Vygotsky’s Social Constructivists Theory of Learning

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Introduction

Study on “Human Learning” is continuous which keep on developing and expanding. People agree to the fact that learning is important. But the views on the causes, processes, and consequences of learning differs from one another (Schunk, 2012). As researches from different theoretical traditions apply their ideas and hypothesis in basic and applied settings, their research findings give rise to improvements in teaching and learning. But to link these research data it is required to have a theory consisting of scientifically acceptable set of principles offered to explain a phenomenon. These theories provide a framework for interpretation of environmental observations and serve as bridges between research and education (Suppes, 1974, cited by Schunk, 2012). Moreover, research data is viewed as just a disorganised collections of data if it is not based on any theory. Therefore, for the researchers on “Human Learning” to rely on, there are different “Learning theories”.

“Learning theories provide empirically-based accounts of the variables which influence the learning process, and provide explanations of the ways in which that influence occurs” (Alzaghoul, 2012). It also helps us understanding the inherently complex process of learning as it describes how people and animals learn. There are three main categories or philosophical frameworks under which learning theories fall; namely behaviourism, cognitive and constructive (Alzaghoul, 2012). Behaviourism theories main focus is on the objectively observable aspects of learning. But cognitive theories look beyond behaviour and explains brain-based learning. On the other hand, constructivism views learning as a process where learner actively constructs or builds new ideas or concepts (Alzaghoul, 2012). There are number of theorists involved in all broad categories expressing their view on the major concept.

This report explains in details of Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory which is under major category of constructivism.

Background of Vygotsky and his Social Constructive Theory

The social and intellectual context in which he lived and worked as well as his own background were reflected on Vygotsky’s theoretical views. Hence a brief look into the background of
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Vygotsky will provide a ‘biography of the ideas’ (Kozulin, 1990, cited by Verenikina, 2010) and give a clear understanding of the uniqueness of his theoretical views and beliefs (Verenikina, 2010).

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was born in Russia and taught by a private tutor whose pedagogical technique was teaching by engaging in extended critical inquiry and philosophical conversations with students. This is considered as the reason for Vygotsky’s views on the role of social dialogue in learning (Wretsch, 1985 cited by Verenikina, 2010).

Sociocultural approaches to learning and development were initially applied systematically by Vygotsky and his collaborators in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s (Steiner & Mahn, 1996). While psychologists were intent on developing simple explanations of human behaviour at that time, Vygotsky came up with a rich, multi-layered theory through which he examined a range of subjects including the psychology of art, language and thought, and learning and development, including a focus on the education of students with special needs (Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Even though Vygotsky is considered as the father of social constructive theory, his work was based on John Piaget’s idea of the child as an active learner (Piaget, 1959 cited by Verenikina, 2010) – which is often attributed as the roots of constructivism (Jones & Araje, 2002). While Piaget focused on stages of child development and individual construction of knowledge – referred as individual constructive theory – Vygotsky identified the greater socio-cultural context. For Piaget, knowledge construction takes place when knowledge is actively assimilated and accommodated into existing knowledge (Jones & Araje, 2002). However, Vygotsky’s places more emphasis on the social environment as a facilitator of development and learning (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003 cited by Schunk, 2012).

**Social Constructive Theory – Vygotsky’s approach**

Vygotsky stated that the “human mind is constructed through a subject’s interactions with the world and is an attribute of the relationship between subject and object” (Verenikina, 2010). He finds a significant role in humans’ understanding of the world and of themselves. These roles are attributed as ‘tools’ (Turuk, 2008). Furthermore, Vygotsky advocates that humans do not act directly on the physical world without the intermediary of tools. These tools can be any artefacts, whether symbolic or signs, created by human under specific cultural and historical conditions carrying with them the characteristics of the culture in question (Turuk, 2008).
Hence he argues that mental processes could only be understood if we understand the tools and signs that mediate them (Verenikina, 2010).

According to Vygotsky, child is completely dependent on other people during the early stages as the sociocultural environment keeps on presenting the child with a variety of tasks and demands, engaging the child in his world (Turuk, 2008). Especially these people could be the parents who instructs the child on what to do, how to do it, as well as what not to do, initiating the child’s action. Parents, as representatives of the culture and the conduit through which the culture passes into the child, actualise these instructions primarily through language. Vygotsky further explains that children appropriate these cultural and social heritages by acquiring knowledge through contacts and interactions with people as the first step – referred as interpsychological plane, and then later assimilates and internalises this knowledge adding own personal value to it – referred as intrapsychological plane (Turuk, 2008). This transition from social to personal property is not considered as a mere copy rather it is a transformation of what had been learnt through interaction, into personal values. In addition, Vygotsky claims that in schools also students are not copying the teachers’ capabilities but transforming what teachers offer them during the processes of appropriation (Turuk, 2008).

