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Two Senses of the Term Social

The notion of *social* is key to the work of Vygotsky, and it takes on different characteristics in a sociocultural perspective. In terms of learning and developing, one sense of *social* incorporates the idea of interpersonal relationships. For example, when we read a good book, the first thing we might do is run and tell a friend about it. We talk about the book with others, and as we do, we create new knowledge. When we sit in staff development in-services, and the presenter shares a thought or a concept with us, we try to patiently wait until the presenter gives us permission to discuss the idea with our colleagues sitting beside us. When children actively generate knowledge through meaningful classroom discourse and activities, they hurry home to tell their families. They are more excited about what they have done in the classroom when they have been part of the learning process because they own the knowledge, not because a teacher told them so.

Reflecting critically on Vygotsky's perception of the importance of the sociocultural context raises questions about some of our traditional assumptions about schools. Reflecting critically on the sociocultural context also leads us to recognize that we are a part of the world in which we live, what and Horton and Freire (1990) referred to as creating our own path as we walk.

Let's go back to a prior example to bring sense of social into focus. We stated earlier that when we read a good book, we want to share what we have read with others. That is one meaning of social interaction. However, the notion of genetic development from Vygotsky indicates that being social is also being cultural and historical. As Wertsch (1991) stated, "… even when mental action is carried out by individuals in isolation, it is inherently social in certain respects and it is almost always carried out with the help of tools such as computers, language, or number systems" (p. 15). So, when we read that good book alone in our favorite reading nook, we are not really participating in an individual mental process. We have a cultural artifact in our hands, the book, that employs a cultural tool, language. When we "individually" read the text, we are using our cultural/historical tool of language, which is also a social/cultural/historical artifact. We are, in a sense, interacting with the author and constructing our own version of the text before us as we think about the words and ideas we are reading from our own experiential base.

Our life experiences influence our learning. We talk to each other; we listen to our friends and colleagues, and we develop new thoughts and new ideas. When we don't understand something, we discuss it with a friend and often we discover the answer as we talk. The primacy of being human is how we use language in social context to make meaning. As we talk, we manipulate, not only our language, but also our thoughts, which lead us to higher cognitive processes.

This is often how we think of *social*—what we do with others rather than what we do individually. The view of being social as a secondary process to the individual is so inherent in our Western cultural thinking that we often use the word *social* to distinguish between work carried out by an individual and in direct relations with others. For example, an observer in a classroom might distinguish between "social talk" and "academic talk" to indicate that, when students carry on personal conversations with each other, they are being "social" and when they talk about the learning activity in which they are engaged, they are not being social, but being academic.

However, Vygotsky charged us to think of learning as processes that we carry out first on an *inter*mental plane—in relation and cooperation with others. The individualization of our thinking happens as a result of our intermental processing of information. Learning becomes an *intra*mental processing as we begin to internalize what we have learned through our interactions with others. As Wertsch & Tulviste (1996) state,

> … this view is one in which mind is understood as "extending beyond skin." Mind, cognition, memory, and so forth are understood not as attributes or properties of the individual, but as functions that may be carried out intermentally or intramentally (p. 57–58).

Therefore, in our first look at the word *social* we come to understand that, from a Vygotskian perspective, everything about learning and developing is social. His "general genetic law of cultural development" established that development occurs first between people, then within the individual (Vygotsky, 1981). Individuals then actively transform what they have realized through interactions with others. As Zebroski (1994) noted, "Social relations are always transformed when they are internalized by the individual" (p. 160). We individually decide what is important to understand, and we actively reconstruct for ourselves the information we have taken up from interactions with others.

Vygotsky's premise of cultural development leads us to second way of looking at the term *social* that often evades our Western thinking. That is to say that not only are we social beings, but at the same time our being social is also cultural and historical through the mediational role of artifacts that we construct. For example, language that we speak, texts that we write, numbers we use to compute all help us learn to use more language, create more texts and solve more complicated problems. Wells (2000) stated: "Human beings are not limited to their biological inheritance … but are born into an environment that is shaped by the activities of previous generations" (p. 54). The cultural artifacts produced by previous generations bring with them the past, and through their use we bring the past into the present (Cole, 1996). Through our interactions with others and with the cultural artifacts produced, we continue to learn and develop, and we construct more cultural artifacts for our future generations to use. Vygotsky's conceptualization mental processing as primarily a social/cultural/historical intermental function that becomes an intramental function as we continue to internalize and reconceptualize what we have learned from others, leads us to the purpose of the rest of this chapter.

Through the observed experiences to come, we will take you on a path of social/cultural/historical development. However, you will note an extra pebble added to our construction of the path, a political component that cannot be ignored. In this sense we combine the work of Paulo Freire with that of Vygotsky because the two perspectives inform each other and help us make sense in our reading of our world.

Socioculturally Learning and Developing

The value of Vygotsky's work in relation to pedagogy stems from the very way in which he viewed learning and development as dynamic processes, social, cultural, and historical by nature, and in a dialectical relationship with each other. He acknowledged learners as interactive agents in communicative, socially situated relationships. This was a departure from viewing the learner as a lone individual whose abilities could be measured objectively and who was genetically predisposed to develop and act upon the environment. Instead, he viewed teaching as an active process of exploring student activity, while guiding students to levels beyond their current ability to solve problems. Vygotsky did not view students and teachers as separate entities. Instead, he worked to identify "the social environment that linked the two together" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. xxiv).

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From a Vygotskian perspective, then, we see that the sociocultural context is very complex. What influences schools and the influence that schools have on the students, teachers, and parents is a complex study. Likewise, what influences classroom outcomes, and the influence those classrooms have on the participants within, is a complex study. Simplistic answers will not suffice for complex questions. As we have indicated before in our work, "for every complex question, there is an answer which is obvious, simple, and wrong." However, what seems to happen in our complex and fast-paced society is a search for quick fixes and fast results. Throughout this chapter, we demonstrate why this approach is not a beneficial one for educational purposes.