Vygotsky: Between Socio-Cultural Relativism and Historical Materialism. From a Psychological to a Pedagogical Perspective

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In this paper I draw a distinction between two strands of argument that have evolved in the wake of Vygotsky's early 20th century writing. I examine key methodological differences between sociocultural relativism and historical materialism. I then consider the pedagogical implications of these differences. My concern is that the all too common western predeliction for a post modern account yields a deeply conservative approach to pedagogy. In this form pedagogy may loose its power as a tool of social transformation and may curtail the possibilities for individual transformation. I close with a quote which neatly captures this concern: "Methodology is not a "toolbox" of different methods from which the researcher selects some on the basis of personal or social preferences! Instead, it is an integrated structure of the epistemological process (Branco & Valsiner, 1997) that can equally and easily reveal and obscure the empirical reality in the knowledge construction process of social scientists" [8, p. 8].

Keywords: Vygotsky, Davydov, relativism, materialism, pedagogy.

Выготский: между социокультурным релятивизмом и историческим материализмом. От психологической перспективы — к педагогической

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В статье рассматриваются различия двух подходов, возникших и развившихся вскоре после публикаций Л.С. Выготского начала 20 века. Я исследую ключевые методологические различия между социокультурным релятивизмом и историческим материализмом, а также то, какие последствия эти различия имеют для педагогической практики. Мою озабоченность вызывает то обстоятельство, что общеизвестное пристрастие западной культуры к постмодернистским идеям влечет за собой глубоко консервативный подход в педагогике. В таком виде педагогика рискует утратить свою силу как инструмент социальной трансформации и значительно сокращает возможности трансформации личностной. В заключение статьи я привожу цитату, которая как нельзя более точно отражает всю сущность этой проблемы: «Методология — это не «ящик с инструментами», из которого ученый может

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по своему вкусу или по социальному заказу вытаскивать тот или иной метод. Напротив, это сложная, интегрированная структура эпистемологического процесса, которая легко может в равной степени как обнажать, так и скрывать объективную действительность в процессе конструирования знания исследователями».

Ключевые слова: Выготский, Давыдов, релятивизм, материализм, педагогика.

It is possible to point to differences in epistemological and ontological assumptions which serve to create significant divides in the post-Vygotskian field. Their existence is not always made clear and yet they carry with them such important implications for research and the development of theory. This situation would appear to call for two forms of action: that readers of these texts should be encouraged and supported in their efforts to understand the methodological and theoretical lens through which Vygotsky's work is interpreted; and that writers should be encouraged to be much more explicit in their articulation of the assumptions which guide their work.

The version of neo-Vygotskian Psychology that is being developed in the West is regarded as, at best, partial if not inaccurate by those concerned with Developmental Psychology in present day Russia. Yaroshevsky [38; 39] and Petrovsky [29] do provide English language versions of Russian views of the history of Psychology in general and of Vygotsky's work in particular. Chaiklin [4] has delved into the some of the more obscure elements of the Vygotskian opus to produce a significant challenge to much of the received understanding of the much bowdlerised concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). A key element of his argument is that western interpretations have subsumed the original intentions within their own culturally situated academic priorities. In a way this could be argued as an example of a community of practice as a transformer of knowledge and a vehicle of developing values.

This effect may be witnessed in the different approaches to the theorisation and application of the community of practice and community of learners ideas. The examples I will now discuss are but two perspectives among many.

From the perspective of discursive psychology, Linehan and McCarthy [22], criticize Greeno [11] and Rogoff, Matusov and White [30] as paying insufficient attention to the complex relations between individuals and between individuals and communities,

> Taking more account of individual responsiveness to community discourses suggests that as people engage in joint activity they not only appropriate but also create or reconstruct the context in which they participate. This approach leads to a reading of individual—community relations quite different than that produced by Rogoff, Lave, and others. Discursive events are portrayed as acts in which multiple centers of emotional, valuational, and cognitive consciousnesses meet (Hicks, 1999). This perspective gives full weight to the sense of lived dilemmas and conflicts faced by individuals engaged with practices. Thus, we can think of individual and community as mutually

emerging from particular relations, which entail the sociocultural and personal historical contexts from which they emerge. Relations in which conflict and control may necessarily emerge as part of the process of negotiating who you may become in a community [22, p. 146].

