

EVERY CONFERENCE BRINGS NEW HORIZONS

IET 

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE

 **IDEC**

INTERNATIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION CONFERENCE

 **INTE**

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW HORIZONS IN EDUCATION

IQC 2022

INTERNATIONAL QUALITY CONFERENCE

 **ISTEC**

INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE

 **ITICAM**

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS AND ISSUES IN COMMUNICATION & MEDIA CONFERENCE

 **ITEC**

INTERNATIONAL TEACHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE

IWSC 2022

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S STUDIES

JULY 26-27, 2022

Lefkoşa (Nicosia) / Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

JULY 28-29, 2022

Girne (Kyrenia) / Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

SEPTEMBER 01-02, 2022

Güzelyurt (Morphou) Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

PROCEEDINGS BOOK

ISSN:2146-7366

WHAT HE WOULD SAY IF ... SECOND PART

Silvio MORGANTI

UVI - “Unione Volontari per l’Infanzia e l’Adolescenza”
Milan, Italy

Verena ZUDINI

Department of Mathematics and Geosciences
University of Trieste, Italy
vzudini@units.it

Abstract

What Vygotsky (also spelled Vygotskij) would say if ... This contribution has been conceived as the second part of our possible/impossible interview with the founder and most significant representative of the cultural-historical school, Lev S. Vygotsky (1896-1934), whose first part was published for INTE 2021. Our work has once again been carried out on the basis of knowledge drawn from primary and secondary sources, referring to Vygotsky’s biography and writings, and by imagining Vygotsky’s hypothetical reflections and comments regarding important aspects of his theoretical framework and scholarly output, as timely as ever in the field of education.

Keywords: Vygotsky/Vygotskij, cultural-historical school, education



Figure 1. L. S. Vygotskij

(Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lev_Seměnovič_Vygotskij)

We certainly never expected this: to meet Vygotsky again in a mountain village, where spending the evening hours in front of the fireplace is still pleasant, despite the season’s high average temperatures. Students gather around him, with the intention of discussing topics of common interest. And we, along with them, move closer to listen.

Lev Seměnovič (he likes to be called this, by his first name, by the young students) is happy to answer the doubts, curiosities, and questions that they ask him as they go along.



One young girl breaks the ice and asks:

«I didn't quite understand the difference between the historical-cultural approach and the socio-cultural approach. If I understand correctly, you support the validity of the "historical" paradigm, considering the socio-cultural perspective of little interest. Why is that?».

Lev Semënovič, smiling, tries to clarify his opinion on the matter:

«What is meant by "culture" should be the complex (peculiar to a given social group) of conceptions, symbols, models of behaviour, moral rules, religious and philosophical beliefs. In addition, the characteristics of social, economic, and political institutions, with artistic, literary, and scientific expressions. In short, everything that characterises a given society at a specific historical moment. That is why "historical" and not "social"».

It certainly depends on what you mean by "Psychology". As far as I am concerned - and I am well aware of Georges Politzer's point of view and his support, in tune with the theoretical framework suggested by Friedrich Engels in *Dialectics of Nature*, of the concrete character that should characterise psychology - for me, too, the concept of "concreteness" cannot disregard the historical (and not social) dimension of any kind of, precisely, psychological investigation».

«Thank you. Although I am reminded of what one of my teachers once told me: "Psychology is either social or it is not psychology". So here we are again in the midst of an interesting discussion with a dialectical flavour...».

Lev Semënovič, accustomed to constructively handling opinions other than his own, does not reply.

But it does not escape him (he notices) that one of the girls, while listening to him, has headphones on and is listening to songs from: "When life fled... On the highway you were looking for life, but death met you..."

Lev Semënovič, for a moment, almost seems to take offense and says:

«OK, guys, calm down... Life is tough, but not impossible. Look, I too have not had an easy life, yet you are here listening to me because, despite everything, I have a lot to tell you...».

The girl, blushing, takes off her headphones, thus providing an opportunity for a primary school teacher to ask if it is possible to discuss and clarify whether the operating modes she adopts almost instinctively have a theoretically valid basis, especially with regard to the use of "tools", understood as "means" useful for improving teaching strategies in a broad and general sense.

Lev Semënovič thanks her (patting the girl with the headphones on the head) as she touched on a point that is particularly close to his heart:

«Tools perform "mediating activity" and are connected to the concept of "means"».

They include both the (material) tools employed for interaction between the person and the outside world, and the (psychological) tools employed by the mind for its own functioning, among them, in particular, the "sign".

