

WHEN CONSTRUCTIVISTS JEAN PIAGET AND LEV VYGOTSKY WERE PEDAGOGICAL COLLABORATORS: A VIEWPOINT FROM A STUDY OF THEIR COMMUNICATIONS

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Jean Piaget, author of Genetic Epistemology, and Lev Vygotsky, creator of Cultural–Historical Theory, were able to communicate and exchange ideas for a period of five years. After 1929, despite Stalin cutting off all East–West communications, they still were able to have some communication. Many think that Genetic Epistemology and Cultural–Historical Theory are dissimilar, but the knowledge of these mutual communications presents the idea that these researchers changed their pedagogical theories to become more similar to each other’s each time they were able to communicate.

Many educators see the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky as exact opposites when it comes to their pedagogies. Jean Piaget, it is argued, focused on the primacy of the individual in his Genetic Epistemology. On the other hand, many believe that Lev Vygotsky focused in his Cultural–Historical Theory on the social aspects of learning. For example, Cole and Wertsch (1996) stated, “Vygotsky’s ideas for bringing the importance of the social context in learning appear to be antinomious to those of Jean Piaget, who focused on individualization of learning” (p. 33). For Vygotsky, human inquiry is embedded within culture, which in turn is embedded within social history (Glassman, 2001). For Piaget, human inquiry is embedded within the individual child, who constructs knowledge through his or her actions on the environment (Cole & Wertsch, 1996).

This is how I was taught in “introduction to educational psychology”; perhaps that was done because that might be the easiest way to break college freshmen into two complex theories.

Received 20 December 2005; accepted 22 December 2006.

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However, the more I started historically studying the lives and works of Piaget and Vygotsky, the more I came to believe that many of their ideas are complementary rather than incompatible. Over time, I made historical inquiries into the origin of their ideas, and I discovered that they did spend time communicating with one another. They also, of course, communicated with other researchers, but this article is only concerned with how they mutually influenced each other. Every time they communicated, they changed their ideas—mainly, to come more into agreement with each other. Unfortunately, Stalin effectively cut off East–West communications, and this stymied but did not completely curtail their communicative attempts.

This article looks at the similarities of Piaget and Vygotsky's pedagogical theories in light of their attempts to communicate. This also is an inquiry into what their pedagogy would have looked like had they been able to fully communicate their ideas. Pedagogical ideas are not only the products of research but also the products of all the personal influences that affect a researcher's thinking.

Methodology

Historical Inquiry

Historical inquiry “qualifies as a scientific endeavor from the same standpoint of its subscription to the same principles and the same general scholarship that characterizes all scientific research” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 1989, p. 48). The four steps used in the present inquiry were (1) identifying the issues, (2) searching for relevant information, (3) evaluating the information, and (4) synthesizing the historical facts into a meaningful interpretation that might illuminate present and future trends. Such a methodology is valid for historical research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 1989; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Hill & Kebert, 1967). Upon completion of the study, scholars of both Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky reviewed the information and arguments, and the present article incorporates their suggestions for review.

Electronic data were used in this work. The computer allowed entrance inside the archives of the Russian Academy of Science,

Moscow State University, and the Piaget archives at the University of Geneva. From there, the bibliographic sources cited in those archives provided further information that resulted in emails to various authorities, including Leontiev's son and Vygotsky's daughter. I also read secondary sources available at local libraries. From there, bibliographies of those sources provided other sources of information. This work took approximately 3.5 years.

New primary information was difficult to obtain. When Fernando Vidal wrote his book, *Piaget before Piaget* (1994), he used anonymous neighbors to cite difficulties in Jean Piaget's childhood, such as documenting two nervous breakdowns. "After that, no one is talking" (Colet, 1998). Knowing he was under scrutiny by the KGB, Vygotsky left little personal information. Guillermo Blanck was allowed by Vygotsky's daughter, Gita, to investigate what personal information her father left behind. It was contained in one shoebox in her closet (Blanck, 1990), and no new biographical data emerged.

Attempts at Communication

Both Vygotsky and Piaget tried to communicate their ideas to one another; for about five years, that communication was active and effective. In 1924, after reading Piaget's book *Judgment and Reasoning of the Child*, Vygotsky wrote Piaget that learning was a socio-cultural-historical event and sent him a copy of his 1923 book (Vygotsky, 1924). This exchange began a series of personal communications that lasted until Stalin erected an Iron Curtain between East and West.

Lenin died in 1924. Stalin came to power immediately and, as he consolidated dictatorial rule, he began cutting off East-West communications, but this was only partially effective at first.

