

# CHARTING THE AGENDA

Educational  
Activity  
after  
Vygotsky

EDITED BY HARRY DANIELS



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# Charting the agenda

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In formulating his theories, Vygotsky drew on a wide range of influences. His studies involved the reformulation of many ideas from various disciplines into a general theory of semiotics. In turn, his theories have been developed through the practice of the different disciplines that have interpreted his work.

*Charting the Agenda* provides readers in education and related fields with an insight into the cultural processes that have influenced the development of Vygotsky's work. The contributors offer their views on the practical and theoretical pedagogic developments that have taken place within their own professional and academic cultures, and also reflect on what lies ahead.

The collection acts as a forum for cross-disciplinary discussions in education. It provides lecturers, teachers and students with a general, detailed overview of important developments outside their own field to enable them to re-examine practice in their own discipline.

**Harry Daniels** is Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Education, London.



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This book is dedicated to my long-suffering family.



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# Foreword

*Basil Bernstein*

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It may be that these comments might serve better as an afterword than a foreword.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, two grand narratives of the travails of modern society shared the analysis, diagnosis and treatments of its social and individual pathologies. In both narratives, structures of power/domination and the conflicts these engendered propelled the narratives. Both shared strategies for exposing false consciousness and revealing transparent relationships. Both pointed to the duplicity of authority and its repressive regulation. Both claimed scientific status. Marx's theory had little or no purchase on micro levels of interaction and Freud's theory had little or no purchase on discussing and explaining macro structures. Marx projected the macro on to an unmediated micro and Freud projected the micro on to an unmediated macro. Base and superstructure appeared in both theories with similar generating power. In Freud, the id could be conceived as the biological level, ego/superego as the fragile superstructure. The superstructures in both theories were, in today's talk, discursive formations, dependent and regulated by their respective base. These discourses mask reality, rendering it opaque, misrecognised, and so establishing a fragile, pathological status quo. Yet neither theory singled out language as of special theoretical concern; neither was discourse given a special status. However, there was no doubt that there was a reality to be discovered and lived.

At the close of the twentieth century, from different perspectives, language and discourse are aspects of crucial concern. Indeed, it could be said that language and discourse enjoy a hegemony in theoretical and applied fields. But the grand narratives of the

beginning of this century are at a discount and are suspect in terms of the stories they tell and, more importantly, in terms of the very possibility of such stories. Holism is to be replaced by the local, by the particular, the contextually contingent. Authors are to disappear; texts are created by readers having a temporary significance as a set of differences. If you like a radical de-centering of discourse, let a thousand flowers bloom in a democracy of de-centred texts. From a complementary but more radical perspective, the challenge is to the possibility of any relation between language, truth and reality. Reality is no more and no less than a managed symbolic simulation, referable only to the procedures of its own simulation (Baudrillard). Language is a complex set of strategies to mask a fundamental emptiness (Derrida). Discourses negate the concept of a singular subject. The subject is a node, an intersection, in the criss-cross fire of discourses, a position normalised by these discourses (Foucault).

From another perspective, that of language as information systems, codes, or grammars, these have weakened discipline boundaries and opened the relations among them. The boundaries between the social and natural sciences are crossed, giving rise to the potential technologizing of everything. Realities are on supply rather than on demand. Perhaps this is the major reversal between the beginning and end of the twentieth century.

From yet another perspective, closer to the issues of this book, there is a contrary view. Here I am referring to the emergence, or rather, the re-emergence of language as the study of development *and* its pedagogic facilitation. Language here is a system of meanings, a relay for the social, a primary condition for the formation of consciousness and the levels and variety of its function. Relation to (the social) precedes relations within (the individual). This insight was, of course, Mead's, much earlier than Vygotsky, but his insight produced a very different model. The I/Me dualism of the Meadian self is a dualism endemic to European thought, perhaps even to Christianity, with its distinction between inner/outer and individual/society. The relaying, mediating role of language is shared with Durkheim.

One term is missing so far. Relaying and mediating, place the emphasis upon the construction of consciousness rather than upon consciousness as constructing, as initiating, as agency. Here we meet the age-old dualism and suspicion of language. Language as a deception, language as a means of revelation. Language as a mask of the other, language as emancipation from the other. Language as

the message of authority, language to speak one's own voice, where 'one' may include gender, race, class, region. It is here that Vygotsky's theory of development and of its facilitation becomes crucial: the pedagogizing of development. Development is maturation plus instruction. Exit Piaget; enter the pedagogue. The concept of the zone of proximal development, which is discussed in most of the papers in this book, brings the adult (and, of course, the peer group, not necessarily working together) firmly into the context of development. But what kind of adult, what kind of relationship, what kind of knowledge, what kind of context, what criteria of development?

