On the Subject of Pedagogies

Contributions of Vygotskian Theory to Radical Pedagogy as a Postmodern Practice

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Since the early 1970s, diverse forms of pedagogy have arisen in resistance to so-called transmissionist approaches to education, under the banner of Radical Pedagogy (Gore, 1993; McWilliam, 1997). This paper is part of a continuing project to develop in my own practice what I will call a post-critical pedagogy - a radical pedagogy that is comfortable under postmodern conditions; that no longer legitimizes itself by appeal to a meta-narrative of liberation; and after Gore (1993), accepts its own effects as potentially both productive and repressive. In this paper I consider ways that some radical pedagogues have responded to the crisis of knowing that an encounter with postmodernism invites. I argue that by being constructed around an often explicit emancipatory project (see for example, Giroux, 1994), existing forms of radical pedagogy operate in opposition to postmodern skepticism. Rather than abandon a notion of the political in pedagogy altogether, I attempt to show that those pedagogies inspired by Vygotsky's (1934/1987) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) construct what Derrida (according to Jenkins, 2000) or Foucault (according to Falzon, 1999) might describe as an ethical relation between pedagogical subjects, that suggests possibilities for a post-critical pedagogy. I argue that, a radical pedagogy centered around the ZPD and Engestrom's (1999) Activity system concept, not only maintains a concept of pedagogy as politics, but by being grounded in an ethical/dialogic view of relations between the self and Other (Falzon, 1999), avoids an appeal to totalizing moralities or meta-narratives of emancipation. I will attempt to show that such a pedagogy opens the way for a radical practice that is self-reflexive and cautious about closure; that resists tendencies to any "kind of self-righteousness that claims innocence" (Gore, 1991); that remains open to alterity. In the final section of the paper, following Foucault, I cast my post-critical pedagogy as a "dangerous practice", acknowledging concerns about its potential to serve the interests of fast capitalism (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996).

Radical Responses to the End of Certainty

Although there is no single form of radical pedagogy, its multiple versions have been argued to grow out of "a common set of issues and conditions" (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996:3). Although in many cases the common issue is "the political nature of public schooling" (Giroux, 1988:xxix), at least some radical pedagogies have developed as attempts to respond to postmodern instabilities. It would certainly appear that acceptance of postmodernism is in some sense equivalent to a loss of innocence regarding our claims to know (Bain, 1995:14). Though some may seek to redefine postmodernism towards their own ends (see for example, Kanpol & McLaren, 1995:3), arguably the most transparent way in which radical educators have attempted to respond to the crisis of postmodernity, has been to suggest the need for teachers to engage in a critical pedagogy that aims to challenge the legitimacy of "white supremacist" master-narratives (Giroux, 1991:233); to encourage the
"increduity towards metanarratives" that has been said to define the postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1976).

According to Sullivan (1987:63) "a fundamental assumption of a critical pedagogy is that it is a broad educational venture which self-consciously challenges and seeks to transform the dominant values of our culture." Likewise, Leistyna & Woodrum (1996) assert that:

Critical pedagogy is primarily concerned with the kinds of educational theories and practices that encourage both students and teachers to develop an understanding of the interconnecting relationship among ideology, power, and culture... [that] challenges us to recognize, engage, and critique (so as to transform) any existing undemocratic social practices and institutional structures that produce and sustain inequalities and oppressive social identities and relations (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996:2-3).

Thus, radical/critical pedagogy is often defined by its deliberate attempts to interrogate and deconstruct institutional structures, curricula, and pedagogical practices implicated in relations of domination and oppression. It has been argued that critical pedagogy has as its driving force a modernist emancipatory project (Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1993; Yates, 1992). In focusing on the deconstruction of only those master-narratives that are associated with the "dominant" culture, but rarely its own, Gore (1991) has asserted that such a pedagogy "risks the replacement of one orthodoxy with another".

While Giroux - as one of the leading voices within the discourse of critical pedagogy - may be unwilling to see his emancipatory project as being supported by a potentially limiting meta-narrative of its own (Gore, 1993), he accommodates postmodernism as a set of:

new theoretical tools for... [raising] important questions about how narratives get constructed, what they mean, how they regulate particular forms of moral and social experience, and how they presuppose and embody particular epistemological and political views of the world (Giroux, 1991:233-234).

Certainly, a self-styled postmodern project can be found in his collaboration with Aronowitz, where it is argued that border pedagogy:

offers the opportunity for students to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages... educating students to read these codes critically, to learn the limit of such codes, including the ones they use to construct their own narratives and histories (my emphasis; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991:118-119).

