On the Interconnected Nature of Interpreting Vygotsky: Rejoinder to Gredler and Shields

Does No One Read Vygotsky’s Words 2004

Michael Glassman, Ye Wang and doctoral student in the College of Education

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER 2004 33: 19

DOI: 10.3102/0013189X033006019

The online version of this article can be found at:

http://edr.sagepub.com/content/33/6/19

Published on behalf of

American Educational Research Association

and

SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Educational Researcher can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://er.aera.net/alerts

Subscriptions: http://er.aera.net/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.aera.net/reprints

Permissions: http://www.aera.net/permissions

Citations: http://edr.sagepub.com/content/33/6/19.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Aug 1, 2004

What is This?

by Michael Glassman and Ye Wang

Accepted under the Editorship of Evelyn Jacob and C. Stephen White

In response to the critique of Gredler and Shields (2004) of Glassman’s article Dewey and Vygotsky: Society, Experience, and Inquiry in Educational Practice (2001) we suggest that interpretation of theory is dynamic and based very much on the use of that theory as an instrument. Gredler and Shields argue that Glassman misinterprets Vygotsky because Glassman did not read his words (carefully enough). We, in response, suggest that Gredler and Shields own interpretations of Vygotsky’s words are based very much on their own predispositions about how developmental theory should be understood, and how to use Vygotsky’s ideas to achieve specific research goals. Change the research goals and you might change the meaning of Vygotsky’s words. We offer alternative interpretations of Vygotsky’s words based on a different perspective of human development and research goals.

Our response to Gredler and Shields Does No One Read Vygotsky’s Words (2004) is to suggest that meanings (of theories) are dynamic and dependent on use. The way in which members of a community understand, conceptualize or operationalize a theoretical construct is very much dependent on its use as a tool (to meet the needs of that community). We see Gredler and Shields (2004) as interpreting Vygotsky’s theory along a specific trajectory in order to delineate its intentions so that it meets certain social goals (we will explore some of those goals over the course of this response); and we argue that this process of interpretation shades both choices and emphases in their historical and textual exegesis. We will explore their interpretation, and our response, in light of two questions we believe are central to the development of educational and psychology (James, 1890; Ladd, 1897). It was only later that Hall, his students (e.g. Terman and Goddard) along with a number of other psychologists and educators looking to break free from philosophy adopted the “counting” methods of Galton or the delineated empiricism that was the off-spring of phrenology and faculty psychology (Ross, 1972; O’Donnell, 1985). The attitudes of Gredler and Shields (2004) towards philosophy seem obvious by their cavalier use of philosophical underpinnings. For instance, Gredler and Shields (2004) point to Spinoza’s influence on Vygotsky, and while it is true Spinoza is often one of the favorites philosophers of philosophy students because of the elegant, geometric progression of his thinking (Spinoza 1677/2000), his pantheism may not make him the first choice of those interested in development, offering few suggestions how one might calculate progress, or even development. Gredler and Shields’ suggestion that Vygotsky was most influenced by Hegelian synthesis is also troubling: Hegel really never talked about synthesis and the adult Vygotsky almost certainly had an understanding of the Hegelian dialectic (see Glassman 2000 for an extended discussion). We also believe that Marx and Engels were important (perhaps the most important) philosophical influences on Vygotsky, and that their omission highlights a critical distinction between how Vygotsky is presented in Glassman (2001) and Gredler and Shields’ interpretation. For example, a careful reading of Vygotsky and Dewey (and Marx and Engels for that matter) might show that they were all influenced by Hegel’s organicism.

This short shrift to philosophy, while a small part of the paper, tips Gredler and Shields’ (2004) hand. They seem to have a more Hallian view of Vygotsky: that Vygotsky was less interested in exploring various inter-connections in development and more interested in counting (this will be explored in our discussion of the second question). It is interesting in this context that Gredler and Shields compare Vygotsky to Thorndike who was probably Hall’s greatest ally in bringing a Galton-like sensibility to psychology and education (Ross, 1972) (and in the process undercutting James and Ladd). This may be the reason the authors give so little credence to the role of the social interlocutor in development or the part played by developing technology in both micro and macro-genesis. But it colors their selective use of quotes (which in itself is a form of “counting”), their choice of experts, and the definitive nature of their assertions. For example, their assertion that “Vygotsky did not include the assistance of another’s interests in his definition of ZPD” (Gredler and Shields, 2004, p. 22) seems at odds with our (admittedly “inter-connections” based) interpretation of Vygotsky. Here are two of Vygotsky’s own...

...
definitions of ZPD: “It is 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” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), and “... this difference between the child’s actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult, defines the zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 209). If we are interested in “counting”, this list will go on and on; however, we feel that we need to jump out of this quotation circle and approach a more general way to look at our discrepancies with the Gredler and Shields.

Question 2: Is the Presentation and Analysis of Human Activity Reflecting Self-Action, Interaction, or Transaction?

