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Excerpt from:

Wink, J., & Putney, L. (2002, pp. xxvii to xxx). *A Vision of Vygotsky*, Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

### **Meeting Our Distant Mentor: Le Meets Vygotsky**

I first met Vygotsky in midst of a career move back to my educational roots after 13 years in the business world. In 1990, I joined the academic world again as graduate student, intent upon completing a secondary credential and a master's in multilingual education. My earlier experience of teaching high school students in a Spanish language classroom was a distant memory as I negotiated the courses I would have to take to resume this career.

One of the first courses I enrolled in was designed to inform us about various models of teaching. I remember that first day of class, thinking, "I must have learned this in my first go around at teaching back in the 70s. I have to think back on my own experience as a teacher and as a student to help me make sense of the text we were going to have to read for this course." Then the news came from the professor that we were required to be teaching in a classroom so that we could put into practice what we were learning. How was I going to accomplish that? The next day I was at a local high school, asking if they needed a substitute teacher for their Spanish classes. Indeed, they needed a substitute. In fact, they needed a long-term substitute for two classes, and that suited my needs perfectly. We signed the contract, and I had no idea how much I would learn from that experience!

I was slated to teach two classes: second-period class had 22 students, top in the class and eager to learn; third-period class had 39 students; 12 of those students were bilingual, but needed help with their Spanish reading and writing skills. The second-period class was so similar to the classes I had taught before, that I thought it would be a breeze. Nothing in my past experience had prepared me for the third-period class. They were a rowdy group, well known in the school for their ability to run off substitute teachers. I quickly learned that I was number 10, in only the fourth week of school. I wrote in my self-reflection journal after my first week:

(9-17-90) They are bored...these kids have had no consistent teacher for four weeks, and they figured I was just another sub. Day two was better and each successive day I could see improvement in their attitude, but the one class is still a major challenge for me because I have to come up with extra materials for them.

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I did not know what I was going to do with the students in the third-period class. I knew that I had to tailor the teaching to the students, but my classes prior to this had been similar enough in composition that only minor adjustments had to be made. With this third-period class, I had to throw away the pattern and start over to construct an experience that would benefit their learning and my teaching.

As my graduate course continued through the semester, we studied other models of teaching: information processing, cooperative learning, role playing, mastery learning, and direct instruction. As graduate students preparing to be teachers, we studied numerous ways to assign points for good behavior, ways to increase executive control and learning aptitude. We learned how to determine learning styles so that we would address all the modalities of learning. We learned how to award points for group work and points for individual learning.

In the classes where I was substitute teaching, I tried all of these teaching strategies. I discovered that some things worked, once. As soon as the students caught on to my fancy methods, they would up the behavioral ante, and I would have to comply by doing something even more entertaining the next time to keep them engaged. I found that there was power in giving points for behavior, but the power soon paled for me because the students were more interested in earning points than in learning what I had to offer. Something had to change, and change it did, when I met Lev Vygotsky.

The change came with a class assignment in the methods course I was taking. The professor told us we had to select one of the models we had studied, work with that model extensively as a project, and report on it at the end of the course. The most popular models were quickly snapped up by those savvier than I was about these methods. When the selections were made, peer tutoring and reciprocal teaching were remaining as options, and my name was still not assigned. The professor asked if I would do both of these together. "Sure, why not?" I replied. I figured I had as good a chance with those unfamiliar terms as with any of the others.

Off to the library to research those unfamiliar terms: *peer tutoring* and *reciprocal teaching*. I was going to be implementing these in my substitute-teaching classes so I had to find out how to do so. I found three articles in our library to guide me, and I read them over and over to understand what I had to do. As I studied Palincsar and Brown's (1986) work, I realized that what they were proposing was similar to what I had done in my prior teaching: making predictions about the text by using their prior knowledge, generating questions about the text, summarizing, and then clarifying what had been learned. The teacher was a facilitator, guiding the practice while students were sharing responsibilities of learning with each other.

