BOOK REVIEW: *Vygotskian Perspectives: Implications for Research and Practice*

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Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research: Constructing Meaning Through Collaborative Inquiry. Carol D. Lee and Peter Smagorinsky, Editors, 2000. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK). Softcover. 280 pages.

Bakhtin (1981) claimed that true understanding is dialogic in nature. Through collaboration and conversation with others, knowledge is constructed. This text, Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research: Constructing Meaning Through Collaborative Inquiry, is simultaneously representative of and an invitation to engage in such meaning-making discussion. Inspired by the 1996 conference, "A Vygotsky Centennial: Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research," the chapters in this collection explore and extend the work of Lev Vygotsky (1930/1967, 1971, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1987). Editors Carol D. Lee and Peter Smagorinsky encourage readers to join in an exchange across chapters as Vygotsky's cultural-historical theoretical framework is applied to literacy learning and teaching. The work represented is a form of collaborative inquiry, characterized by the history of ideas influencing and influenced by Vygotsky. Contributors are concerned with the role of joint activity in the construction of meaning, the formation of communities of practice and operations within them, and the social construction of meaning through language. Eleven chapters engage readers in an analysis of language as a semiotic tool and of the social nature of learning and practice. Whereas no definitive answers to social questions are provided, the authors share the processes of their Vygotskian interpretations of educational problems.

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"For Vygotsky it was the reasoning against other viewpoints that could lead his ideas to reach a breakpointfor a novel synthesis" (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 393).

While writers of this text collaboratively reach for new understandings as they appropriate the work of Vygotsky, readers, too, aim for new synthesis as they personally integrate the perspectives and ideas offered by contributors. Readers become actively involved as they adopt cultural knowledge – the information proposed in this text – construct new meaning from it, and undergo the Vygotskian processes of transformation and adaptation. As a result, Vygotsky's tenets become more salient. In order to provide an overview of the textual conversation, I will first provide a synopsis of each contribution. These all too brief summaries will be followed by a more extended discussion that offers implications of this text for research and practice.

After a thorough introduction to the fundamental principles of Vygotsky's work by the editors, Wertsch begins the dialogue by drawing attention to an inconsistency in the nature of meaning in language as presented in *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1987). Wertsch suggests that Vygotsky's commitment to the Enlightenment tradition of abstract rationality is revealed when he assumes meaning is a matter of referential relationships between signs and objects; another Western philosophical tradition, Romanticism, accounts for Vygotsky's seemingly conflicting definition of meaning as contextualized, personal sense. In the next chapter, John-Steiner and Meehan present their theory of creativity as informed by the sociocultural perspective, revealing the centrality of social interaction in creative lives and implying that a dynamic tension between the social and the individual adds to learning, internalization, and creation of the new.

The following contributions include literacy research strongly influenced by Vygotsky's work. First, Wells applies Vygotsky's theory to education as he reconstitutes classrooms and schools as communities of inquiry, basing his argument on the social constructivist belief that understanding is constructed in the process of people working together and solving problems that occur during joint activity. Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, and Yeager combine sociocultural theory, interactional ethnography, and critical discourse analysis and discuss how this provides a means of studying learning as culturally and socially constructed. In her aim to understand the link between learning to write and learning to participate in a complex community marked by sociocultural differences, Dyson finds classrooms to be conflicted sites for language use and reveals gaps among community members relating to gender, class, and race. Gutierrez and Stone critically examine the theoretical constructs that currently underlie the educational treatment of linguistically and culturally diverse students and argue for a syncretic approach, a combination of complementary theories, as a systematic means for documenting and understanding the complexities of literacy practices in educational settings. The next chapter, co-authored by Smagorinsky, reveals the efforts made by fellow author, O'Donnell-Allen,