In 1926, Vygotsky was asked and agreed to write the preface for Piaget's Russian edition of his 1923 *Language and Thought of the Child* and also his 1924 *Judgment and Reasoning of the Child*. A result of this work was that Piaget contributed the idea of four stages of epistemological development in humans to Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1926). In other words, while already working on stages of human cognitive development, Vygotsky changed from three to four stages after reading Piaget, but he refused to give them chronological settings, as Piaget had done.

Vygotsky then sent his 1926 work, *Psychological Pedagogy*, to Piaget. Vygotsky was delighted that, in the second (1926) edition of Piaget's *Language and Thought of the Child*, Piaget admitted in his Foreword the possibility that a child's learning might be impacted socially (Newman & Holzman, 1993). In 1926, Piaget wrote in the Foreword of that Russian translation (second edition) of his 1923 *Language and Thought of the Child* that he welcomed collaboration with Soviet psychologists (Piaget, 1926).

Vygotsky made repeated attempts after that to have his work smuggled out of the U.S.S.R. to Piaget, but he could not accept this invitation because of growing Stalinist repression and censorship of the mails (Newman & Holzman, 1993). Vygotsky tried to smuggle out his 1926 *Psychological Pedagogy* to Piaget in 1927. Unfortunately, Piaget would not get this manuscript until 1932. When he received it, Piaget's response was to concede in his next work, *Moral Judgment of the Child*, that there is a historical context for some reasoning (Piaget, 1932).

In 1964, Piaget was finally able to read a book that Vygotsky wrote and tried to send to him in 1932 entitled *Thinking and Speech*. Prior to 1964, Piaget only had a role for external speech (talking). However, after reading Vygotsky's work, Piaget wrote a commentary on it stating the value of internal speech (Piaget, 1962).

If you go back and look closely at *Language and Thought of the Child*, you will see that Piaget hovers over the issue of individual/social and takes the individual path while recognizing that it is not the only way to go. (M. Cole, personal communication, March 3, 2003)

For the first and only time, Vygotsky left the Soviet Union in 1925 to deliver an address at a London conference on defectology and educating the deaf. Piaget was at that conference but did not attend Vygotsky's lecture. In 1929, Piaget addressed a major psychological convention in New Haven, Connecticut, to which Vygotsky could only send a paper, which Alexander Luria delivered. There is no indication of Piaget obtaining a copy of that paper (Kozulin, 1991), even though he was in a position to do so (M. Cole, personal communication, May 14, 2003).

Arguably, one result of this inability to communicate adequately in a timely fashion was that Vygotsky rejected Piaget's idea

that the learner, not the teacher, interacting with the environment was the only thing necessary for new concepts to emerge. In 1933, the local government around both Neufchatel and Geneva, where Piaget was working, became “obsessively anticommunist” (Vidal, 1989, p. 103). Piaget, unable to hear from Vygotsky but aware of the violence of Stalin’s dictatorship, would stop his teachers from speaking in the classroom unless it was to ask diagnostic questions, because he was concerned about the possibilities of Soviet-style indoctrination in the classroom (N. R. Colet, personal communication, March 15, 1999).

Writing from Moscow after the fall of communism, Alexander Kozulin noted in his 1991 work that it was the influence of both communism and Westerners like Piaget that developed Vygotsky’s Cultural–Historical Theory. This influence was especially true when Stalin began his purges of the mid-1930s. Vygotsky, trying to stay alive, worked on the idea that learning was an activity, but he was unable to have any of his work published (Kozulin, 1991). Kozulin hinted that Stalin probably repressed Vygotsky’s work because Vygotsky’s idea that learning was an activity was just as much Piagetian as it was Marxist. Kozulin wrote that Stalin wanted to purge Soviet thought from “corrupting” Western influences. Kozulin was the first to write that Leontiev had adapted Vygotsky’s idea to coincide with what Stalin wanted and became famous for it “as a response to immediate political circumstances” (Kozulin, 1991, p. 247).

Conclusion

In this biographical comparison between Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, I have attempted to reveal the impact on their ideas of their personal life experiences and their mutual communication, showing how the exchange of those ideas influenced each other’s views.

This inquiry presupposed that pedagogical theory is the cumulative attainment obtained from two sources: internal and external. The internal source is one’s intellect. The external source consists of all influences impacting that intellect. This work argued that Piaget and Vygotsky influenced each other externally and that this impacted their ideas internally.

I hope that studying how such pedagogical pioneers as Piaget and Vygotsky communicated with each other and revisiting their ideas in light of how that communication caused them to adjust their ideas adds worthwhile information to the foundations of education and educational psychology and provokes reflection on this domain of thinking in education and psychology.

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