

Applying Vygotsky's Sociocultural

Theory of Development to Art Education

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## APPLYING VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT TO ART EDUCATION 2

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development focuses on language, social and cultural influences on a child's developing mind. Vygotsky's theory stated that culture along with social interaction and language all directly influenced one another as well as cognitive development. In this theory, children use cognitive tools to understand their surroundings and the world. These cognitive tools are created in one's culture. In the sociocultural theory, learning occurs within a social situation, and is first between the teacher and the learner, and then is inside the child, or internalized. Active participation, another component of this theory, in activity creates a framework for dialogue to occur, and ideas are exchanged which leads to advanced development. Vygotsky believed this is a primary mechanism for cognitive development. Learners also have a zone of proximal development, which is a task that cannot be completed without the assistance of others. Teachers can use scaffolding as a tool to assist children to complete these tasks that inside their zone of proximal development to promote learning and cognitive development.

One type of scaffolding that can be used is modeling. As an art teacher, I would use modeling in my instruction frequently. To get an idea or project across to students, it is important that they see ideas put forth rather than just hear them. If I were to have an assignment focusing on making a pinch pot, I would need to demonstrate how to do this first and foremost, or it would be very hard for them to understand what to do. Giving them this visual clue along with auditory instruction would bridge the gap from the unknown to the known, making this inside their zone of proximal development. As well as modeling, other types of scaffolding would be important tools in an art classroom. To initiate the exchange of ideas in a classroom focusing on the art of ceramics, I could prompt students about where they see ceramics and how they are used. As traditionally we use ceramics to cook in, eat out of and drink out of, as well as to hold

our fruits and vegetables, I could ask students to tell the class about their favorite cup, bowl, or plate and what designs may be on them. Culture is a generally direct influence on design, so one thing I could do to examine this would be to have students draw designs on paper. This could be designs they make up on the spot, or designs they remember seeing somewhere, even on their dish set at home. If students are unsure of what to draw, I could use the previous type of scaffolding by giving them auditory prompts and cues such as 'draw something that reminds you of family, of a tradition that you value, or of your favorite plant'. I would also be sure explain that it is ok to make mistakes, as this is part of the learning process and that the best artists make the most mistakes, because they aren't afraid to take risks – and in turn, they learn from those mistakes which help them to grow as an artist.

Another way I could use modeling in my certification area would be to teach students to throw a mug on a pottery wheel. They would first need to know how to wedge clay. Wedging clay gets all of the air bubbles out of the clay, and it is important because if something is fired that has air bubbles in it, it will explode. Wedging is done by rocking the clay and pushing it, basically the opposite of kneading dough. I would demonstrate how this is done, as it is not easily explained on paper or orally. Even if it was easy to explain orally, I would still show them what I meant so that the visual learners would benefit. These students would be somewhat familiar with clay as they have worked with it earlier in the semester, so I would know that this would be in their zone of proximal development, an idea central to Vygotsky's theory. In a review by Jie Zhang of Pennsylvania State University of *Vygotsky's Legacy: A Foundation for Research and Practice*, by Margaret E. Gredler and Carolyn Claytor Shields, Zhang states that the idea of the zone of proximal development "pinpointed that good education aims at the individual's potential development rather than current abilities". After modeling wedging, I

would explain what tools are needed when you throw and what they are used for, and place them around the wheel. I would at that time demonstrate how to set up the wheel and how to put a bat on it, what a bat is and why we use it. I would turn the wheel on, and begin by slamming a half pound ball of clay onto the center of the bat, followed by teaching the students how to center the clay. I would then model to them how to open the centered clay to begin to throw a cylinder. After the cylinder is thrown, to demonstrate the ideal wall thickness of a mug, I would cut the cylinder I just modeled in half vertically. Modeling all of the steps in this activity provides a framework for ideas and development to occur. I could verbally use private speech during this activity also to demonstrate what I am thinking about while doing the process.

Miller explains in his book, *Vygotsky in Perspective*, that Vygotsky's theory states our actions are determined by our socialization. By demonstrating using private talk shows that our inner talk and imagination is tied to the development of higher mental functions, or internalization (Miller, 36). To internalize something, we must first see it done and then reflect upon it, and then do it ourselves. Action such as this is what, in Vygotsky's theory, causes learning to be accomplished and internalized. Much like a musician gains muscle memory after practicing a song repeatedly, learners become unconsciously aware of previous knowledge. This previous knowledge builds on itself with everything that is learned, using private speech throughout the process.

We use our imagination when we are using inner speech. So, what force does our imagination have on our learning? Vygotsky's theory does not word for word state this, but in Natalia Gajdamaschko's *Theoretical Concerns: Vygotsky on Imagination Development*, Gajdamaschko states that imagination development is very important during school years to cognitive ability and development. Vygotsky understood that people can have multiple and

multifaceted levels of knowledge in different areas, such as academic, emotional or social. She also states that children are in a type of battle and inner struggle between their developing personalities and interests and what is socially forced upon them and viewed as acceptable. Everything that enforces behavior is a tool, which is a central idea of sociocultural theory. This mediated development leads to the idea that school and teaching correlates with imagination development, as learners take from their environment slowly and gradually more simple thoughts become more complex and developed thoughts. As language is a very important cultural tool in the development of the child, it is also important in the development of the imagination. Speech gives the child the ability to describe and reflect about an unseen object. Overgeneralizations are an example of a child imagining what something is, for instance if they mix up everything that is rectangular with a pillow. Vygotsky viewed imagination as a cultural function in place to enable one to master their behavior, as Vygotsky looks at two types of imagination: emotional and intellectual. As we grow older, we are more able to control our emotional imagination and our intellectual imagination expands, as does the ability to articulate such thoughts.

As an art teacher, I could use many ideas from Vygotsky in my classroom as effective tools to promote student learning and cognitive development.

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