From the perspective of constructivist pedagogy, Brown and Campione [3] have discussed an approach entitled Fostering Communities of Learners (FCL) with classroom teachers in upper elementary and middle school science classrooms in urban settings in the U.S.A. The same principles have been applied in social studies classrooms [24], English language arts classrooms [37] and mathematics classrooms [33].

> we will argue that this reform exemplifies many of the learning-centred efforts of contemporary school improvement that would be characterized as constructivist, learner-centred, oriented toward the development of higher-order understanding and skills, and emphasizing collaborative efforts by students in learning communities engaging in complex, 'authentic' tasks through 'distributing their expertise' [34, p. 136].

From my point of view, the research community or the research field or the practices of research or research activity must retain the critical edge as its seeks to develop and refine ideas such as the community of practice or learners. This critical edge must surely be used to pare and parse the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of such development.

Funds of knowledge and third spaces

I will now discuss, albeit briefly, a body of work which also takes up specific views on the situated nature of learning and the knowledge which is developed and acquired. Within this discussion is a commentary on the implications of acknowledging or discounting the possibilities of different knowledge structures and / or in Vygotsky's term the differences between scientific and every day concepts.

Luis Moll has made an important contribution to that fraction of the post Vygotskian research field which also draws on the methodologies and imaginations of anthropology. His classroom-based and home-based studies of language and literacy (see [25]) focus on the social distribution of knowledge, understood as cultural resource for thinking, within Latino homes [26]. In this way he considers both situated and distributed features of learning. In order to gain access to the understandings that have been acquired and developed in different settings he sought the help of classroom teachers as researchers who carried out ethnographies of practices of literacy within children's communities. The intention being to

recognize value and build on the funds of knowledge which are specific to the social, economic, and productive activities of people living in specific settings.

> Households in our sample share not only knowledge regarding repair of homes and automobiles, home remedies, planting and gardening, as mentioned, but funds of knowledge specific to urban living, such as access to institutional assistance, school programs, transportation, occupational opportunities and other services. In short, households' funds of knowledge are wide-ranging and abundant [28, p. 323].

This work has been influential on researchers in many settings. For example Martin Hughes and colleagues [17; 18] have explored how children's attainment and learning disposition including attitudes to school and to learning could be enhanced through a process of exchanging knowledge and information exchange between home and school in the UK. This work can be read as a counter to many parent involvement projects in the UK which are seen to operate 'as a form of cultural imperialism' [9].

Moll argues that schools should draw on the social and cognitive contributions that parents and other community members can make to children's development. Through these anthropologically driven studies of learning in clusters of households much has been learned about the ways in which knowledge is built and acquired in such settings. After school clubs are used as settings in which the richness of the community knowledge funds can be brought together with the academic purposes of the teaching. The after school clubs were designed so that multiple goals could be pursued. The children engaged in meaningful activities in which valued outcomes were achieved. Teachers ensured that academic progress was facilitated in the context of these activities.

Rowlands presents a strident critique of this approach arguing that it fails to incorporate an understanding of Vygotsky's position on epistemology which he attributes to Marx.

> Survival strategies (or 'funds of knowledge') of the oppressed cannot be used to facilitate a scientific and objective understanding of the world (this is a Marxist position despite how 'politically incorrect' it may sound)! … A scientific understanding has to be developed from 'above' in school; it cannot come from 'below', in the everyday experience of having to survive in the world. [31, pp. 558].

Moll and Greenberg [28] suggest that scientific concepts (after Vygotsky) **are** to be found in the funds of knowledge that are developed in communities

> 'Vygotsky (1987) wrote that in 'receiving instruction in a system of knowledge, the child learns of things that are not before his eyes, things that far exceed the limits of his actual and even potential immediate experience' (p. 180). We hardly believe that rote instruction of low-level skills is the system of knowledge that Vygotsky had in mind. We perceive the students' community,

and its funds of knowledge, as the most important resource for reorganizing instruction in ways that 'far exceed' the limits of current schooling. An indispensable element of our approach is the creation of meaningful connections between academic and social life through the concrete learning activities of the students. We are convinced that teachers can establish, in systemic ways, the necessary social relations outside classrooms that will change and improve what occurs within the classroom walls. These social connections help teachers and students to develop their awareness of how they can use the everyday to understand classroom content and use classroom activities to understand social reality.' [28, pp. 345—6].