The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image.

The stimulus-means (SM) interposes itself between stimulus (S) and response (R) and modifies their relationship previously fixed either by genetic factors or by learning.

It is my opinion, which I have repeated often, that the presence, in addition to the given stimuli, of created stimuli (stimuli-means, such as the knot in the handkerchief, the coin toss, i.e., "heads or tails") is the distinguishing feature of human psychology».

Lev Semënovič personally serves each of his pupils a cup of tea, leaving time for a deaf-mute boy - who has come to appreciate what Lev Semënovič has said and written about defectology - to send him a note where he has written the question he would like to ask him:

«Do you agree with Shakespeare's statement that life is itself a stage? If you are of the same opinion, could you tell me what the sets should look like (with associated scripts) of those particular stages that are classrooms?».

Lev Semënovič replies almost instinctively:

«The mental space of each individual (child, whether boy or girl, or adult) is, in a sense, a stage animated by constant dynamic activity in which the external and internal worlds are experienced and relived like a play. This is why it would be a good idea, when articulating the teaching activity, to keep in mind the concept of "stage balance" (one must avoid any kind of "unbalance", even emotional) and of "hard-covered flats" (which define the stage space)».

He then nods to the boy, encouraging him to continue being the "director" of his own life.

Lev Seměnovič is a man with a sense of humour. And so it occurs to him - who knows why - to ask his listeners if they know the difference between “psychosis” and “neurosis” (are they or are they not, after all, scholars, albeit still in training?). No one feels up to answering. And Lev Seměnovič simply says:

«The psychotic doesn't know how much two plus two equals. The neurotic knows, but it annoys the hell out of him».

The pupils smile, but not exactly with relish, as we say....

Here is a middle-aged teacher, wearing an artist's hat, asking what the point is of discussing everything that they are talking about and, also, whether it might be a good educational and pedagogical approach to create the conditions for children to be urged to describe their own world view “poetically”. And, again, what might be a useful channel for conveying feelings, experiences, emotions.

«By the concept of meaning - Lev Seměnovič replies - I mean the content (meaning) that a word (expression, construct) acquires in a given context of use, in a given concrete verbal situation (the situation of social relations). A word has a specific meaning, accepted, and shared by a community of speakers, in a given historical and cultural context.

The mind is the creator of its own “senses”, but in what form does it transmit them to other people? Through Art, in all its forms: from music, to painting, to literature, but especially through poetry.

You may very likely disagree with me, but that is my view: we are driven and guided by the meaning we give to ourselves and others, by the meaning we give to life and death; we are not driven and guided by archetypal unconscious urges that rise from the depths of the psyche».

With a slight movement of his head (made conspicuous by the strange, large hat), our artist shows that he has not quite understood the answer, especially with regard to the question “What is the point of all this?”. But so be it: we cannot always have a satisfactory answer to every question we ask.

There is just under a minute's silence and a girl takes the opportunity to pose a personal problem:

«The thoughts I have and that come to me are abundant, but passing from thought to action is difficult for me, and I regret it».

«My dear, theory and action are never disjointed. Every theoretical proposal is calibrated according to its full practical applicability. From my point of view (and I think I have already mentioned this) psychology must of necessity be understood as a concrete discipline. You don't have to feel sorry for it: you just have to try to think less and act (do) more...».

Three girls, somewhat to the side, chat amongst themselves, in low voices.

Lev Seměnovič becomes curious and asks what they are talking about.

«We are quite clear on the concept of pedagogy, but we have read that you also speak of “pedology”, a term that is obscure to us».

«It is the “science of child development”, i.e., the study of general laws, transversal to specific biological, psychological, and social developments. I tend to reject the idea of a linearity of psychic development, parallel to biological development (as proposed by Jean Piaget, studying the “Swiss child”), and highlight, in contrast, the fluctuations of development, with phases of advancement and phases of stasis: a progressive, but spiral course».

The spokesman for a group of teachers then raises the issue of the school as an institution that tends, in principle, to mortify the free and creative thinking of each individual pupil. An invitation for Lev Seměnovič, who has always been critical of a certain way of understanding education as it develops in the institutional school context.

«In my opinion, society “grafts” its own system of knowledge, rules, and values onto the mind of a child, whether boy or girl, through school. Here the school, as the social hinge of this “grafting”, may aim at conformism, at immobility, at the mortification of individual minds (oral exams, psychological tests, questionnaires, flunking instead of allowing pupils to blossom); however, it could also be the time and place to “teach” people to be free, thinking, and creative.

