of other people who exhibit points of difference that have real ramifications in their lives, students could begin to engage empathically with others such that they begin to share an understanding of social positioning and the ways in which students' feelings shape their subsequent development of healthy relationships and their engagement with social institutions.

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## Mind in Society

Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, and Souberman (1978) called their collection of essential Vygotsky essays *Mind in Society* for a good reason. Vygotsky argued against the widespread notion that cognition takes place strictly within the skull. As noted in the previous section, he viewed cognition as a full-body experience, particularly in relation to emotions and the whole of the neurological system. Just as important, he argued that thinking is social in origin: we learn not only words, but ways of thinking, through our engagement with the people who surround us.

This view has great implications for the organizations of societies. As Diamond (1997) has demonstrated through his study of the evolution of societies, social groups develop means of organization that are particular to their circumstances. Most obviously, European societies developed according to principles of centralized management, technological advancement, and currency-based means of exchange. Meanwhile, many descendants of the same original gene pool who dispersed to the American continents developed decentralized social organizations based on a collectivist approach that did not rely on advanced technology. The Europeans sought to establish dominion over the earth, while aboriginal Americans sought to live in harmony with it (Jacobs & Jacobs-Spencer, 2001).

The point here is not to claim cultural superiority for either group, or any other. Rather, the point is to demonstrate on a broad scale how people come to view the world through their engagement with their cultural elders. This is not to say that other ways of thinking never become available, because in our increasingly wired and connected world, other perspectives are available to most people. The point is simply that cognition is not the same for everyone. Culturally learned ways of knowing—those that people learn through their interactions with those who surround them—provide a major source of difference in how people learn how to think.

The primary consequence of this social reality is that schools, which must accommodate students of increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds, tend to remain dedicated to the values of the White mid-dle class. For students who have been immersed in other sorts of communities, school can be an alienating place. To give one of many possible examples, Moll (2000) has studied the performance of Mexican American students in Arizona, a US state that has as strong a nativist stance toward immigration—that is, one based on the ethnocentric fear and rejection of foreigners—as any. He finds that throughout their upbringing, Mexican Americans learn to act in collectivist ways. For example, they establish "funds of knowledge" through which they share information and resources so that they grow collectively rather than in competition with one another. Once in school, however, they become separated for competition for grades, leading to states of confusion and alienation.

*Culturally learned ways of knowing—those that people learn through their interactions with those who surround them—provide a major source of difference in how people learn how to think.*

To relate this problem to other issues I have covered, Mexican American students then tend to be treated as stupid and incompetent, and frequently experience dysphoria that leads to low levels of personal worth, at least in the context of school. Their solution is often to drop out rather than face, on a daily basis, an environment in which everything they have learned about functioning socially is deemed inferior. This sort of experience has been shared by other groups whose cultural ways of knowing are neither appreciated nor rewarded in typical school conduct, instruction, and assessment.

The culture of school thus serves some students better than others because some have far fewer adaptations to make in order to fit. One solution for teachers is to create more hybrid classroom learning spaces that allow for broader legitimate participation in classroom activities. An activity I helped to study in a secondary school classroom could be modified to elementary classrooms for this purpose. The teacher, Cindy O'Donnell-Allen, taught a unit on "identity" in which students constructed both life maps (Smagorinsky, Anglin, &

**Figure 1.** Student-constructed life mask reflecting personal identity.
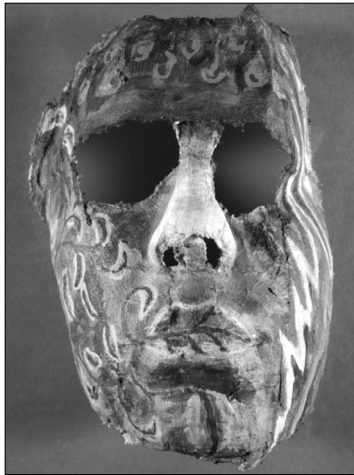


O'Donnell-Allen, 2012) and masks (see Figure 1) that depicted their personal identities (Zoss, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007). Their composition of these texts accompanied their engagement with writing and reading identity-oriented texts, such as self-portraits by painters Pablo Picasso and Vincent van Gogh and literature such as Sylvia Plath's poem "The Mirror." Through these vehicles, one Native American student, Peta (featured in these two articles), whose history of school was characterized by disengagement, participated to the point where he stayed up late at night working on these projects at home because the open-ended activities enabled him to incorporate much of his native heritage into his compositions. (Peta's life map was not available for reproducing. Examples of life maps are available at https://www.google.com/search?q=life+map&hl=en&prmd=imvns&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=DbzpT4LaFo-Q8wS_9I3WDQ&ved=0CIYBELAE&biw=1280&bih=899.)