This approach sees radical education as a process in which pedagogues assist students to write "counter-narratives" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991), that challenge the messages they engage with through media, raising what Friere (1970) described as a "critical consciousness" that makes transparent the relations of power behind specific claims to truth. While it appears that the pedagogic principle of generating counter-narratives, or deconstructing the "selective tradition of practices and conventions" (Luke & Luke, 1992:56) through which we are "semiotically engineered" into particular kinds of subjects (McClaren, 1991:167), is often aligned with a modernist emancipatory project, it could be appropriated as a postmodern practice of challenging truth claims. Thus, the radical is potentially open to reform.

Before I move to my retheorization of radical pedagogy, I want to address what Gore (1991) has described as the "neglected" issue of practice. She argues that:
In their emphasis on the articulation of alternative social visions, these discourses which claim to be centrally about pedagogy (in their embrace of the labels "critical pedagogy" and "feminist pedagogy") have given surprisingly little attention to the specific practices through which pedagogy functions (Gore, 1991:5).

While often overlooked, attention to classroom practice is not completely absent from the radical literature. Educators such as Shor (1993:27) have insisted "on consistency between the democratic values of this critical pedagogy and its classroom practices." Clearly derived from a Freirian view of pedagogy, Shor (1996:29) argues that "the power-sharing project begins by democratizing discourse." He attempts to establish classroom discourse that permits students "to read, write and speak their own language variety as well as the standard;" that invites students to negotiate a curriculum with the teacher that addresses "issues they consider important;" that encourages them to "produce knowledge for themselves and others;" and finally, that challenges "inequitable power relations in and out of the classroom" (Shor, 1996:30). Further, he commences his interactions with new groups of students by disciplining himself "to follow the students rather than disciplining the students to follow the teacher's pre-emptive lecture" (Shor, 1996:41). Thus, Shor's goal may be characterized as an attempt to restrict the dominating effect of teacher-led discourse, in the interests of engaging students in a dialogic process. This view is underscored in feminist pedagogical literature, where critical classroom praxis is described as being "grounded in equality, non-hierarchy and democracy" (Weiner, 1994:130); where feminist educators make deliberate attempts to divest themselves of "authority", in the interests of reforming the patriarchal pedagogical model in which the teacher is conceptualized as knower (Gallop, 1995). Likewise, the self-consciously Habermasian critical pedagogy advocated by Young (1992:106-121), would see pedagogues engage in discourse with their students through a democratically based discursive model of classroom interaction, as opposed to the common asymmetrical questioning approaches he labels "What Do Pupils Know" and "Guess What Teacher Thinks", in which teachers control and lead pupil contributions. Common to all these forms of pedagogy then, is an attempt to subvert teacher authority, by increasing the agency of students within the discursive activity of the classroom.

While these attempts to restructure the power relations of the classroom are admirable, they tend to arise out of the simplistic commodifying zero-sum or relative view of power (Gore, 1992), in which an increase in the power of one group or individual, necessarily means reduction in the power of others. Likewise, they tend to support to varying degrees the view that power is always constraining and rarely, if ever, enabling. Such pedagogies define their criticality by the degree to which they reject pedagogic "authority". They fail to recognize, that their attempts to avoid authority may do nothing more than - to draw on a concept of Bernstein (1990) - make a visible pedagogy invisible. It is the appearance, rather than the effects of power, that have been transformed in the process. Thus, a post-critical pedagogy must not fall into the trap of equating an invisible pedagogy with a lack of pedagogical influence and power, but rather see it as power circulated through a different set of discursive conditions. It must never assume the moral high ground either in its practices or negotiations, but remain self-reflexive, and critical of its own effects. While radical in its construction of pedagogic relations, it must resist any suggestion that labels (such as radical, critical or post-critical), have any essential meanings, or actually describe unproblematic qualities of practice. Having established some of the ways in which pedagogy has been approached by radical educators facing postmodernism, I now turn - with acceptance of the multiple and inconsistent effects of pedagogies (Gore, 1992) - to my post-critical retheorization of radical pedagogy.
In the zone between the self and alterity

The ZPD may be an instantiation of Vygotsky's more general notion of sociogenesis (Wertsch, 1984), the process by which "we become ourselves through others" (Vygotsky, 1966:43). Subject to a wide variety of interpretations, it has been defined metaphorically as "a social space, a space for interrelationship" (Lima, 1995:448); "a construction zone" in which knowledge is co-constructed by participants (Newman, Griffin & Cole, 1989); "a strategic relationship located in sociocultural space and historical time" (Vare, 1993:3); or the crucible in which "culture and cognition create each other" (Cole, 1985). An important concept of my post-critical pedagogy, the ZPD was said by Vygotsky to be:

[T]he 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 (Vygotsky, 1978:86).