Davydov [5; 6; 7], and following him Hedegaard [14] as outlined above, insisted that the tradition of teaching empirical knowledge should be changed to a focus on teaching theoretical knowledge. He developed a 'Developmental Teaching' programme which pursued this goal. The connection between the spontaneous concepts that arise through empirical learning and the scientific concepts that develop through theoretical teaching is seen as the main dimension of the ZPD. The process of 'ascending from the abstract to the concrete' which formed the core of Davydov's early work has been extended by Hedegaard into a conceptualisation of teaching and learning as a 'double move' between situated activity and subject matter concepts. When working within this approach, general laws are used by teachers to formulate instruction and children investigate the manifestations of these general laws in carefully chosen examples which embody core concepts. These core concepts constitute the 'germ cell' for subsequent learning. In practical activity children grapple with central conceptual relations which underpin particular phenomena. In this way the teaching focuses directly on the scientific concepts that constitute the subject matter.

Hedegaard [14] suggests that 'the teacher guides the learning activity both from the perspective of general concepts and from the perspective of engaging students in 'situated' problems that are meaningful in relation to their developmental stage and life situations [14, p. 120]. Her account makes it clear that successful applications of this approach are possible, while indicating the enormous amount of work that will be required if such practices are to become both routine and effective. In this way Davydov is associated with the formulation of an approach to teaching and learning within which the analysis of theoretical knowledge is central. Davydov and his group, along with the now 2500 school strong Association for Developmental Instruction have done much to pursue the 'marxist epistemologist' interpretation of Vygotsky's work to which Rowlands alludes:

> … any consideration as to the conditions necessary to evoke development must have, as its starting point, the content of the body of knowledge (and by content I mean logical structure, its theoretical objects and the way these theoretical objects speak of the world). This … is Vygotsky as 'marx-

ist epistemologist' and the ZPD ought to be seen in the context of this epistemology.

Rowlands [31, p. 541]

As Hedegaard [14] reminds us, this body of work identifies the general developmental potential of particular forms of teaching as well as its specific microgenetic function. The assertion is that teaching should promote general mental development as well as the acquisition of special abilities and knowledge. Karpov [20] contrasts Russian approaches such as those developed by Davydov with North American guided discovery pedagogies that he claims serve only to promote empirical learning rather than the theoretical learning that leads to the acquisition of scientific knowledge comprised of scientific concepts and relevant procedures.

In contrast, Moll [27] suggested that the focus of change within the ZPD should be on the creation, enhancement and communication of meaning through the collaborative use of mediational means rather than on the transfer of skills from the more to less capable partner. Thus even within the 'scaffolding' interpretation there are fundamental differences. A rigid scaffold may appear little different from a task analysis produced by teaching which has been informed by applied behaviour analysis. A negotiated scaffold would arise in a very different form of teaching and may well be associated with collaborative activity as discussed by Moll. From the perspective of Developmental Teaching it is very unclear as to whether the content of scaffolded instruction would serve a developmental function.

Griffin and Cole [12] mount a strong criticism of instructional approaches in which the child's creativity is underplayed. They draw on the work of the Russian physiologist Nicholoas Bernstein and A.N. Leontiev. From Bernstein they borrow an emphasis on essential creativity in all forms of living movement and from Leontiev they pursue the notion of 'leading activity'. The argument that different settings and activities give rise to 'spaces' within the ZPD for creative exploration rather than pedagogic domination.

> 'Adult wisdom does not provide a teleology for child development . Social organization and leading activities provide a gap within which the child can develop novel creative analyses.' [12, p. 62].