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As I sat in the library musing on these articles, the germ of an idea began to form:

“Ok, I used to teach Spanish years ago, but not under these circumstances. Let’s see what I can use from my experience, combined with what I am learning now.” I reflected to myself.

“I know that the bilingual students have expertise in oral language that they could share, but they need to improve their writing skills. The English-only students need to talk and learn the vocabulary, and I always used dialogues in class so they could practice. Why not have the bilingual students write texts for us to use in class? They can become peer tutors, and if I explicitly model the techniques of reciprocal teaching, they can use the same techniques to teach their texts to the rest of the class. Then the English-only students can construct dialogues from the texts, practice them and get feedback from their peer tutors on their progress,” I reasoned.

For the first time since I took this job, I was getting excited about teaching and learning with these students. It occurred to me that this “difficult” class was going to teach me far more than the calmer, easy going second-period class. So off I went, to implement this form of teaching and learning. The project soon became successful as we worked through the initial implementation issues. The bilingual students improved their writing skills, became the local experts in their native language, and honed their tutoring skills with the English-only students in the classroom. The English-only students began to respect the expertise of their bilingual peers, as they read the texts and constructed dialogues together. These particular strategies were working with these students. That much I knew. It was in the next class in my master’s program that I found out why.

The next class I took was with a newly hired professor at the same university. During that first class, as Joan taught about assessment of second language students, I quickly realized that I had entered a realm of education with a vocabulary all unto itself. Questions began to form as I struggled with all new words and ideas, feeling much like a second-language student myself.

From the very start of this class, we were always talking and sharing so that we could, in Joan’s words, make meaning for ourselves. We soon found that whenever we verbalized our thoughts about our readings, it was all we could do to stop talking and bring our attention back to the front of the room. Joan never talked at us, but continually asked questions and posed problems. Just when we thought we had answers, she would ask more questions to generate discussion. Through this discussion, I began to make sense of what I had experienced the prior semester.

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Vygotsky came to life as Joan shared his concepts about thought and language. Finally, I had encountered a theory that unlocked for me what I had intuitively felt about teaching and learning, but did not yet have the words to articulate. I knew that the learning theories encountered in my education years earlier did not jibe with my own convictions. Working with the bilingual and English-only students the semester before had taught me that what worked with one group of students was not necessarily going to be effective with another group. Now, I knew why. I was realizing then that in his search for a new psychology, Vygotsky showed that learning is both individual and social and, at the same time, natural, and cultural. Our lived experience surrounds and touches each of us in different ways, and as such, influences our learning.

In portraying the importance of social context on language, Joan told us about Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development. This meant that if students could talk and problem solve with others, who had more experience or knowledge in specific areas, they would be able to reach greater levels of cognition. In our work together in Joan's class, we lived these concepts while we internalized theory that informed our practice. What Joan had learned from her studies was being played out in this classroom each time we met. We realized the value of verbalizing our thoughts, recognizing that we came from differing perspectives because of our lived experiences. Every idea had merit, questions were more important than answers, and the process was more important than the product. We were experiencing transformative education, and most of us were working harder and enjoying it more than ever before in our educational lives.

When asked how I first learned about Vygotsky, I credited Joan with introducing me to his work, and sharing with me a way to theoretically verbalize my practice. Through our sharing over the years and after reading many other's interpretations of Vygotsky's work, it dawned on me one day that Joan was not the one who introduced me to Lev Vygotsky. I actually encountered his ideas for the first time the semester before I met Joan, in my experience with "models of teaching" class. I had been assigned a semester project, by an expert in behaviorism, the one model of teaching that actually fit with my theoretical perspective of teaching. In that serendipitous semester, I encountered the "how" of teaching and learning, and in the next serendipitous semester, I discovered the "why". I am able now to put words to my experience. I still marvel at the convergence of events in that year that have instigated a synergy that continues even to this day.