## **VYGOTSKY AND PEDAGOGIC PRACTICE**

I would like to consider under this heading the relation between Vygotsky's theory of the social basis of mental functions and of their development, and theories of the appropriate pedagogic practice for the realization of this development. Now in the case of Piaget, the pedagogic practice inferred, associated and legitimized by the theory was created not by Piaget but by educators. However, in the case of Vygotsky where instruction is foregrounded, where cultural formations are privileged as 'tools' rather than systems or structures internal to the individual, pedagogic practice is necessarily foregrounded. It is not incidental that Vygotsky spent some years as a teacher. It is also no accident that this theory arose in the Soviet Union. A crucial problem of theoretical Marxism is the inability of the theory to provide descriptions of micro level processes except by projecting macro level concepts on to the micro level, unmediated by intervening concepts through which the micro can be both uniquely described and related to the macro level. Marxist theory can provide the orientation and the conditions the micro language must satisfy if it is to be 'legitimate'. Thus, such a language must be materialist, not idealist, dialectic in method and its principles of development and change must resonate with Marxist principles.

Language is a crucial site for study (and, of course, there was a great tradition of that study in the Soviet Union) but a site fraught with ideological pitfalls. Further, Marxist theory, when translated into what was thought to be 'state policy', could not admit any theory of mental functions, and even more of their development, which placed these processes under the aegis of the child's own

activity, independent of adult regulation, where the source of development and its facilitation were unfolding structures internal to the child. Thus, any theory of development must be primarily social and offer a pedagogic practice which places development firmly in the control of socializers. Of course, it is not possible to move from the conditions for a legitimate theory to the theory itself. But the conditions restrict, orient and ground the surveillance of the theory for illegitimate deviations.

Thus, in Vygotsky's case, we have a theory and a necessary pedagogic practice, but which? Daniels, in his introduction, brings up the fascinating point that Vygotsky's theory can provide grounds for different, if not opposing, epistemologies and pedagogies. Vygotsky's is not the only theory which creates these possibilities for educators. Ideological divisions within the field of educators acts selectively on which theories are appropriated and how a theory is used. Theories, usually not constructed by educators but recontextualized by them, ground positions of power, carry resource allocations, construct careers and so on. The point I want to pursue is rather different. How did Vygotsky see the link between the zone of proximal development and pedagogic practice? It is interesting here that Wertsch and Smolka, in their chapter, supplement Vygotsky with Bakhtin and Lotman to point to their preferred pedagogic process. It may well be that the less preferred practice could be relevant to some learning contexts but not to all. Similarly, Levine feels the need to engage with what she infers to be Vygotsky's view as to how foreign languages are to be learned because it is antipathetic to the practice to which she is committed, and for which she skilfully argues. Vygotsky seems to think that crucial to learning a foreign language is an understanding of the formal grammar and the application of its rules, rather than situating the language in contexts of relevance to the learner. It is worth while mentioning in this context the imaginative research of Vygotsky and Luria in the 1930s, where they studied the ability of groups of adults, distinguished by the presence or absence of schooling/literacy, to solve syllogisms where the contexts and relationships of the syllogisms were drawn from the local culture, contexts and relationships. Vygotsky and Luria were interested in which groups of adults would give primacy to the logical relations of the syllogism and which groups would foreground the cultural context and relationships. The translators in their introduction issue a health warning to readers in order that the

'wrong' conclusions are not drawn from this study of the capacity of peasants. Thus, the context in which Vygotsky is recontextualized shapes the reading.

It seems to me that Vygotsky saw the zone of proximal development very much in terms of the extension of cognitive functions to levels of increasing complexity and generalization. There may be grounds for believing that Vygotsky saw school subjects, such as he saw foreign language teaching, to be taught by exposing the specialized systems of formal relations which distinguished the bodies of knowledge. The term 'tool' as a metaphor clearly resonated with the theoretical orthodoxy but may well have facilitated the abstraction of the formal properties of knowledge from the contexts in which they were realised and the pedagogic relations of their transmission and acquisition. The form and the content of the pedagogic relations may well have been taken for granted as they were currently operating in Soviet schools in the middle 1930s.

## **SOME THEORETICAL ISSUES**

I would like very briefly to consider some theoretical issues which arise out of Vygotsky's work which forms the basis and focus of the papers in the book.