For Vygotsky, it would appear that interaction with a "more capable" other was central to his understanding of learning and development. My own interpretation attempts to go beyond Vygotsky, by arguing that the ZPD describes after Vare (1993), a strategic encounter between the self and the Other (Parkes, 2000a). I would assert that underlying Vygotsky's ZPD concept is a notion that development may potentially occur whenever the self encounters alterity. This is clear in his suggestion that a ZPD is generated when a child interacts with "an adult or more capable peer" (Vygotsky, 1978), where the Other is real; and in his assertion that "play creates a ZPD" (Vygotsky, 1978), where the Other is only ideal. Although the Other is often resisted, rejected and even subject to oppression in a variety of forms (Young, 1990), I want to argue that developmental change is a consequence of a strategic or "mediated" encounter between the self and that which is Other to the self (Diagram A) - whether the Other is defined through reference to difference: located in or between, subjectivities and capabilities; as substance, text, or ideal (Shepel, 1995).

According to Vygotsky's socio-historical theory, human beings use cultural artifacts "to control their behaviour from the outside" (Vygotsky, 1978:40). It is proposed that all distinctly human mental processes "can be considered as functions of mediated activity" (Presseisen & Kozulin, 1994:46). It is Vygotsky's assertion that cultural tools (such as language), mediate the encounter between the self and the world; and I would add, between the self and alterity. This interpretation of the ZPD "accepts multiple truths, subjectivities and agencies, and actively embraces them as the substances of pedagogy (developmental transformation, and historical change)" (Parkes, 2000a), recognizing pedagogical intervention as the manipulation of the tools and rules of the encounter with alterity. It is thus a reading of the ZPD that invites a consideration of ethics.
Diagram A: The Vygotskian Triangle

Mediating Tools / Rules

Subject Other

Adapted from: Engestrom [Online]. Available: [1999, August]

http://www.helsinki.fi/~jengestr/activity/6a0.htm

Conceptualizing the ZPD as a strategic encounter between the self and alterity, provides the basis for an ethics of radical pedagogy, that may be extended by reference to the ethical in poststructuralist thought. According to Falzon's (1998:94) reading of Foucault, "we cannot encounter the other without interpreting or judging it in some way" (Falzon, 1998:94). He reads Foucault as saying that while "we always come to the world from a certain perspective... we also encounter other perspectives and can be transformed in line with them" (Falzon, 1998:94). He sees the poststructuralist ethical position that arises out of Foucault as one in which we adopt an:

[A]ttitude of openness towards the other, an attitude which in its reflective form is the critical attitude towards oneself which acknowledges the historicity and finitude of one's own point of view, which recognises that one's point of view has itself emerged historically out of a long process of dialogue with the other (Falzon, 1998:95).

Jenkins (2000) provides us with a similar notion of an ethical openness to the Other in his reading of Derrida. In his recent book Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity, Jenkins (2000:41) argues that Derrida refuses to accept "all certaintist histories" that close our knowledge, or attempt to stabilize our view of the world (and of the Other). He highlights the problem of the "undecidable hesitation" in Derrida's poststructuralist work, that resists certainty, and thus remains open to alterity; open to alternative views of the Other (Jenkins, 2000:37). It is this "openness" to alterity that provides the space - in a neo-Vygotskian sense - for the emergence of developmental potentials.

I am sensitive to the fact that Vygotsky himself may have a more narrow view of the developmental possibilities that might emerge from interaction in a ZPD than I am suggesting here. Recent scholarship by Wegerif (1998) comes to the conclusion that Vygotsky, like Piaget, had a 'monological' view of reason, that posits the acquisition of scientific concepts, or the appropriation of scientific modes of thinking, as the highest form of human cognitive development. However, this kind of teleology implicit in Vygotsky's work has been rejected in many of the more recent appropriations of his pedagogical concepts. I would argue that by conceptualizing the interaction between pedagogical subjects in the ZPD as an ethical relation between the self and alterity, we can never be sure in which direction development will proceed. In all probability, given the variety of contexts in which human beings engage, development will be - following Deleuze - rhizomatic, rather than linear, branching off in a number of different, potentially conflicting directions. Gordon Wells has argued that:
Since the development of the individual is dependent on the tools and practices that are made available for appropriation in the activities in which he or she participates, it is just as possible for the learner's interpersonal experiences to constrain or even distort his or her development as to enable the development of a socially and emotionally balanced personality (Wells, 1999:326).