It will be impossible to explore this question in depth in the space allotted, but we believe it is so important in light of what Gredler and Shields (2004) have to say that it must be raised. Dewey and Bentley (1949) suggest three types for the presentation and analysis of activity: self-action, interaction, and transaction. Self-action (which is often, unfortunately conflated with individual) suggests that all action originates within the organism itself; that there is some type of (native) force that is driving action. In the study of modern human behavior it is manifested in the concept of the isolated mind that drives and determines the consequences of individual human activity (e.g. I.Q.). Interaction suggests activity be analyzed as a result of relationships between two or more organisms or forces in a given arena. Transactive analysis recognizes that all interactions occur within a larger organic whole, and it is impossible to understanding the single interaction without erasing artificial boundaries between what is immediately apparent and organismic forces that may have a distinct but important impact on activity (Dewey & Bentley, 1949).

Gredler and Shields (2004) offer a presentation and analysis of Vygotsky that seems to be based in self-action. It is this type of presentation that leads to the way the authors portray the concept of psychological tools (as reified objects rather than part of a larger process of activity), the concept of the zone of proximal development (as an individual, mind based ability, where the mind is an object that either drives or allows the developing organism to attain certain conceptual abilities), everyday and scientific concepts (as completely isolated from each other with totally different functions), and cultural development (again as a reified object based almost completely on the level of pre-existing technology in the immediate environment). Glassman (2001) (and the writings of the author in general, e.g. Glassman, 1996, Glassman, 1995) tends to take a much more interactionist and transactive view of Vygotsky’s work. In particular, Glassman believes Vygotsky took an interactionist perspective most of his mature career and crossed over into transactive analysis in at least parts of Thinking and Speech (Vygotsky, 1987), but this is an argument for another time. In any case this leads to a different interpretation of many of the same issues raised by Gredler and Shields.

We offer an analysis that is less harsh, but perhaps more historically situated, of this (possible) phenomenon. As a theory becomes more popular, more and more individuals (and the intellectual communities to which they belong) begin to recognize it as a possible tool in their own ongoing activities. These individuals and communities develop interpretations of theoretical constructs that will meet their own motives and goals. The rising popularity of the theory naturally leads to its meaning becoming more and more distributed over a number of communities. This is not to say that the original intentions of the theorist(s) become lost through this process: they still exist to some extent through in-depth historical analysis. But history can never really be separated from what Santayana (1939) referred to as the “specious present.” Our final response to Gredler and Shields is that at least as important as reading Vygotsky’s words is recognizing your motives and goals in that reading.

NOTES

1 We are obviously using these questions as tools to meet our own goals of establishing an alternative interpretation to Vygotsky’s theory.
2 Educators and psychologists tend to see Galton as an intelligence theorist. Galton actually had little formal training in any discipline; but he was able to impact a number of fields (geography, meteorology, the introduction of finger printing) through his innovative methodologies. These methodologies, developed before his interests in heredity might best be described as “counting” (Black 2003). Galton showed in a number of fields that if you counted enough things in different contexts and made comparisons, patterns would begin to emerge. Hall imported both Galton’s ideas and his methods into the nascent fields of psychology and education. The methods, which had proven highly successful in other arenas, would allow Hall to move the field towards both a more positivistic model and claim the mantle of “scientific discipline” for psychology.
3 Illyenkov (1977) points to Hegel’s contention that Spinoza’s philosophy was simple and easy to understand.
4 Pantheism suggests that there is no differentiation between God, the material of the universe, and human rationality. Therefore you cannot gain rational thinking from simple experience, but only from the exploration of God or Nature. There is a complete differentiation between experience-based thinking which is an illusion, and reason-based thinking which is eternal and necessary. It is difficult to see how this view of knowledge could have a great impact on a developmentalist. In any case it was difficult for us to find any passages that might suggest that Spinoza was one of the two primary influences on Vygotsky. Illyenkov did see Spinoza’s materialism as the natural precursor to Marx and Engels (Illyenkov 1977), and the note Gredler and Shields offer in support of their position suggests they are following the same line of thinking concerning Vygotsky, but this leads us to wonder why they identified Spinoza without identifying any other materialists.
5 We are especially concerned because Gredler and Shields (2004) choose two specific areas in their critique where recognition of Engels’ influence would be especially important. We believe Engels’ essay on development from ape to man (Engels, 1940) was a seminal influence on Studies of the History of Behavior (Vygotsky & Luria, 1993). When read in the context of Dialectics of Nature (Engels, 1940), as well as other philosophical texts, we believe there is little doubt that they were exploring issues related to human cooperation. Perhaps more important, Engels work serves as part of the connective tissue between Vygotsky and later Activity Theory (see Glassman, 1996 for an extended discussion). Vygotsky also took his concept of the “new man” (which we believe Gredler and Shields minimize) from Engels (Vygotsky, 1930). Ironi-
cally, one of the few places where we have found Vygotsky directly quoting Spinoza (Vygotsky, 1930) it is to amplify a point from Engels about the development of the “new man.”