There have been a number of recent attempts to both recognise and value the knowledge that develops in homes and communities and to make connections with the knowledge that is valued in schools and other official pedagogic sites. This 'third space pedagogy' been developed by researchers such as Kris Gutiérrez [13] and it resonates with the literacy and discourse studies undertaken by Carol Lee and James Paul Gee (e.g., [21; 10]. The move has been to find ways to connect the "first space" of learning, knowledge and understanding in the home, community, and social networks with the "second space," of formal pedagogic practice and its discourses. This is done through the creation of a "third space" in which connections are made between the two which may, for example, involve classroom instruction which engages with and then re-positions forms of literacy which

have often been regarded as marginal or irrelevant in schools. Lee's [21] Cultural Modeling Project which has been trialled in a school where most of the pupils bring African American English Vernacular (AAEV) from the "first space" to the "second space" of schooling. Lee [21] seeks to engage these young learners with literary reasoning through a "third space" in which the AAEV practice of signifying that entails the use of figurative language, persuasion, and double entendre to engage in insult is recognised and valued. Here there is a theoretical acknowledgement of different forms and structures of knowledge along with a political recognition of power of different discourses in different contexts. I understand such attempts in terms of what I take to be an appropriate and reasonably correct translation of the Russian term '*obuchenie*' (often translated as instruction) which was used by Vygotsky [35; 36] to signify the process of teaching and learning in which to learn one has to teach (communicate one's understanding with the teacher) and to teach one has to learn (about the understandings of the pupil / learner) Thus there is a need for dialogue or at least connection across the knowledges which to a greater or lesser extent may be situation specific. It is here that the questions of seperability and knowledge boundaries discussed above condition the theorisation and methodology of pedagogic practice and research. Despite Matusov's [23] scepticism about the prevalence of Bakhtinian dialogues which seem to him to be 'accidental rather than essential to pedagogy and education'. [23, p. 236], I find the following statement about learning from otherness to be an important starting point in the consideration of situated and distributed understanding.

> In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly . . . A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it does not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us new aspects and new semantic depths [1, p. 7].

Matusov [19] had earlier argued the case for differing socio-political orientations on the part of Vygotsky (who he sees as advocating a seperability thesis and thus a model of internalisation) and placed the nonseperability thesis (linked a model of learning through participation) firmly in the domain of Bakhtin's work.

> 'Vygotsky shaped and gave the major impetus for the internalization model of development. He ethnocentrically considered Western societies as the historically most progressive and advanced [30]. His life project [using Sartre's term] seemed to be how to facilitate people's connection with the network of Western sociocultural practices of mass production, formal schooling, vast institutional bureaucracy, and alienated labor. That

is why, in my view, Vygotsky mainly focused on studying children, people with disabilities, and people from 'primitive' cultures. In contrast, his contemporary Russian theoretician Bakhtin, whose scholarship was deeply literary, had a very different life project. Bakhtin seemed to be concerned with how people constitute each other in their diversity, agency, and dialogue. According to Bakhtin, people need each other not so much to successfully accomplish some goal in their cooperative efforts but because of their 'transgradience' (it literally means 'the outsideness'), which allows them to be participants of never-ending dialogue. Bakhtin's project was much closer to the participation worldview than Vygotsky's'

[23, p. 237—8].

I will close this paper with a quote from Jaan Valsiner whose work may be thought of in terms of the development of analytic dualism. He distinguishes dualisms from dualities, arguing that the denial of dualism (inner, outer) in appropriation models leads to a denial of the dualities which are the constituent elements in dialectical or dialogical theory. As such he occupies a very different position on the interpretation of Vygotsky from that developed by Rogoff and Lave. However there is no necessary refutation of Bakhtin's argument on mean-

ing and dialogue here. The statement reproduced below from Diriwächter, Valsiner [8] surfaces and, for me, reaffirms one of the central claims of this book.

Methodology is not a "toolbox" of different methods from which the researcher selects some on the basis of personal or social preferences! Instead, it is an integrated structure of the epistemological process (Branco & Valsiner, 1997) that can equally and easily reveal and obscure the empirical reality in the knowledge construction process of social scientists [8, p. 8].

This calls for clarity of purpose and belief in research. As I and others have argued (notably Sawyer [32]) the post Vygostkian field is populated by a number of epistemological and ontological positions not all of which are made clear in publications. The clarification of such positions would appear to be an important part of the development of the field. As Vygotsky, in what may arguably have been his preferred role as a methodologist remarked:

The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity . . . the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study [35, p. 65].

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