Vygotsky emphasised that children and adults are both active agents in the process of child’s development. Cole & Cole (2001, as cited by Verenikina, 2010) mentions that the development in this case is co-constructed. When applying to teaching it means that both the teacher and a student are seen as active agents in children’s learning. The teacher's intervention in children's learning is necessary, but it is the quality of the teacher-learner interaction, which is seen as crucial in that learning (Tharp & Gallimore, 1998 cited by Verenikina, 2010).

The theory emphasises the importance of what the learner brings to any learning situation as an active meaning-maker and problem-solver (Turuk, 2008). It acknowledges the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners and tasks and provides a view of learning as arising from interactions with others. Ellis (2000, as cited by Maturuk, 2008) states that Vygotsky’s theory assumes that learning arises not through interaction, but in interaction. Learners first succeed in performing a new task with the help of another person and then internalise this task so that they can perform it on their own. In this way, social interaction is advocated to mediate learning. According to Ellis, the theory goes further to say interactions that successfully mediate learning are those in which the learners scaffold the new tasks (Turuk, 2008). Table 1.1 below identifies the key points of the theory.
**Key points in Vygotsky’s theory**

- Social interactions are critical; knowledge is co-constructed between two or more people.
- Self-regulation is developed through internalization (developing an internal representation) of actions and mental operations that occur in social interactions.
- Human development occurs through the cultural transmission of tools (language, symbols).
- Language is the most critical tool. Language develops from social speech, to private speech, to covert (inner) speech.
- The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the difference between what children can do on their own and what they can do with assistance from others. Interactions with adults and peers in the ZPD promote cognitive development.

*Source: (Meece, 2002 cited by Schunk, 2012)*

**Table 1.1: Key points in Vygotsky’s theory**

According to Vygotsky, ‘good learning’ occurs in the Zone of Proximal Development where he distinguish between the children’s actual and potential levels of development.

**Zone of Proximal Development**

Vygotsky defines the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Schunk, 2012). According to Puntambekar & Hübscher (2005, cited by Schunk, 2012) the ZPD represents the amount of learning possible by a student given the proper instructional conditions. The main reason to the introduction of the notion of the ZPD by Vygotsky was due to his dissatisfaction with two practical issues in educational psychology (Turuk, 2008). The first issue is assessing child on intellectual abilities and the second is the evaluation of the instructional practices. He believes that testing should not be based only on the current level of a child’s achievements but it is more important to include the child’s potential development as well (Verenikina, 2010).
He claimed that the actual level of development which is considered as the level of independent performance does not sufficiently describe development. It rather indicates “what is already developed or achieved, it is a ‘yesterday of development’. The level of assisted performance indicates what a person can achieve in the near future, what is developing (potential level, ‘tomorrow of development’, what a person ‘can be’)” (Verenikina, 2010). Hence ZPD can be described as the distance between what a person can do with and without help (illustrated in figure 1.1). Vygotsky defines the ZPD as “the difference between actual level of development as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Verenikina, 2010). According to Cole & Cole (2001, cited by Verenikina, 2010), the term ‘proximal’ means ‘nearby’, indicating that the assistance provided goes slightly beyond learners current competence complementing and building on their existing abilities. It is largely a test of a student’s developmental readiness or intellectual level in a specific domain, and it shows how learning and development are related (Schunk, 2012).

In the ZPD, a teacher and a learner work together on a task that the learner could not perform independently because of the difficulty level. Also it reflects the idea of collective activity, where according to Bruner (1984, cited by Schunk, 2012), those who know more or are more skilled share that knowledge and skill to accomplish a task with those who know less. According to Rogoff (1986, cited by Shunk, 2012) a good deal of guided participation is required when working in the ZPD and learners bring their own understandings to social

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Source: http://www.archemedx.com/blog/zones-proximal-learning-development/#.Wa7l3LpuL4g

Figure 1.1: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
interactions and construct meanings by integrating those understandings with their experiences in the context.

