Vygotsky and Learning

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Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896-1934)

- Attended both public and private schools
- Studied law, literature, philosophy, art, and psychology at university
- Literate in eight languages
  - Read widely in philosophy, psychology, theater, literature
- Familiar with a host of psychologists
  - Piaget, Freud

http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/images/index.htm
Marx and Vygotsky

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” - Marx

“The social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual dimension is derivative and secondary.” - Vygotsky

“Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (1845), http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm
Levels of human development

1. **Ontogenesis** – Development from childhood to adulthood

2. **Socio-historical** – Development of humans throughout history (cultural)

3. **Phylogenesis** – Development of humans as a species via evolution

4. **Microgenesis** – Development of competency for a task or activity
Socially shared cognition

- All higher cognitive functions (uniquely human) are derived from social context.
- Two planes: “social plane” and “psychological plane”

“Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. ... First it appears between two people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category.”

- Vygotsky
Cognition embedded in society

- Example: Conservation tasks
  - Performance affected by questioning method
- Repeated questions, 180 four to six year olds
  - 78% of children conserved on the one-question case
  - 28% of children conserved on the two-question case
- If adult is replaced for second question, more children conserve
- Children try to both make sense of the cognitive task and the societal expectation.
Cultural selection of tasks

- Children of the Hausa in Nigeria don’t conserve until age 11
- Western cultures promote fairness in terms of distribution of resources, so children conserve early
- Mayan children do better in remembering spatial relation than American children
Social engagement

- **Piaget - Conflict**
  - Contact with agemates more meaningful than that with adults
  - Differing opinions allow child to move away from pre-operational, egocentric thinking to concrete operational de-centered thinking

- **Vygotsky - Collaboration**
  - *Who* is not important
  - *How* problems are worked out is
  - Children learn best when working with an expert
    - ZPD, Scaffolding
Vygotsky and Language

- Language is a tool that *mediates* relations between people.

- Once a function has been learned in the social plane, language is used to *internalize* this function in the psychological plane.
Mediation through signs

- Analogy to hammer
  - Hammer is used to gain control over the physical world
  - Language/signs are used to gain control over the psychological world

- Signs are socially generated
  - Language inherently sociocultural
  - Primary purpose of language is for communication

- During year 2, sociocultural and ontogenetic lines merge
Internalization

- Child is an active agent in development of internal processes through *collaboration*.

- Combination of child’s behavior and partner’s behavior leads to generation of signs.
Zone of Proximal Development

- Capacities are first developed through collaboration, then internalized.
- The area in which this happens is the zone of proximal development.
- Adult’s or expert partner’s goal is to keep the child in this zone.
Scaffolding

- Child as builder, adults provide scaffolding
- Joint problem solving
- Intersubjectivity
  - Both participants must arrive at a shared understanding
- Warmth/Responsiveness
- Keep child in ZPD
- Promote self-regulation
  - Low-, mid-, and high-level distancing
Private talk

- Piaget – egocentric
  - Side-effect of the pre-operatory stage

- Vygotsky – self-regulation
  - Children “talk through” difficult problems
  - Does not become more social with age
  - Self-scaffolding
  - Differs in social context (more talk when performing academic activities)

- The more private talk preschoolers use, the greater their improvement in tasks
Discussion questions

- Scaffolding is culturally dependent. How would methods of scaffolding change given different tasks that are not as analytic?
- Are Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s theories incompatible? What do you think we can learn from both of them?
- Do you think private talk is suppressed due to greater internalization or societal norms, or both?
- Are you aware of “private speech” in everyday thinking? Is all thought linguistic?