Organicism deals with the relationship between parts and wholes. This perspective promotes the idea that even when parts are identified for analytic purposes, they can only really be understood through the role that they play in relation to other parts, within the whole. Vygotsky explores this idea specifically, and in some depth early in Thinking and Speech (Vygotsky, 1987).

Perhaps we are trapped within the very paradigm we decry but we cannot resist at least a little bit more “counting.” With regards to the examples Gredler and Shields (2004) provide to claim “ZPD is not always manifested in social interaction” (p. 6), here are Vygotsky’s responses: “When the school child solves a problem at home on the basis of a model that he has been shown in class, he continues to act in collaboration, though at the moment the teacher is not standing near him” and “It is a solution accomplished with the teacher’s help” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 216).

Gredler and Shields (2004) describe Vygotsky’s “…psychological tools as a mediator between objects of action and mental function…” (p. 21). We believe that the authors are presenting these tools as functional objects, which exist prior to use. The actor calls upon these objects in order to solve a problem. The implication is that the actor has the correct “mediator” for the situation (or does not have it) and controls its use in various situations. We believe that, at least the later, Vygotsky saw the use of psychological tools as a much more dynamic process related to any number of variables, including individual and social history, time and place, and immediate goals and distal motives. Vygotsky was especially eloquent on this subject in Thought and Word (In Thinking and Speech, Vygotsky, 1987). (See Glassman, 1996 for extended discussion).

As we have already suggested, Vygotsky wrote differently about the Zone of Proximal Development in different venues. Gredler and Shields (2004) state “Instead Vygotsky . . . defined the ZPD as the ‘area of innate, but maturing (psychological) processes’ and first used it in the context of assessing cognitive development. In contrast to Glassman’s view, the content of the ZPD is the higher psychological functions and their interconnections that are beginning to mature” (p. 22). We believe Gredler and Shields offer an interpretation of ZPD that puts it squarely in the mind of the individual: the mind is a vessel and the ZPD is part of its content. This suggests that the critical vehicle in development is the mind (as object) of the individual—it is the mind that makes the interconnections leading to systematic thinking. This interpretation also presents the mind as a measurable entity.

Gredler and Shields’ (2004) discussion of the relationship between spontaneous or everyday concepts and scientific concepts points to the importance of philosophy in general, and Spinoza’s influence in particular, discussed earlier. Gredler and Shields state, “The key difference between everyday and scientific concepts is the presence or absence of a system (italics in text) that affects their psychological structure. Whereas everyday concepts are formed from a child’s experiences, they do not form a system and, as a result are not characterized by conscious awareness.” And later, “In addition, children acquire everyday concepts in different social environments rather than from the consequences of activities…” (p. 23). The authors do not seem to posit any type of developmental relationship between everyday concepts and scientific concepts. From a purely philosophical perspective this is a difficult position to maintain: one of the reasons for instance that Dewey abandoned Spinoza very early in his career (Ryan, 1995). We see this type of interpretation as offering no other alternative but self-action (perhaps force of will, or discovery of Nature) in the movement from everyday concepts to scientific concepts. We believe that Vygotsky did hypothesize a developmental progression created out of the interplay between individual activity, social milieu, social history and the goals of the larger community. A second difficulty we have with this interpretation is it suggests that everyday and scientific concepts are tied to specific environments rather than emerging through activity. This interpretation does allow for cross-environment comparisons (by counting the amount of times a certain behavior is manifested within a particular environment), but it misses the important interplay described earlier.

Gredler and Shields (2004) view of cultural development is encompassed in their interpretations of Studies on the History of Behavior (Vygotsky & Luria, 1993) as well as the fieldwork conducted in Uzbekistan. As mentioned earlier we believe there is an important relationship between Engels’ writing on evolution and this work. Gredler and Shields focus on specific developments reported in this work such as “attention, abstraction, language, memory, numeric operations and reasoning,” (pp. 23). These are psychological constructs that can be parcelled out, tested, and counted in order to make specific comparisons between environments. We believe that what Vygotsky was most interested in was how and why such developments occurred (and will continue to occur over the course of history). The “counting” was a consequence rather than a motivation for the work.

REFERENCES

**AUTHORS**

**MICHAEL GLASSMAN** is Associate Professor of Child Development in The Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, The Ohio State University, 135 Campbell Hall, 1787 Neil Ave., Columbus OH, 43210; Glassman.13@osu.edu. He is currently working on issues related to Dewey’s conception of participatory democracy and education.

**YE WANG** is a doctoral student in the College of Education at The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, 43210; angel_ye_wang@yahoo.com. Her current interests include Vygotsky and education of the hearing impaired.

Manuscript submitted November 18, 2003
Revision received February 6, 2004
Accepted February 9, 2004