Honors in Practice -- Online Archive   National Collegiate Honors Council

2010

Individual Achievement in an Honors Research Community: Teaching Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Kaitlin A. Briggs
University of Southern Maine, katebriggs2014@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons

Individual Achievement in an Honors Research Community: Teaching Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Kaitlin A. Briggs

University of Southern Maine

The years leading up to the 1917 Russian October Revolution must have been a dynamic environment for an emerging young intellectual living in Moscow. Eclipsed by such popular Western cultural representations as David Lean's 1965 Academy Award winning film, *Dr. Zhivago* (based on Pasternak's novel), this milieu included the writers Babel, Gorky, and Nabokov; the poets Mandel'shtam and Tsvetaeva; the composers Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky; the theater director and acting teacher Stanislavsky; and the artists Chagall and Kandinsky (Van Der Veer, 23–4). There we find situated a law student, also studying philosophy, literature, and aesthetics, who went on to become a developmental psychologist—Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), described by a contemporary as possessing "an aura of almost Mozartian giftedness" (Kozulin, xi). However, when only thirty-eight years old, Vygotsky died of tuberculosis, and his work did not become significantly known in the West until the 1960s. Despite this time delay, Vygotsky's book *Thought and Language* (*Myshlenie i rech*) and the Vygotsky essay compilation *Mind in Society* are now established, seminal texts across many Western academic disciplines, including education, linguistics, and psychology.

The focus of this essay is a Vygotsky reading I use in our honors thesis preparation course: the sixth chapter (Part II, Educational Implications) in *Mind in Society: The Development of the Higher Psychological Processes*: "Interaction between Learning and Development" (79–91). In the 1920s and 30s, on one side of the iron curtain Vygotsky theorized the structure of thought as socially derived while, on the other, Frank Aydelotte developed the first honors program at Swarthmore based on individual achievement (see Rinn, 2003). Yet Vygotsky's work has particular relevance for students embarking on an honors thesis in 2010. The Vygotsky chapter operates on many levels, both curricularly and pedagogically, as a common reading and as an operating principle, and sets the stage for the subsequent individually-oriented reading, writing, and research that students carry out together through the course process.

ABOUT THE HONORS THESIS WORKSHOP

So prevalent in graduate schools, the "All But Dissertation" (ABD) phenomenon is one we are all familiar with: even though students progress well through their master's and doctoral course work, they flounder when the time comes to carry out independent thesis or dissertation study. Undergraduate students completing their honors thesis requirements also experience difficulty making this shift. Because regular course work provides both structure and a detailed focus within the traditional time boundary of a semester, students generally have had little experience with more boundary-less and self-directed study, research, and writing. As they have done (often successfully) with their course papers and reading assignments, undergraduate honors students also misconstrue the work of the thesis as a product or an event that they can cram into a short period of time.

Given this pedagogical landscape at the University of Southern Maine (USM), in 1996 I was asked to develop and teach what eventually became a four-credit, required, writing-intensive course—the Honors Thesis Workshop (Honors 311)—to support students through the thesis proposal process. Prior to the development and implementation of this course, the USM Honors Program had a thesis requirement, but only a handful of students completed it. Since we instituted the workshop, the percentage of honors students completing this requirement has grown significantly and remains steady. We are an honors program in the interdisciplinary learning community model, like a small liberal arts academy within our university. As the first of two required sequential courses, both four-credit, which together constitute "the honors thesis" at USM, the Honors Thesis Workshop structures thesis development into a process in order to develop a product: a thoroughly researched and thoughtfully revised thesis proposal. Functioning like a compass, the workshop keeps students on track and oriented to this path and to this goal. Their proposal then functions as a map or plan of action to carry out the thesis itself in the second-semester course, Honors Thesis/Independent Study (Honors 312).