Other scholars (e.g., Hill, 2009) have written about the inclusion of cultural art forms, such as hip-hop, in classrooms as a way to promote the engagement and retention of students who experience school as alien due to their feelings of cultural dissonance. The ideas of Hill and others go beyond the idea of eating tacos on Cinco de Mayo, instead enabling students to integrate their home cultures with their schoolwork, thus promoting feelings of belonging and helping to bridge home experiences with academic work in meaningful ways.

## An Emphasis on Meaning

Vygotsky's research was centered on the phenomenon of human development. His psychology is thus simultaneously grounded in the past (in terms of formative cultural experiences), the present (in terms of how new learning takes place through the use of cultural tools), and the future (in terms of his view that life takes on a trajectory whose arc is grounded in the past and present). Activity in meaningful cultural practices is a central facet of his approach, with meaning both contributing to and following from one's involvement with people and the tools (computers, rules, etc.) that they construct to channel life in desired ways.

An emphasis on human development focuses on how people engage with others socially so as to learn how to use cultural tools (writing, reading) that will contribute to one's understanding of self in relation to society. Note that this approach is centered on cultural action, rather than biology; Vygotsky rejected "stage theories" of human development triggered by advances in age as the primary source of growth, often distinguishing his perspective from that of Piaget, an influential stage theorist. Just going through the motions of being in school is not sufficient to contribute to the growth of personality in social context as one advances in age. Rather, people learn by making things that they find useful and important—that is, meaningful to them—particularly as the forms that these things take bear signs of broader cultural meaning (Smagorinsky, 2008). Vygotsky was adamant that this process, at least in school, should involve a dialogue between what one knows through personal experience outside school (what he called *spontaneous* or *everyday concepts*) and what one learns about formal, generalizable principles (what he called the *scientific* or *academic concepts* learned in school). This principle is evident in the inclusive setting established by Cindy O'Donnell-Allen in the class in which Peta was enrolled.

Schoolwork thus needs to be grounded in what students know from their experiences in everyday

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activity. That knowledge becomes refined as students learn in school how to take what they know and create abstractions that they can then apply to new situations. Without this process of using personal examples to enrich school understandings, academic knowledge is hollow and difficult to construct meaning for. At the same time, the formal knowledge learned in school can make personal knowledge more robust by enabling students to see how it fits within larger patterns of human conduct. As the example provided by Peta suggests, he infused his understanding of the school topic of identity with personal examples, and in turn used his school assignments as a way to reflect on his personal experiences such that they took on added meaning for him.

The notion of meaningful academic experience, then, relies on the need for students to fill out academic concepts with personal examples such that school experiences lead to personal growth. This growth takes place within the contours of social interaction and is therefore channeled in a particular cultural direction. This aspect of growth can be problematic when the developmental path assumed by teachers is at odds with the pathways assumed by members of the students' home communities. A good example of this problem occurred in the classrooms studied by Moll (2000), where students learned one orientation to the world in their lives outside school, yet were expected to abandon those ways in classrooms and conduct themselves in ways that served the social purposes of other cultural groups.

This common problem in diverse communities suggests the need for classrooms to take on more flexible arrangements, such as the hybrid setting available in Cindy O'Donnell-Allen's classroom—a tremendous challenge in an era characterized by increased standardization so stifling that even technological advances valorized for their potential for text construction and communication are often viewed as alien to the goal of promoting high test scores. Yet if schools are to provide a broad range of students with opportunities for meaningful personal growth in relation to others, such arrangements seem necessary. Addressing the tension between the need to respect students' cultures of origin, while socializing them to the dominant culture's means of engagement, serves as one of the greatest challenges facing 21st-century educators.

## An Expanded Zone of Proximal Development

If all these factors are taken into account, then the conventional notion of the zone of proximal development as a "cognitive zone" requires considerable revision. Recall that even though Vygotsky described this construct on only a few of the thousands of pages he wrote, it remains the contribution for which he is best known. The ZPD is succinctly summarized in Vygotsky's (1987) postulation that "What the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow" (p. 211). This phrasing, along with Vygotsky's examples, suggests that the ZPD exists as an individual's zone of potential that can be scaffolded into something new by a skilled adult or more competent peer, resulting in tomorrow's new, individual competencies.

Yet this relationship does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, it relies on a variety of factors, including:

- the learner's prior experiences and framework for viewing the world;

- the history of the collaborator in grasping the purpose and process of the task;

- the degree of intersubjectivity between the two—i.e., the degree to which teacher and learner agree on the definition of the task and one another's roles in carrying it out;

- the specific actions of the collaborator in relation to learner and task;

- the degree to which the teacher and learner share an understanding of the cultural tools employed to undertake the task;

- the social context that each constructs for the situation, and the history of activity that each has had in prior social contexts that in turn frame their understanding of the present circumstances;

- the cultural history of the school site that suggests the appropriateness of particular ways of conducting school business.

