
Except from:

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Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

What in the world is the zone of proximal development (ZPD)?
Once again, we can turn to Vygotsky and Pablo to discover the answer:

The ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

Pablo's Story: the ZPD in Action

First, no one thought he could learn.
Second, he learned with his group.
Third, he was able to learn alone.

Vygotsky viewed this experience as a key factor affecting the relationship between thought and speech. Students use language to communicate thoughts, and through the social act of verbalizing those thoughts (talking to each other) combine their experiences with those of others. These zones we create in our classes, in our departments, in our communities, and in our homes make a difference in individual lives and in society. They have the potential to lead to self and social transformation.

Thought and Language

The third legacy of Vygotsky relates to the powerful interrelationship between thought and language. The eighth graders in the following example demonstrate the ways in which students use their language to generate thoughts and how the thoughts affect their language. Words and ideas: it's a two-way street.

Richard: An Example from Secondary. Richard's social studies class was studying the Preamble to the Constitution. In this classroom of 28 students, 15 are English-dominant, 6 are Spanish-dominant, 4 are Cambodian-dominant, and 3 are Lao-dominant. The text and the language of the classroom is English. Richard and his students have just orally read the Preamble in English. After heterogeneously grouping the students, Richard, the teacher, explained:

"Rewrite the Preamble using your own language. Look at the Preamble, pick it apart and put the thoughts back together with any language that you want to use. Words like everyday talk at home, or outside of school, Spanish, English, Cambodian, Lao. Use street language if you want. Use any language, but just demonstrate the thoughts of the Preamble. Afterwards, in your groups, redo it in English so that I can understand."

"Our language? Any language? Just write the ideas?" the students asked.

They buzzed with each other about the prospect of writing their thoughts in their languages and then translating them to English.

Richard answered, "Write it, agree on it as a group, read it, and explain it. Brainstorm. Put your homo sapiens' cabezas together. How would you put this in everyday language so you can go to the local market and talk about the Constitution?" After a pause he prompted, "We the people, me and my friends."

"Me and my posse?" asked one.

"Yes!"

"Yo y mis amigos?"

"Si."

"My buds and I?"

"Sure

(Putney, L. 1993, pp. 48-49)."

The purpose of this lesson is for the students to relate the language of the Preamble with the embedded thoughts. Marginalized students are often denied the opportunity of full participation in discussing abstract concepts in content areas. In the previous example, Richard organized his classroom and implemented his own pedagogy so all students internalized the abstract concepts of this social studies class. Richard was building on the resources that each student brings to the classroom.

As the students write and talk in their own language they internalize the democratic ideas of the Constitution. This process is multidimensional, boundless, dynamic, and noisy. Language informs thought, and thoughts come to life in language.

In a pluralistic society, the issue of language acquisition is fundamental for all teachers. If students don't get to read and talk in a language they know, they don't get to learn. Using our own language makes us smarter, which is why everyone in the world loves her own language. And, when we are smarter, we learn other languages faster. Language develops cognition; words turn into thoughts, and thoughts turn into more words. All students need to talk and listen to each other in social, academic, and problem-solving contexts. Vygotsky's concept of the relationship between thought and language is how I developed my own cognition about critical pedagogy.

Vygotsky's Legacy to Critical Pedagogy

Meaningful dialogue matters.
Our lived experiences make a difference.
Our business is to keep tugging students
to their next cognitive level.
The combination of words and ideas generates more.

What does a Vygotskian class look like? An Example from Post Secondary. It has been my experience that sometimes teachers might teach about Vygotsky but not adapt their own personal pedagogy to create a context whereby students experience a Vygotskian classroom. Following is a description of a postsecondary classroom that had the experience but did not see it, nor recognize it, until they articulated it. (LeAnn Putney, personal communication, December 15, 1988):

"What does a Vygotskian class look like?" the graduate student asked after they had studied Vygotsky.

"Well, what have we been doing since day one of class in this course?" the professor replied.

"We keep an issues log each night as we read our assignments," the first student replied.

"Then, when we get to class, we sit in small groups and discuss the issues each of us has highlighted," replied the second student.

"Next, our whole class discussion is determined by our logs, not from the text and not from your log," the third graduate student said to the professor

"How did we create the midterm project?" the professor asked the class.

"Oh, yeah," the first student replied, "I remember that we created six different possibilities for a mid-term, and each student could choose one. Some of us renegotiated our choices a couple of times."

"How did we decide to grade the various projects?" the faculty member queried.

"We created a rubric together one night in class," a student answered.

"I remember that some of us read the same difficult journal article and then got together and talked about it and then presented it for our colleagues in class," another students shared.

"I knew when I assigned those readings, that on an individual basis, they might be a bit beyond you because you would be grappling with new academic thought and language. But, I remember that each group had a dynamite demonstration of the materials so that your colleagues could do their own sense-making of those same articles. Together, it seems that you have extracted meaning from some very heavy readings that you all complained about from the first day," the professor said and the students smiled knowingly.

"And look at how much we learned," the professor concluded. "Now my question of you is: What will you do with the new knowledge which you have generated?"