As a writing intensive course, the Honors Thesis Workshop assignments are organized into the following progressive, chronological sequence:

- Preliminary Idea Paper

- Research Component A (at the library)

- Project Diagram I

- Working Proposal Draft

- Research Component B (at the library)

- Project Diagram II

- Abstract

- Final Thesis Proposal

The process begins with the preliminary idea paper in which students present their initial ideas in writing for the first time. These papers are sent to the library to prepare the librarians to work with us in the databases there. One workshop requirement is that students must read and annotate ten research articles or book chapters, and the two course sessions in the library facilitate locating these readings. After our first trip to the library, in preparation for the mid-semester working proposal draft, the students orally present an outline of their project in visual, diagrammatic form, examining the inter-relationships among their developing thesis sections/chapters. Expanding on both the initial preliminary idea paper and this project diagram and incorporating the first five research articles, students put together the material gathered thus far into a working proposal draft, given to three honors faculty members to review and comment on. Based on this feedback, students must then carry out a substantive revision with the faculty feedback synthesized and the drafts reworked into an abstract and a final proposal. An important workshop goal is that students must execute this in-depth revision and improve the quality of their written product through a process of drafting, receiving feedback from multiple sources, returning to the research literature, then reconceptualizing, and rewriting accordingly. The second-semester course continues and expands this sequence, culminating in a public thesis defense and a published final product that is bound, catalogued, and archived in the university library and made available to other researchers on the World Cat database.

In an evaluation several years ago, a student recommended that we have some common readings at the beginning of the course before the students settled on and developed their respective projects, and I have experimented with different readings since then. Drawing from the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences, readings have included Rosemarie Waldrop's "Alarms and Excursions," a *New Yorker* essay titled "The Lobsterman: How Ted Ames Turned Oral History Into Science" by Alec Wilkinson, and Sarah Wall's "An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography." The reading, however, that remains a constant is Vygotsky's chapter on learning and development in *Mind in Society*. At first students are confused by this choice. They are used to doing interdisciplinary work but have focused their mid-careers fulfilling the requirements of their majors. Most of them are not education majors and thus often exclaim in reaction to this text, "This is about little kids! What does it have to do with us?"

THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Vygotsky begins his chapter reviewing current (late 1920s, early 1930s) theories of the relationship between learning and development in order to contextualize his new theory—the "Zone of Proximal Development." These theories break down into three positions, moving from the theory that development occurs independently from learning (Piaget, Binet) to the theory that learning and development are synonymous (James) and finally to the theory that

learning and development are mutually dependent and interactive (Thorndike, Koffka).

The first section of this chapter thus turns out to be a strong, clear example not only of a classic literature review but also of how existing work lays the groundwork for new ideas. The past and the present, the old and the new are not in opposition to one another but mutually informing and inter-textual. Existing thinking makes new thinking possible. Across disciplines, the history of idea development is one of accumulation and accretion. This lesson is important for beginning researchers because they are often intimidated by the scope and thoroughness of existing scholarship; the organization of this chapter demonstrates that knowledge production is an ongoing building process and that there are always cracks and crevices for new insights, new statements, new questions—new scholars—to emerge.

This initial review and critique then set the stage for Vygotsky's departure from existing theories in section one to the presentation of his radically new theory, "the Zone of Proximal Development" (the Zone) in section two. Vygotsky explains that, from day one, children's learning and development are entangled in one another (84), but the onset of schooling introduces a new element: "that what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone" (85). The Zone is the distance between the collective group problem-solving possible for a child *today* and the independent problem-solving emerging from that context that will be possible *tomorrow.* Conversely, standard educational psychological theory had assumed that only independent problem-solving determines mental level. Flying in the face of this accepted notion, the process of learning as theorized by Vygotsky fans out prospectively (into the future, what will be possible, the budding edge) as development fills in its wake. Skill mastery, whether of a basic mathematical operation or of a literacy benchmark, is not a conclusive endpoint but a beginning that lays the foundation for increasingly more complex and diverse subsequent thinking as what was at first external, socially derived knowledge becomes individually internalized and integrated (90–91). Furthermore, this relationship between learning and development continues to spiral forward up and across the educational hierarchy. Even though our focus on disciplinary knowledge in higher education at the other end of this hierarchy may background the processes of learning and development at work, they continue nonetheless.

Although Vygotsky focused on early development, the implications of his theory for complex curricular and pedagogical enterprises such as undergraduate honors thesis development are considerable. For students ready to commence their theses, reading this chapter serves as an example of not only the kinds of theoretical readings they are likely to encounter but also the processes they must engage—unpacking, translating, linking, speculating—to break down the ideas encountered and to make them their own. Theory seldom precisely fits the applied context. Not only is Vygotsky most often read in education

courses, but his theory is also about early schooling, not college. So students must take up the micro-project of creating the scaffolding (a term used by Vygotsky scholars) from the ideas as they are presented in the original text to this new context: a research community within which each student will develop an independent project.