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These considerations suggest that much more is involved than just teacher and learner, or an individual's cognitive zone of potential. Rather, they suggest that without attention to the whole context of learning and the cultural history that has helped to produce it, one cannot consider the facets of *human development in social context* that are central to a Vygotskian outlook. Such factors tend to be difficult to notice when one has been acculturated to experience conventional classroom processes as normal, as many White middle class teachers and students do (Heath, 1983). They come powerfully into play when learners and teachers lack intersubjectivity, when they construct the setting of the classroom in different ways.

This mismatch of expectations often comes into play when teachers and learners come from noticeably different cultures. Gallas (2001), for instance, describes her adjustment from a suburban classroom outside Boston to a California community in which the students initially appeared to her to lack sufficient imagination for participation in such activities as sharing time, which had been routinely productive sessions in her Massachusetts classroom. When she observed a child she believed to be short on imagination in a less formal context saying that he was "running like Jell-o!" (p. 457), she realized that rather than possessing innate traits, her students had *relational* personalities and possibilities that emerged through social engagement. By taking her students' perspective rather than generalizing from her prior teaching experiences, Gallas recognized that students need

> an opportunity to bring their lives into contact with curriculum. Implementing this theory of action requires a shift in point of view on the part of the teacher.

## SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND SCAFFOLDING

This article talks about the Zone of Proximal Development—the range of skills that a learner can perform with assistance, but cannot yet perform independently. The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org show how social interactions and scaffolding can work with students:

### Building a Learning Community: Crafting Rules for the Classroom

Empower students academically and socially by allowing them to participate in setting up the expectations for classroom behavior throughout the year. Supported by teacher modeling and coaching, students consider what behaviors and manners are necessary for the classroom to function successfully and collect the opinions of other community members on the subject.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/building-learning-community-crafting-991.html

### Improving Fluency through Group Literary Performance

Students participate in shared reading, choral reading, and readers theater using books by Bill Martin, Jr. Repeated readings and literary performances help students with their reading accuracy, expression, and rate.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/improving-fluency-through-group-793.html

### Scaffolding Comprehension Strategies Using Graphic Organizers

In this lesson, collaborative strategic reading (CSR) is initially presented to students through modeling and whole-class instruction. To facilitate comprehension during and after reading, students apply four reading strategies: preview, click and clunk, get the gist, and wrap-up. Graphic organizers are used for scaffolding of these strategies while students work together in cooperative groups.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/scaffolding-comprehension-strategies-using-95.html

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Essentially, by postulating that literacy is a dynamic, inside/out process with imagination at its core, I am also proposing that teaching must reflect a similar position. It must become an imaginative, inside/out process that places student action and interaction at the center. (p. 488)

Gallas's (2001) solution follows from her reflective practice in relation to classroom problems that her prior assumptions had no way of resolving. In taking the perspective of herself as a learner, she changed the setting of the classroom such that students were not always compelled to gravitate to her norms. Rather, it became her responsibility to adapt to her students' ways of being in school. As a result, the classroom ZPD took on a highly social character in which each participant, including the teacher, was positioned as a learner. The task of each student was less to take on Gallas's sensibilities and more to contribute to what counted as imaginative, meaningful participation in the classroom as a whole.

Vygotsky assumes some degree of intersubjectivity, of mutual understanding of why one would do the task and how one could best carry it out. When teachers and students come from different backgrounds, however, this assumption is not necessarily warranted. When particular cultural groups do poorly in school, there is little likelihood that their problems follow from a lack of intelligence. More often, it is their lack of familiarity with the cultural practices through which they are taught and assessed. For teachers to work effectively with zones of proximal development, these differences need to be mitigated. Typically, it is the student who is required to make all of the adaptations. As Gallas (2001) and other reflective practitioners have shown, however, when teachers strive to adapt to students, the classroom dynamics may be altered to promote richer learning, and thus a stronger sense of affiliation with school than the students might otherwise develop.

## Conclusion

Why should 21st-century English-speaking teachers of reading, writing, and language—along with more recent additions to the literacy tool kit based on a wider variety of technologies, senses, and processes—pay attention to this long-dead, short-lived Byelorussian teacher and psychologist? Why

should one who ascended with the Bolsheviks be of service in an era where capitalism is asserting its clout in newly sanctioned ways through the Supreme Court?