“For example assume that a teacher (Trudy) and a child (Laura) will work on a task (making a picture of mom, dad, and Laura doing something together at home). Laura brings to the task her understandings of what the people and the home look like and of the types of things they might work on, combined with knowledge of how to draw and make pictures. Trudy brings the same understandings plus knowledge of conditions necessary to work on various tasks. Suppose they decide to make a picture of the three working in the yard. Laura might draw a picture of dad cutting grass, mom trimming shrubs, and Laura raking the lawn. If Laura were to draw herself in front of dad, Trudy would explain that Laura must be behind dad to rake up the grass left behind by dad’s cutting. During the interaction, Laura modifies her beliefs about working in the yard based on her current understanding and on the new knowledge she constructs.” (Schunk, 2012).

Educational Applications of Social Constructivists Theory

Karpov & Haywood (1998) and Moll (2001) believes that Vygotsky’s ideas lend themselves to many educational applications marking the field of self-regulation as the strongly influenced (Schunk, 2012). One of the application reflecting Vygotsky’s theory is reciprocal teaching. It involves interactive dialogues between teacher and small group of students. At first, the teacher models the activities. After that teacher and students take turns being the teacher. During reading comprehension, if students learn to ask questions, then to determine their level of understanding, teacher can include a question-asking strategy in the instructional sequence. Since students gradually develop skills, reciprocal teaching comprises the principle of social interaction and ZPD of the Vygotskian perspective (Schunk, 2012).

Peer collaboration is another area where Vygotsky’s ideas fit. Bruner (1984), Ratner et al., (2002) states that it reflects the notion of collective activity (Schunk, 2012). The shared social interactions when peers work on tasks cooperatively serve an instructional function. This method is mainly used in learning mathematics, science, and language arts which attests to the recognized impact of the social environment during learning.

Another application of Vygotsky’s theory is apprenticeships as they occur in cultural institutions like schools and agencies which helps in transforming learners’ cognitive
development. On the job, apprentices operate within a ZPD as mainly their works depend on tasks beyond their capabilities. Apprentices develop a shared understanding of important processes by working with experts and integrate this with their current understandings (Schunk, 2012).

**Post-Vygotskian Studies**

There are number of prominent leading theoretical perspectives today developed from the theory of Vygotsky. Daniels (2001) calls these concepts and approaches which are associated with Vygotsky’s theory as ‘post-Vygotskian studies’. The most common among them is the concept of scaffolding by Jerome Bruner. In an educational context scaffolding is an instructional structure whereby the teacher models the desired learning strategy or task then gradually shifts responsibility to the students (Turuk, 2008). It fits nicely within ZPD of Vygotsky (Schunk, 2012).

Verenikina (2010) highlights further more post-Vygotskian studies which are summarised in Table 1.2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualist(s)</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Rogoff (1990)</td>
<td>cognitive apprenticeship and guided participation</td>
<td>Based on the idea of the ZPD. They involve collaboration and shared understanding in everyday problem-solving activities. Adults or more skilled peers assist children in their development by guiding their participation in relevant activities, helping them to adapt their understanding to a new situation and structuring their problem-solving attempts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lave &amp; Wenger (1991)</td>
<td>situated cognition</td>
<td>Views learning as engaging in problem solving in the course of participation in ongoing everyday activities. It concerns learning within the communities of practices in real life situations</td>
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Moll & Greenberg (1992) | households’ funds of knowledge | Aims at establishing cultural connections between what teachers and students do in classrooms and what students experience in the community. It focuses on the households’ social histories, methods of thinking and learning and practical skills related to the community’s everyday life in order to provide teachers with the knowledge of the culture and history of the students that are being taught.

Hatchins (1995) | distributed cognition | looks at the phenomenon of cognition as being extended beyond the individuals: the information is processed between the individual and tools and artefacts provided by the culture, therefore the individual's abilities and achievements cannot be understood outside of the connections to the society and culture in which they are immersed.

Table 1.2: post-Vygotskian studies

Conclusion

In educational settings, Vygotsky’s work has formed the foundation of social constructivism (Jones & Araje, 2002). In particular, Vygotsky's emphasis on the role of others, or the social context, in learning has pushed educators to re-examine the extent to which learning is an individual process. Furthermore, these have emphasized on the role he greater community and the role of significant others in learning. The Social constructivism have had the greatest impact on instruction and curriculum design because they seem to be the most conducive to integration into current educational approaches (Jones & Araje, 2002). From Vygotsky’s perspective, learners construct meaning from reality but not passively receive what are taught in their learning environment. Therefore, constructivism means that learning involves constructing, creating, inventing, and developing one’s own knowledge and meaning. The role of teacher is a facilitator who provides information and organizes activities for learners to discover their
own learning (Liu & Chen, 2010). Furthermore, ZPD of Vygotsky serve as foundation of many other concepts and approaches.

**References**