We could say: it depends on the teacher and his/her balancing the prescriptive aspects with the discretionary aspects... In fact, again in my opinion, the individual teacher must explore new paths, activate new solutions in a “dialogic” relationship with pupils so that potentialities overshadowed by the traditional educational process are activated in them».

The spokesperson, again on behalf of the teachers' group, takes the opportunity to ask for further clarification: «We have read some of your essays where you mention the concept of the “zone of proximal development”. Can you clarify its meaning for us?».

«The child's “zone of proximal development” is the distance between the child's current level of development, determined through the problems he or she solves on his or her own, and the level of potential development, determined through the problems he or she solves under the guidance of adults or in cooperation with “better prepared” peers. In this perspective, each of you, as a teacher, plays a fundamental role».

“Playing a role” immediately suggests a broader reading of the phenomenon “play”, which can be defined as the space separating two mating mechanical surfaces (bolt and nut, for example). From mechanics to interpersonal relationship, the transition is instantaneous. Lev Semënovič “explodes” the concept, declining its meaning in the context that defines the operational spheres of pupils:

«In play, a mental space develops in which people, actions or events are disengaged from the corresponding real reference while retaining their meaning (to play at being a knight, one does not need a real horse, it is sufficient to replace it with a stick). In this mental space, specific rules must be adopted and observed for the game to proceed and be “played”. Play thus becomes the mental activity through which children exercise their minds to introject rules.

Play creates a zone of proximal development in the child. In play, the child is always above his or her average age, above his or her usual everyday behaviour (two little sisters playing at being sisters...). In this respect, the category of “imagination” comes to “play” a major role».

We realise that we are, in a way, returning to themes already touched upon in our interview of a year ago. When talking to Vygotsky, it is impossible not to discuss the dynamics involved in learning processes, collaboration and the sharing of knowledge between teacher and learner, the mediating role of the former for the latter's successful task completion, the use of tools, school, education and play, with forays into the psychology of art.

This time we were the spectators of a pleasant conversation that allowed Vygotsky's young pupils (and not only them) to become more aware of certain “passages” that qualify his theoretical approach.

Master and pupils say goodbye with grateful smiles.

And we leave, thinking to ourselves: “There is no two without a three”, and trusting in a possible/impossible see-you-again.

TO LEARN MORE:

Caprin, C., & Zudini, V. (2015). Lev Vygotskij, figura e opera da (ri)scoprire. Un contributo alle teorie dell'educazione. *QuaderniCIRD*, 11, 32-55.

Dixon-Krauss, L. (Ed.) (1998). *Vygotskij nella classe. Potenziale di sviluppo e mediazione didattica*. Trento: Erickson.

Engels, F. (1954). *Dialectics of nature*. Moscow: PROGRESS Publishers. <https://archive.org/details/dialecticsofnature/>.

Keiler, P. (2015). *Lev Vygotskij - ein Leben für die Psychologie*. Überarbeitete, aktualisierte, neu formatierte und mit einem Vorwort versehene Version der Originalausgabe von 2002. Weinheim: Beltz.

Kozulin, A., Gindis, B., Ageyev V. S., & Miller, S. M. (Eds.) (2003). *Vygotsky's educational theory in cultural context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mecacci, L. (2017). *Lev Vygotskij. Sviluppo, educazione e patologia della mente*. Firenze: Giunti.

Mecacci, L. (2019). *Storia della psicologia. Dal Novecento a oggi*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Morganti, S., & Zudini, V. (2021). What he would say if ... TOJET, Special Issue for IETC, ITEC, ITICAM, IQC, IWSC & INTE-2021 (September 2021), 174-178.

Morganti, S., & Zudini, V. (2022). *Discorrendo di didattica e società inclusiva con tre giovani compagne di viaggio: Biancablu, Fragolina, Testacuoretempesta*. BlogBar dell'UVI (<https://albardelluvi.blog/2022/06/15/discorrendo-di-didattica-e-societa-inclusiva-con-tre-giovani-compagne-di-viaggio/>).

Vygotskij, L. S. (2022). *La mente umana. Cinque saggi*. A cura di L. Mecacci. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1971). *The psychology of art*. Cambridge, MA, and London: M.I.T. Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1987-1999). *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky*. New York: Kluwer and Plenum.