Vygotsky's chapter serves both as an example of a literature review and as a catalyst for undertaking the processes of inter-textual scaffolding, but the direct application of his theory to students participating in a research community may be the most compelling reason to use it as a common reading in an honors thesis workshop. In early schooling as well as at the college level, the Zone underscores that what we can do with others today we will be able to do independently tomorrow. Making a meta-cognitive leap, through discussion of Vygotsky's chapter the first day of class, the students turn his theory to their present context; full research community participation in the first semester might maximize their chances of successfully completing their independent work in the second semester. In short, students buy in. Vygotsky's theory foregrounds the social dimensions of learning: we absorb and integrate the intellectual life—practices, attitudes, ideas, others—around us; for beginning thesis students, this translates to their immediate context: the research community forming in their midst. This insight may seem obvious to us, but it does not appear obvious to students.

Integral to this research community formation, reading and discussion of Vygotsky's chapter also make students *aware* of their research community membership and their role in, their influence on, and their responsibility for not only their own projects but also the projects of others. Moreover, because this awareness of thinking and learning falls into the meta-cognitive domain, it strengthens cognitive development (see Anderson and Krathwohl on factual, conceptual, procedural, and meta-cognitive knowledge; see also Kegan).

THE HONORS THESIS WORKSHOP
AS A ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

As explained above, the Zone of Proximal Development is the *distance* between learning enacted today within a social context and the individually integrated learning that will thus be possible tomorrow building on that foundation. Distance suggests space, and social context suggests an array of inter-personal relationships within that space, but these relationships expand exponentially and rapidly.

My own awareness of the Zone's fuller meaning and possibilities occurred during one of our library research sessions. After I sent the preliminary idea papers over to the library to prepare for our visit, one particular paper created quite a stir among the librarians—Nick Allanach's "Power, the Sex Economy, and Functional Aesthetics," eventually completed and published in 2003. Once the class had gathered, a lively discussion ensued, and a student working at a computer nearby—not in our class—spontaneously inserted a comment, "I was

wondering what you mean by 'functional aesthetics.' I'm not familiar with that term." This student and also a student at a neighboring computer joined in our discussion. Another librarian walking by stopped, listened to the conversation, and then went to retrieve the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. At that moment my understanding of the Zone crystallized.

As a community emerges around research, the Honors Thesis Workshop builds on and expands the traditional seminar format/course structure. Although the students develop interdisciplinary projects, the workshop is really more cross-disciplinary because the students come from an array of disciplinary majors. A recent workshop included students majoring in psychology, nursing, geography/anthropology, philosophy, English, and sociology, among others, and the topics they eventually developed included hypnosis; a cross-cultural study of health care systems; the history of granges in rural New England agricultural communities; a sociological phenomenon called "dumpster diving"; and the art of the personal essay. Allen Repko describes a critical stage in the interdisciplinary research process as finding "common ground" among the disciplinary theories and perspectives deployed to address the complex problem under study (271–295). In the Honors Thesis Workshop, the students receive multiple angles of vision and input on their own evolving projects, providing topical, methodological, and disciplinary diversity; the common ground occurs through a shared thesis development process.

However, given that so much of academic interaction is textually based, shared reading and shared writing most powerfully and immediately enact and shape the Zone. The Honors Thesis Workshop is a writing-intensive course, but the writing includes process writing as well as product writing. In their project logs, students articulate, explore, and track their thinking in writing as their projects evolve. Drawing from Vygotsky's other major work, *Thought and Language*, this practice operationalizes his insight that thought and language are inseparable. Thought does not emerge fully formed—like Athena from the head of Zeus—but rather is born *through* a process of articulation in language. For these beginning thesis students, this means everything must be documented and explored in their project logs, including, for example, the six conversations they are required to have with other faculty (we call these "Socratic dialogues").