The zone of proximal development raises fundamental questions as to what counts as developmental facilitation at any one level of maturation and the means of facilitation. Vygotsky appeared to have a restricted view of development, essentially cognitive and a practice which appears to privilege the acquisition of the 'tool' rather than the social context of acquisition. It is clear that once development is viewed more generously than the zone which is the space for pedagogizing becomes a site for ideological struggle, for new agendas. The metaphor of 'tool' draws attention to a device, an empowering device, but there are some reasons to consider that the tool with its internal specialized structure is abstracted from its social construction. Symbolic 'tools' are never neutral; intrinsic to their construction are social classifications, stratifications, distributions and modes of recontextualizing.

The socio-historical level of the theory is, in fact, the history of the biases of culture with respect to its production, reproduction, modes of acquisition and their social relations. In Vygotsky, this level may

well have been left vague because there was a crucial key to this study of the biases of culture and their conflicts: Marxism. There is now some doubt about this key. Even in Vygotsky's time such a study would have been fraught with ideological issues.

Finally, interesting questions arise out of the use of Vygotsky and the consequences of such use for the theory. In a way we have caught up with Vygotsky. It's not so much an idea finding the time, but a time selecting its idea. Vygotsky lays out levels of analysis in which two levels are vague: the socio-historical and the social construction of the child, including the child as an agent in his/her own development. When one considers what was accomplished in this short life there are no ground for complaints. However, Vygotsky did develop a methodology in which he outlined the requirements of his theory of description. I am not sure whether what follows is a correct inference from this methodology but it seems to me that if the basic unit must be a term which condenses within it possibilities of extension to other levels, then we can ask of applications to what extent do these applications permit or facilitate such extension. We could also enquire whether the use of Vygotsky arises because the language of a pre-existing model can be, or is, translated into Vygotskian terms. And if so, what are the implications of such a translation for the Vygotskian *total* project? We could distinguish such implications for any one level and for relations between levels. In other words, does an application entail a sideways move, or a hierarchical move or both? It is clear that most but not all of the chapters in this book focus at the micro level of local practices within the school, class or peer group in an interactional setting. On the whole, the emphasis is upon pedagogic contexts in which the practice is mediated by the students rather than mediated by the demands of the teacher. Pollard sees Vygotsky as taking over from Piaget in legitimizing primary school practice, moving the practice from child-centred to the more socio-centred focus of Vygotsky.

If one looks at the language of description of applications one can ask, irrespective of the level the language addresses, whether it facilitates movement to other levels. (Here we are asking how generative the language of description is.) Is it confined to one level? Has it been constructed for only one level or one type of context? We should also perhaps distinguish between diagrams or maps which refer to processes to be described and models which generate

principles for the understanding and description of processes. If we consider Vygotsky's total project, then the deepening of our understanding of any level, and especially of the relations *between levels*, may well fall foul of the boundaries between disciplines and cleavages within them. The Vygotsky project is intrinsically interdisciplinary.

On the whole, the application of Vygotsky by linguists, psychologists and sociologists has been limited to interactional contexts, often pedagogic contexts. It follows that the descriptions offered are confined to these contexts. In the case of sociology, the theories from which these descriptions are likely to be drawn are ethnomethodology or symbolic interactionism. In the case of ethnomethodology, with its focus upon how members create and negotiate social order in well-bounded contexts, the emphasis is usually restricted to what is said. Within this theory it is not possible to ask, 'How is it that it is this order which is created and not another?' Extra-contextual structures of power and their discursive regulation are necessarily excluded from the analysis. The less radical but more open approach of symbolic interactionism, focuses upon meanings, their negotiation, the construction of identities and their careers as these emerge out of face-to-face encounters in well-bounded contexts. Here there is opportunity for showing relations to external constraints and possibilities in which interactions are embedded but not necessarily determined. Yet there remains the crucial conceptual issue of explicating this interrelation. This is not solved by a set of boxes which index only the very processes to be described. Symbolic interactionism provides sensitive and insightful descriptions of interactions within the pedagogic format. The description it gives necessarily stems from its own selective focus. It tends to take for granted that it does not include in its description how the discourse itself is constituted and recontextualized. The theory focuses upon interactional formats rather than the way the *specialization of knowledge is constructed*. From the point of view of Vygotsky the '*tool*' is not subject to analysis although the articulation of the zone of proximal development may well be. This absence of focus is common to both linguistics and psychology. Once attention is given to the regulation of the structure of pedagogic discourse, the social relations of its production and the various modes of its recontextualizing as a practice, then perhaps we may be a little nearer