

### Special Interest Articles:

- Vygotsky's Dialectic
- Differences of interpretation
- Individual and collective
- Development of Consciousness
- Anti-Reductionism
- Metaphors of Learning

EPY 789, Spring 2006, Dr. LeAnn G. Putney

## Vygotsky's Dialectic: Hegel or Marx?

Answer: Yes

Hegel's philosophy change occurs through tension between initial thesis and antithesis. Reconciliation of this contradiction leads to synthesis. Synthesis involves and transcends both thesis and antithesis. For Hegel, this movement from thesis, to antithesis, to synthesis is characteristic not only of thought, but also of nature, cultural progress, and history.

Marx and Engels differed from Hegel:

They saw dialectics as a product of human labor changing the world. Hegel believed that dialectics could only be understood through pure reason, whereas Engels and Marx believed it must be understood through thought and practice-- through the practical struggle to overcome contradictions.

Vygotsky – a dialectic approach:

Used a synthesis of Hegel and Marx. From Hegel, the insistence on human development, collective and individual, in history and culture, along with a preoccupation with human activity. From Marx, an understanding of method as something to be practiced; tool and result

Adapted from <http://mingo.info-science.uiowa.edu/~stevens/critped/terms.htm>

## Why Differences in Interpreting Vygotsky?

An interesting question had to do with Robbin's noting difficulties in interpreting Vygotsky's work. The question was: why this difficulty when theory is based on a general idea? My answer is that even in describing theory, the words used can differ greatly depending on the perspective represented by the person interpreting the theory. Kenneth Strike talks about the expressive potential of language; a research program can be viewed as constituting a

theoretical language that supports and constrains what is studied, how study is conducted, and what can be known, understood and explained by that research.

What is meant by teaching and learning varies according to whether you are a behaviorist or a constructivist, thus what you can understand about thinking and speech can also differ. For example, what is meant by collaboration in a classroom? It can range from students working

together to fill out a static worksheet of basic knowledge facts given to them by the teacher to students and teacher working together on a dynamic problem-solving project in which knowledge is jointly constructed by students and teacher as they research the problem and negotiate meaning.

## Is it Individual or Collective?

Answer: Yes

Central to his approach is a view of the mind which extends beyond the "skull," which does not situate thinking in the confined spaces of the individual brain or mind. Instead, he proposes a sustained dynamic between other humans both present and past, book, the rest of our material and nonmaterial culture, and the individual engaged in symbolic activity. For Vygotsky, interaction with caregivers, peers, teachers, and the material world is the basis of intellectual development. (John-Steiner, 1997, p. xviii)

And from another scholar:

We have two dimensions of development: one that resides in the individual and the other in the collectivity. Both are interdependent and create each other. Historically created possibilities of cultural development are themselves transformed by the processes through which individuals acquire the cultural tools that are or become available in their context (Souza Lima, 1995: 447-448)

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*The individual does not merely acquire cultural knowledge; rather, in acquiring cultural knowledge, the individual also contributes to the shape and resources of the collective (Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, & Yeager, 2000)*

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*Vygotsky was simultaneously immersed in the practical concerns of the clinician, the teacher, and the teacher educator. His 'laboratory' was spread across the Soviet Union in the hospitals, public schools, and universities of a society in transition." (Zebroski, 1994, p. 154)*

## Development of Consciousness

One of the major contributions of Vygotsky to psychology was his work on consciousness. Because of his Marxist background, Vygotsky focused on the notion that "concrete historical activity is the generator of consciousness" (Emihovich & Souza Lima, 1995, p. 376) and that humans use tools and sign systems in order to transform themselves and to reshape cultural forms of society.

This work on the human consciousness has been considered of major importance to those who recognize Vygotsky's attempts to link the natural and social sciences in his conception of a new psychology in order to overcome the reductionism that had been a frequent part of psychology. (VoV)

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## Anti-Reductionism

Vygotsky sought to address four major areas of reductionism in psychology (del Río & Álvarez, 1995)...adapted from Wink and Putney, 2002 *A Vision of Vygotsky*

**Rational:** Vygotsky insisted that emotion was a crucial part of understanding consciousness, and he “emphasized the development and cultural construction not only of *meaning*, but of *emotion and directivity*” (p. 386).

**Individual:** His answer to the reductionist view of the mind as being of the *individual* without acceptance of the social

origins of the thinking process, was to propose that everything that can be considered individual was primarily social. The... “individual constructs the idea of his own person in the likeness of another individual, receiving his speech reflexes, and thus ‘settling’ the other in his own organism” (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 87).

**Internal:** learning takes place first on what he referred to an interpersonal plane (Vygotsky, 1978), through interaction with others, then moves to what he called an intrapersonal plane, as concepts are internalized by the

individual. “The transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

**Innate:** mental functions are socially, culturally, and historically constructed rather than genetically determined... an individual’s mental functioning derives from participating in social life, and that what occurs in internalization is not a mere copying of socially organized processes, but transformations of processes at an individual level.

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*Realizing the historical context of Vygotsky’s life helps us make sense of his world, and also reminds us that the past has a way of coming back to teach us if we will listen. In our current educational world, we are reliving a portion of Vygotsky’s past with our return to high stakes testing, deprofessionalizing, and demoralizing of teachers*

## Metaphors of Teaching and Learning

At the beginning of a class on learning and development, I once asked for a metaphor of teaching and learning. The response from one group was a wall metaphor...students were bricks, teacher was the mason, knowledge was the mortar. As they described the metaphor I could not help but hear in my head the lyrics “All in all you’re just another brick in the wall” from “The

Wall” by Pink Floyd. However, I accepted their metaphor and asked them to keep the drawing as we would revisit it later.

Toward the end of class we revisited the metaphors. After discussing their original version in their small group, they revised it with this version: the products that students produced in the classroom became the wall, with teacher as

the principle mason, students apprenticing and building more of the wall themselves as time went on, and with the content they were learning as the mortar. They agreed that one issue with the revised metaphor was that once constructed, the wall was static, but they also noted that improvement was visible in how the wall was built, and that the wall would become more elaborately decorated over time. **What is your metaphor?**

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*The Russian word for education, obrazovanie, emphasizes a process of formation provided by external forces. obuchenie, translated as teaching, is interchangeable for the activity of the teacher and students*

(Moll, 1990)