I think that Vygotsky has much to offer, in spite of these gaps in environment and cultural experience between his lifetime and ours. Vygotsky emphasizes the development of human potential through social mediation, with schools providing an exceptionally powerful means of channeling how children think abstractly as a way to make sense of their concrete, personal engagement with the world. That thinking is in part academic and in part social, although academic work is surely social in orientation. Vygotsky's emphasis on the social climate of learning strikes me as especially critical for teachers to understand, particularly for those students whose home cultural practices are out of sync with the established routines of school. His work suggests the importance of attending to matters of inclusion so that

*When particular cultural groups do poorly in school, there is little likelihood that their problems follow from a lack of intelligence. More often, it is their lack of familiarity with the cultural practices through which they are taught and assessed.*

people of difference feel welcome in school. This attention is likely to require a reconsideration of the conduct of school so that people who depart from norms—either through their biological makeup, their cultural experiences, or other factors—do not experience dysphoria and develop the secondary disability of feelings of inferiority for having a different orientation to the world.

Vygotsky's understanding of the generative nature of the act of speaking also has relevance in 21st-century schools. With all the emphasis on educational products in the current testing environment, he restores developmental processes to their central role in activity-based learning. This value suggests the need to suspend judgment of students' initial learning efforts and regard them as tentative steps on the way to ideas and expressions of greater sophistication and clarity. Emphasizing the role of

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producing written or spoken speech in classrooms alters classroom dynamics to value not just the product of learning, but the ways in which ideas are generated and developed through tentative expression that typically emerges as halting and half-baked, but eventually serves as the basis for clearer and more fluent expression.

The end toward which learning is guided—the construction of meaning—is also a valuable contribution of the Vygotskian tradition. This emphasis seems deeply compromised when brittle products such as formulaic writing move to the center of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as they are when testing trumps learning in the conduct of school. Making sense of one's environment is a fundamental task of human development. Doing so in settings where difference—including difference of meaning—is respected and fostered contributes to feelings of achievement and of personal security and worth. Such feelings tend to be absent in schools predicated on punitive responses to variation from the norm, and in which every student in this rich, teeming landscape is herded through the same narrow evaluative chute.

Applying Vygotsky's approach—one that views human development as a culturally promoted process—in the era of standardization requires imaginative adaptation. One way to conceive of the challenge is to consider the whole educational system as a ZPD. Presently it is administered in a top-down fashion, with teachers' and students' emotional engagement in meaningful learning of little concern to those in power. This problem must be addressed at the policy level by those with access to power who care about the development of the whole child and whole classrooms of students so that the whole setting of education can change. For teachers, the ones closest to the kids, taking a Vygotskian perspective means emphasizing growth and meaning in between the tests that so heavily influence teacher evaluations. Their assessment will

> *Making sense of one's environment in settings where difference is respected and fostered contributes to feelings of achievement and of personal security and worth.*

ultimately come from the students whose lives are affected by the more sensitive instruction they are provided—instruction whose effects remain strong long after the last bubble is filled on their endless succession of standardized tests to which current education policy intends to subject them.

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## Kate and Paul Farmer Awards

The Kate and Paul Farmer Awards are given to authors of the best articles published in *English Journal* during the previous volume year. Eligible entrants must be high school teachers and may include those on leave or not currently teaching. Winners of the 2012 awards are **Shannon Falkner** for "'Signs of Life' in the High School Classroom: Analyzing Popular Culture to Provide Student Choice in Analytical Writing," November 2011, Vol. 101.2; and **Fahima Ife** for "Powerful Writing: Promoting a Political Writing Community of Students," March 2012, Vol. 101.4.

**Honorable Mentions** were awarded to **Brent McKeown** for "Decoding Teacher and Student Identity with Jay-Z," November 2011, Vol. 101.2, part of the "Challenging Texts" column edited by P. L. Thomas; and to **Jennifer Ansbach** for "Long-Term Effects of Bullying: Promoting Empathy with Nonfiction," July 2012, Vol. 101.6.

Awards were presented at the NCTE Annual Convention in November during the Secondary Section Luncheon.

## *English Journal* Edwin M. Hopkins Awards

The *English Journal* Edwin M. Hopkins Award is awarded biennially to authors of the best article published in *English Journal* during the two previous volume years. This award is given to recognize authors not eligible for the Kate and Paul Farmer Awards. It is named for Edwin M. Hopkins, author of the lead article in the first issue of *English Journal*, a former professor of rhetoric and English language at the University of Kansas, member of the first Board of Directors of NCTE, and coauthor of the first NCTE constitution.

The winner of the 2012 award is **Lauren Esposito** for "Where to Begin? Using Place-Based Writing to Connect Students with Their Local Communities," March 2012, Vol. 101.4. **Honorable Mentions** are **Merrilyne Lundahl** for "Teaching Where We Are: Place-Based Language Arts," January 2011, Vol. 100.3; and **Cynthia Messer** for "Parenting a Child with Special Needs: A Teacher's Journey toward Discovery about Disability and Identity," November 2010, Vol. 100.2.