A radical pedagogy based on Vygotskian theory problematizes teleology. It operates "politically" without appeal to a meta-narrative of final liberation, or without investment in a specific telos - since it resists closure around a specific conception of the Other, or a final consideration of what counts as authentic practice or true knowledge. In acknowledging that subjectivity is developed through a mediated encounter with alterity, such a pedagogy is positioned politically. However, by being built around a recognition that we can never know the Other completely, and thus, our views and actions must always be conditional and cautious, it appeals to an ethical interaction, rather than an emancipatory project, for its justification.

Many pedagogies have been developed to operationalize the ZPD concept, clustering around the metaphors of scaffolding/construction, apprenticeship, and performance (for a more in depth discussion of these pedagogies see Parkes, 1999). Using Engeström's (1999) concept of the Activity System (Diagram B), that elaborates upon the Vygotskian Triangle (Diagram A), we can get a clear picture of what a Vygotskian inspired radical pedagogy might be like. At its most basic level, a pedagogy built upon the notion of the ZPD attempts to provide students with opportunities to engage in "performance before competence" (Cazden, 1981). For Holzman (1995a:6) "the language learning environment [of the child] is perhaps the paradigmatic zone of proximal development." In this environment, the baby's creative babbling is responded to - or "completed" - by the caregivers as a form of (rudimentary) speech. According to Newman & Holzman:

"More experienced speakers neither tell infants that they are too young, give them a grammar book... nor remain silent around them. Rather... they relate to them as speakers, feelers, thinkers, and makers of meaning" (Newman & Holzman, 1997:112).

By relating to children in this way, they come to participate in conversation "a head taller" than they are (Vygotsky, 1978:102). Thus, Newman and Holzman's pedagogical work involves relating "to children as writers, readers, physicists, artists, geographers, etc., encouraging them to perform these activities whether or not they 'know how'" (Holzman, 1995b:24). They assert that "human beings become who we 'are' by continuously 'being who we are not'" (Newman & Holzman, 1997:110). This position implies that schools should be "much more like theatrical stages than classrooms" (Holzman, 1997.ix). Based on the notion that knowledge or cognition is situated, that it cannot be abstracted in a meaningful way from specific sociohistorical contexts (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989:32-33), pedagogies inspired by the ZPD concept attempt to transform school environments into communities of practice, that engage in activities that approximate the practices of the crafts or professions they are drawn from. They are environments in which Vygotsky's (1978:102) assertion that "play creates a zone of proximal development" is taken seriously, as participants adopt a range of roles and practices.
In terms of the Activity System model, teachers can assist students to perform beyond who they are by intervening in four distinct ways. Each of these ways may be thought of as a type of "scaffolding". Although not universally accepted in the Vygotskian community because of its implicit suggestion of teleology (Newman et al, 1989:153ff), scaffolding has become a popular pedagogical concept. Consisting of "the adult 'controlling' those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976:90), scaffolding may be defined as teacher support that is given or withdrawn specifically in relation to a learner's competence (Mercer, 1995), or alternatively, as "assisted performance" (Cazden, 1981), in which a teacher acts to "minimize risk" (Simmons, 1991), so that students have every opportunity of engaging in successful practice.

One of the distinct ways that a radical pedagogue can support a student's performance is by resourcing them. That is, students can be provided with physical tools (instruments, gauges, implements, computers, objects), and semiotic-psychological tools (diagrams, text-type templates, grids, tables, maps, charts, keys, timelines, scales, mnemonics, language games, symbols and signs) that support the successful completion of negotiated goals. This is the most common form of scaffolding. It has spawned a range of pedagogical strategies usually labeled "cognitive apprenticeship" approaches, that make explicit through reifying into "tools", the psychological processes of an expert that are normally invisible and inaccessible to the novice (for more specific details see: Antonacci & Colasacco, 1995; Brown et. al., 1989; Brown & Palinscar, 1987; 1989; Carver, 1995; Collins et. al., 1989). Lave & Wenger, critical of some apprenticeship approaches that are "driven by reference to reified knowledge domains" (Lave & Wenger, 1991:52), argue that "reproductive cycles are productive as well," and that the historical artifacts of such cycles, whether physical tools or cultural signs, "constitute and reconstitute practice over time" (Lave & Wenger, 1991:58). As Goldsworthy (1998:2) notes "tools historically mark people as both within history and potentially as history." That is, tools are as much a product of the historical environment,
containing its ideas (Prawat, 1996), as they are about the shaping of that environment. Thus, a radical approach based on "resourcing" will always involve finding new ways to use existing tools (Lave & Wenger, 1991), or encourage the creation of new tools and new situations simultaneously (Newman & Holzman, 1993). It must recognize tools as "cultural capital" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) that may provide or deny entry into specific situations, professions, communities, or knowledges; and must thus be sensitive of the need to make explicit cultural or disciplinary technologies. It acknowledges that tools often effect individuals "before an agent fully understands what this cultural tool is or how it works" (Wertsch, 1998:132), and thus a radical Vygotskian pedagogy might use tools not only to assist students in making sense of alterity (as subject or as text), but also in making strange knowledge of the socio-historical self (Parkes, 2000b).

