Exploring teaching and learning in real and virtual worlds
Vygostsky's theories and educational practice.

Harry Daniels is Professor of Education: Culture and Pedagogy at the University of Bath. Here he discusses his long-standing interest in Vygotsky's theories about cognitive development and on the ways these theories can inform educational practice.

Professor Harry Daniels

I think his ideas are attractive because they are optimistic, in contrast with Piaget who was interpreted as saying its not much use trying to teach somebody until the developmental machine
has done its job, or the behavioural account, which almost denied a notion of development beyond the structure of the curriculum. Here Vygotsky presents us with a story that says instruction promotes development: it leads it. Education has a formative role and it's interesting in Russian, parenting is often described by a word which is probably best translated as "forming" and parents talk about "forming" their children. Well, that's a rather deterministic view of it, but nonetheless if education is about preparing people for their futures and preparing, helping them to prepare for the future which we think is desirable then we're not waiting for some biologically-driven machine to do its job for us. We can set that agenda; society can set that agenda through the kind of education it creates. Education has profound psychological impacts.

Narration

What's so distinctive about the Vygotskian approach?

Professor Harry Daniels

It's distinctive in that it's a story of the social formation of mind. It's distinctive in that it starts to talk about how the social and the individual are related, about what he calls the 'means of mediation', the tools that operate between the individual and the social such as speech, such as cultural artefacts like algebra that are used by individuals to engage with the social world, not to copy the social world, but to engage and create their own interpretation of the social world.

Narration

The Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD is a key Vygotskian concept. What does the term mean?

Professor Harry Daniels

The Zone of Proximal or Zone of Next Development was a term that he developed to describe the distance between what a person could do on their own unaided, and what somebody could do with the benefit of support. Whether that was with an adult or with a more capable peer is a matter of debate whether he actually wrote that but nonetheless it's the difference between what you do on your own and what you do with somebody else. If you wanted an example of that feeling, if you're in a seminar with somebody and an idea is raised that you've not come across before and you talk about it together and you think "yeah, I've got that", and you walk out the door and you think: "well, can I write that down? No I can't write that down." I haven't what would be called appropriated that idea. I haven't made it my own yet .

And so there is re-negotiation there, to do what Luria subsequently talked about is, is going from regulation by the other. In other words, at the far end of the zone of proximal development, working together with somebody was essentially a lot of the control was with the supporter to the point at which the control was entirely with the learner. It's a gradual process of making something ones own from something, which was originally social.

Narration

How does the concept of scaffolding fit in to this framework?

Professor Harry Daniels

The scaffolding idea was, as promoted by the famous Wood, Bruner and Ross paper, was the idea of the structures you enabled people to learn through. It has been criticised, of course, for being rather too rigid. And the idea of the structure was something that the scaffolder created rather than actually in a more clinical interview kind of setting, where you actually are negotiating what that structure would be. Now I expect Wood, Bruner and Ross might actually say to you "that's what we meant anyway".

Narration

One interpretation of 'scaffold' might be that it's something that's being built by one person rather than being negotiated, for example between the learner and the teacher. And there may be educational situations where scaffolding is not a bad metaphor.

Professor Harry Daniels

I think there are some instances in which predetermined scaffolds might be actually in the mass production of schooling quite appropriate. But when we come unstuck, particularly and over certain matters, it's the need for sensitive tuning-in and responding to the attempts that the learner is making to negotiate in the zone of proximal development, to tune in to the learner, to whatever phrase you want to use. As I understand it the original conception was very much like the Piagetian Clinical Interview, whereas in some of the North American work it's been reduced to a set of standardised prompts which can be administered and then you measure
the amount of help that someone needs in terms of how many prompts they need. Assuming that the prompt that I give you is as useful to you as it is to the person sitting next to you. And I don't actually agree with that.

Narration

Another key Vygotskian idea is that language is a symbolic tool. What did he mean by this?

Professor Harry Daniels

If, as he was trying to develop a theory which spoke of the social formation of mind, one has to ask what is the main means of mediation, the main way in which the social becomes the individual, and one of the major characteristics of humans is that we talk. And talk is social, talking is a social activity, we're using speech to communicate. And that's the way things which are social out there in the social world are used by us, we don't internalise but we work with and make our own the ideas that were once social and become part of our inner world. Become part of what are in his terms are inner speech, so it's
not a copying of the outside world this is a tool for working with ideas which are being developed in the social world and become internal tools for operating internally with the development of ideas and concepts.

Narration

One of the criticisms of Vygotsky's theory is that the ideas don't hold when applied to the complex dynamics of a classroom situation.

Professor Harry Daniels

What we're trying to do with the Vygotskian theory and after all it's only a tool. I don't regard it as a truth that's to be worshipped as I think I inferred earlier. It's something that's there for us to stimulate our thinking and to ask questions about what should be done next. And it helps us to ask questions – you know – does organising the classroom in one way or another way have any impact? So for example every one can say "Well I'm committed to the integrated day method of primary school teaching", or "I think the children should be sitting in rows doing group teaching". Now, Vygotsky, in his socio-institutional guise, would argue there are going

to be profound psychological impacts of those different forms of organisation. What are they? How do we set about investigating those? So, there's the face-to-face instruction element and there's the understanding - the impact of different forms of social organisation on the way children think and learn. I think that is a major part of the agenda, which Vygotsky sets us and is clearly of enormous importance.