to create a social context in a high school English classroom according to the principles of progressive education and the promotion of a democratic community; their analysis reveals that local cultures operating within the larger social structure may take a different direction from that suggested by the predominant motives of the setting, proposing that a more complex view of social context – one that takes into account the overlapping histories of students – be considered. Lee uses the Vygotskian conceptual framework to suggest that signifying, an oral genre of communication within African American Vernacular English, has the potential to serve as a scaffolding device for teaching complex skills such as irony, metaphor, and symbolism in the interpretation of literature, linking what Vygotsky termed spontaneous and scientific concepts. Ball explores how Vygotskian theory helps account for the internalization of new conceptions of literacy with preservice and practicing teachers and the implications of these conceptions for teaching inner-city students. A final contribution by Moll situates culture in multiple contexts and includes a current ethnographic analysis of households by classroom teachers with the aim of using the information gained from this social context to modify the classroom context and make a difference in students' learning.

A reader much less familiar than the authors with the work of Vygotsky, I nevertheless found the variety of ideas shared in this text to offer interesting implications for research and practice. The complexity of social phenomena evident in all contributions suggests a need for a multitude of theoretical frameworks to account for the study of learning in social groups. Through the integration of mutually informing theories, such as Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, and Yeager's merging of interactional ethnography, sociocultural theory, and critical discourse analysis, the distributed, interactive, and contextual nature of learning can be better explored. To illustrate the potential of integrating these perspectives, they share data analysis from a fifth-grade bilingual classroom in which they examined the social and academic consequences of participating in a developing collective. Gutierrez and Stone's argument for cultural-historical activity theory as an overarching frame affords them a range of theoretical lenses through which to view the mutual and independent relationship between the individual and the social world. Their description of the syncretic perspective necessitates transdisciplinary perspectives for the theoretical and methodological treatment of the social practices of literacy learning. Through a combination of psychological and social theories, a greater understanding of the often conflicting and contradictory practices of urban education can be gained. Ball's efforts in preparing educators to work effectively with diverse and urban populations also reveal a need for a variety of theories. As he desires to challenge teachers' pre-conceived notions about literacy, he provides

opportunities for reflection upon literacy histories and contact with the differing theoretical and practical utterances of others. When teachers associate themselves with respect to the theories and ideas presented, understanding begins to occur. Literacy philosophies are shaped through dialogue around the theories and ideas teachers confront. Such a usage of multiple theoretical perspectives is not new. Vygotsky himself employed a variety of cultural tools in his own thinking and speaking. Wertsch documents well the inconsistent theoretical traditions he employed. It seems that such a range of theoretical frameworks is needed to appropriately think about questions of meaning.

In addition, some contributors offer particular approaches to studying learning in social groups. Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, and Yeager present an argument for ways of studying how communities of practice are constructed and how practices within these developing communities become cultural resources for members. Specifically, their interactional ethnographic approach to the study of classroom life is constituted by three analytic constructs: exploring part-whole, whole-part relationships; using contrastive relevance; and exploring the history of intertextual and intercontextual relationships within a social group. To understand the importance of actions and interactions, researchers focus on the discourse of members who provide contextual cues to whole-part, part-whole relationships. Contrastive relevance encourages the ethnographer to examine the significance of choices members of a social group make and the difference these choices make within and across time, while the third analytic construct requires an exploration of the historical and over-time relationship between and among texts and contexts.

Drawing upon the work of Vygotysky (1981), Leont'ev (1981), Bakhtin (1981), and Wertsch (1985), Ball reveals the means through which it might be possible to observe aspects of internalization. His research, designed to explore the internal activity of pre-service and practicing teachers' developing philosophies on literacy, engages participants in oral and written discourse practices over time so that the origin and nature of their evolving thoughts might be revealed. Specific reflective writing activities that explore teachers' literacy histories, interactive classroom discussions that encourage the questioning and challenging of literacy perspectives, and additional participation in research and teaching allow for the possibility of observing internal processes. The various texts created serve as evidence of their developing thoughts as they move from interpsychological external activity toward an intrapsychological commitment to action.