Other supplementary ways in which a student may be scaffolded, include re-framing the conditions (time, space, terrain, climate, etc.) under which a performance is to be take place; redistributing "labour" or roles (scribe, time-keeper, encourager, challenger, leader, etc.) between members of a group or community; or re-organizing the "community" itself, by switching participants between groups on the basis of physical characteristics (age, sex, size), psychological characteristics (knowledge, experience, ability, motivation), behavioural characteristics (degree of independence, initiative, cooperativeness, talkativeness, consistency, on-task engagement), socio-cultural characteristics (literacy, ethnicity), or personal factors (friendships). This suggests a more poststructuralist view of power, in which subjectivity and agency are organized around "trajectories of participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991:54), that are both constituted by, and constitute, the members of the community of practice. Thus, it is an approach that acknowledges the political, while not being bound by a specific politics of liberation.

Conclusions: A Dangerous Practice

In keeping with the argument of this paper, that a post-critical pedagogy must be self-reflexive, and avoid claims to "innocence", I will now answer some significant concerns about the potential of Vygotskian pedagogies to serve the interests of the new work order. According to Gee, Hull & Lankshear (1996:50-51) the principle of a "distributed system" is at work both in the "non-authoritarian hierarchies" of the Vygotskian pedagogies, and the new fast capitalism. For these critics of the scaffolding/apprenticeship pedagogies, the distributed system is "a leitmotif of late twentieth century life because of exponential growth in variety, variability, and diversity" (Gee et al., 1996:51). They argue that "the core dilemma of the new capitalism: how to control empowered units without a central authority" (Gee et al., 1996:64), is "solved" by the Vygotskian apprenticeship approaches to education. They assert that:

Brown and Campione's classrooms are a way station towards a system in which core values and goals are 'seeded' into social practices, activity systems, technologies, and flexible roles of the participants, as well as into the vision of non-authoritarian leaders (coaches), to be internalized as part and parcel of one's very participation in (and even co-construction of) the overall system (Gee et al., 1996:64).

They are suspicious of the 'seeding' into social practice of specific tools, and argue that apprenticeship approaches:

- can also be used as devices to 'manipulate' people (if we can use the term, for the time being, neutrally) into accepting, trusting, and committing themselves to the goals and values (the vision) of the leader (teacher) and the organizational system (technologies and activities) within which she operates (Gee et al., 1996:64).
Thus, their greatest criticism of these new pedagogies is "the way in which immersion into a 'community of practice' can allow individuals or units to internalize values and goals - often without a great deal of negotiation or conscious reflection and without the exercise of very much top-down authority" (Gee et al., 1996:64-65). While I think that Renshaw (1998) is correct in arguing that the alignment between Vygotskian pedagogies and the new work order is only partial, I would agree with Gee et al. (1996), that there is potential for these pedagogies to be appropriated or co-opted. If Vygotskian pedagogies are to be used in some formulation of a post-critical pedagogy, as I suggest they should, then we must recognize that all pedagogies are in Foucauldian terms "dangerous practices." That is to say, all practices have potentially both productive and repressive effects. Far from claiming innocence, a post-critical pedagogy must by definition, acknowledge its potential to have the opposite of its intended effects. What clearly might help a Vygotskian pedagogy is a commitment to negotiating goals before scaffolding is initiated, and a commitment to identifying, appropriating and transforming cultural tools. Such commitments cannot prevent a post-critical pedagogy from serving the interests of an appropriative capitalism, but may ensure that a radical Vygotskian pedagogy really is a dangerous practice.

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References