Along with project logs, this process writing also includes in-class writing: students read their product writing (their preliminary idea papers, their annotated research articles or book chapters, their working proposal drafts) out loud to the others, who take three to five minutes to write in response; we then go around and read our responses out loud and give that writing to the students who presented their work. I term this process Read/Write/Respond (RWR). And I first encountered it, although it was not termed as such, in a graduate school course at the University of Massachusetts Amherst School of Education called "Phenomenological In-Depth Interviewing" with Irv Seidman, whose book on this subject is seminal in qualitative research method study. Pedagogically

powerful, this RWR format changes the audience of writing from teacher to fellow students, colleagues, the other beginning researchers present in the Zone. Because of the multidisciplinary student mix, these new research colleagues are more often than not outside the presenting student's discipline, thus highlighting the need for effective explanation and ongoing clarity.

A richly layered, complex, relational, and inter-textual space, the Honors Thesis Workshop Zone of Proximal Development is multi-dimensional and infinitely variegated. The students' individual reading histories and course studies are brought into play as they connect with and listen to their colleagues articulate various aspects of their evolving work. The Zone includes all of the faculty proposal draft reviewers, all of the faculty who meet with students to fulfill their six Socratic dialogue requirements, and all of the faculty members who agree to serve on thesis committees during the second semester. The Zone includes the librarians as well as the writers and theorists and researchers and various intellectual and creative figures, such as Vygotsky, whose work the students read, discuss, and write about. The Zone includes the members of the public attending thesis defenses, who, in the past, have included, among others, a Civil War re-enactor, the state of Maine architectural historian, and three drug court judges. Because these thesis projects are eventually made available to other researchers on World Cat, the Zone potentially includes anyone in the world, *ad infinitum*, who becomes interested in the thesis subject matter, reads English, and has access to a computer. Finally, the Zone reverses directions and bends back circularly because these published theses become foundational texts for the next group of beginning thesis students.

CONCLUDING PARADOX

The massiveness of the thesis enterprise requires that it be approached as a process—a process fraught with difficulties that include handling an overwhelming amount of generated material; organizing a complex, chaptered work; sustaining the writing process, revising the content, and incorporating feedback; moving in and out of databases; analyzing and synthesizing readings, field notes, primary texts, statistical analyses, and interview material; managing time and maintaining momentum. Even though ultimately the thesis is a product of individual achievement, creating a community context informed by Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development has helped to augment student confidence, enhance thesis quality, increase thesis completion rates, and develop a thesis culture.

The successful completion of a student's individual thesis in the near future may depend on full participation in a research community today. In order for students not merely to adapt to this new, demanding learning context but also to thrive in it, a sense of belonging is as important as independence. Thus I conclude with a paradox. To maximize their success, students must learn to work individually but in community, and the stronger the community, the stronger the individual achievement—a case of East meets West.

REFERENCES

Allanach, Nicholas. "Power, the Sex Economy, and Functional Aesthetics." Honors Thesis. U of Southern Maine. 2003.

Anderson, Lorin, and David Krathwohl. Ed. *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. 2001.

Kegan, Robert. *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1983.

Kozulin, Alex. "Vygotsky in Context." *Thought and Language.* Ed. Alex Kozulin. Trans. Alex Kozulin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986. xi–lvi.

Repko, Allen. *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. 2008.

Rinn, Anne. "Rhodes Scholarships, Frank Aydelotte, and Collegiate Honors Education." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council.* 4:1 (2003): 27–39.

Seidman, Irv. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences.* NY, NY: Teachers College Press. 2006.

Van Der Veer, René. "Vygotsky in Context: 1900–1935." *The Cambridge Companion to Vygotsky.* Ed. Harry Daniels, Michael Cole, and James Wertsch. NY, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 21–49.

Vygotsky, Lev. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes.* Ed. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and Language.* Trans. Alex Kozulin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.

Waldrop, Rosemarie. "Alarms and Excursions." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy.* Ed. Charles Bernstein. NY: Roof, 1990. 45–72.

Wall, Sarah. "An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5.2 (2006): 1–12.

Wilkinson, Alec. "The Lobsterman: How Ted Ames Turned Oral History Into Science." *The New Yorker* 31 July 2006: 56–65.

_____

The author may be contacted at

katebriggs@maine.edu.