Just as there is no single theoretical framework for the study of social groups, there is no one method. Experimentation (and adaptation) seems appreciated, as Moll's

shifts from household ethnography, to group study, to classroom practice, and the theoretical implications of these moves prove. This process he aptly refers to as ethnographic experiments.

As for practice, this text offers an inquiry approach to curriculum. In the spirit of Dewey (1900/1990, 1938), Wells argues that convention and invention are necessary for the development of both the individual and society. He suggests that inquiry as an organizing principle of curricular activity provides the means for exploring chosen themes and topics through the posing of real questions. In explaining his inquiry stance, Wells also discusses writing as a means of learning and thinking and puts forward strategies for knowledge building such as those activities involving joint collaboration of texts. Lee recommends cultural modeling as a form of instructional intervention, proposing specific strategies for exploring such formal literary tropes as irony, symbolism, and point of view through student modeling of the tactics they invoke when signifying dialogues. In this way, the teacher uses the culturally rooted knowledge of signifying as a means of bridging the spontaneous concepts with more scientific concepts (Vygotsky, 1986). With regards to teacher education, Ball presents literacy histories as a means of engaging preservice and practicing teachers in a critical examination of their philosophies about literacy.

Social practices and settings and their relationship to human development in classrooms are discussed by Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen. They describe efforts to direct students' development to particular optimal ends, to structure the physical, social, and instructional environments of the classroom. The creation of a democratic community is undermined, however, by one aspect of an idioculture, termed a relational framework, which contributes to social processes that conflict with the goals of the teacher. Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, and Yeager also find members of a class interpreting the requirements of a task in uncommon ways that require additional mediation from a teacher.

The application of Vygotsky's theory to education certainly presents implications for teaching. The role of the educator in facilitating inquiry in the classroom is vital. She or he must choose experiences for open-ended investigation that arouse interest, engage feelings, provoke values, stir cognition, and above all, generate questions. Teachers become leaders and organizers of the community's activities, ensuring that time and resources are used productively and safely (Wells). In their contribution, Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, and Yeager also explain the importance of the teacher in shaping what counts as collective knowledge, actions, and practices as she or he mediates students' actions, providing support for proper participation and valuing the languages students speak as personal and collective resources. Teachers might

become involved in creative apprenticeships (John-Steiner & Meehan) in which they, as mentors, convey a style of thoughts to a learner. When successful, creative apprenticeships involve joint activity that is meaningful for both participants; the mentor experiences renewal, and the novice gains knowledge.

Student relations and the interplay of gender, race, and class are explored by Dyson as children appropriate story heroes from the popular media and share texts through Author's Theatre. An analysis of student talk reveals that some children exploit the written performance as a means of participating in and transforming community dialogue, considering gender relations or questioning depictions of power, whereas other authors opt to circumvent possible problems. The role of teachers in guiding talk about authors' decisions and the representation of human relations is critical in reconnecting class members as decision-making children informed by certain shared values.

Moll's ethnographic experiment supports the creation of new relationships between teachers and families. Through active engagement with school surroundings, he hopes to reorient teachers' definition of community theoretically and empirically. Encouragement for teacher relations with one another is not overlooked as Wells suggests that Vygotskian theory can serve as a tool for action research and persuade teachers to participate in a community of inquiry that attempts to make sense of current situations, identify contradictions, and consider improvements. Teachers who focus on their own practice will "significantly extend the scope and depth of the opportunities that they provide for their students to appropriate these cultural tools for knowledge building and simultaneously increase their own understanding of the critical features of classroom activities that make this development possible" (p. 81).

Vygotsky's theory of human development is also a theory of education (Bruner, 1962) as the contributors to this text well prove. Their engaging dialogue leads readers to better understand the social and material contexts in how knowledge is constructed and displayed in the literacy classroom. Theory is linked with practice. Through reasoning against the various viewpoints presented, readers can gain a new synthesis. Through the adoption of the information proposed, new meaning can be constructed, transformed, adapted, and implications for research and teaching can be considered.

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