

Examples of Teaching/Learning Within ZPD

Let's begin with an example that Vygotsky himself provided in his chapter on "Literary Creativity in School-Age Children," Chapter 6 of [*Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*](#). Download the PDF of the full text and begin reading on page 41. (The page number in the journal itself is 47.)

In it, he states that the challenge for teachers is "to create within the child the motivation to write and then to help him master the techniques of writing." Please read the case study before returning to commentary.

Case Study of Leo Tolstoy: Commentary by Lev Vygotsky

Leo Tolstoy described a remarkable case study in encouraging creative writing in peasant children, one that he himself had participated in. In his article "Who Should Learn to Write from Whom: Peasant Children from Us, Or Us from Them?" [Komu u kogo uchit'sia pisat'—krest'ianskikh rebiatam u nas ili nam u krest'ianskikh rebiat], this great writer came to the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that adults, and even great writers such as himself, should learn to write from peasant children, and not vice versa. This experiment in encouraging creative writing in peasant children very clearly shows how the process of creative writing occurs in the child, how it is born, and how it evolves, and what role the teacher who wishes to further the correct development of this process should play. The essence of Tolstoy's discovery came when he noticed traits in children's writing that are characteristic of this age alone and understood that the true task of education is not to prematurely inculcate adult language in children, but to help the child develop and shape his own literary language. Tolstoy assigned his students the task of writing a composition based on the proverb, "*He feeds you with a spoon and then pokes you in the eye with it.*"

"Just imagine," I said, "that a peasant takes in a beggar, and then begins to reproach him for needing charity, then couldn't this be described as *he feeds him with a spoon and then pokes him in the eye with it?*" At first the children refused to write anything because they thought that the task was beyond them, so Tolstoy began to write himself.

He says:

Any unprejudiced person who has any feeling for art and for folk culture and reads this first page, written by me, and the following pages of the story written by my pupils would distinguish this page from the others, without even thinking about it. It sticks out like a sore thumb, it is so false, artificial, and poorly written. . . .

It seemed very strange to me that a half-literate peasant boy would suddenly show such conscious artistry, a level of development so high that Goethe couldn't reach it. It seemed so strange and humiliating that I, the author of [*Childhood*], which has enjoyed some success and has been acknowledged by the educated public to show artistic talent, not only could not do anything to help or instruct eleven-year-old Semka or Fedka, but that it was merely a fortunate burst of inspiration that allowed me to follow and understand them. It seemed so strange to me, that I didn't believe what happened yesterday.

How was Tolstoy able to awaken in these children, who previously had absolutely no idea what creative writing was, the ability to express themselves in this complex and difficult way? They started creating as a group. Tolstoy began and they gave him suggestions.

"Someone said, let's make this old man a wizard; someone else said, no, we don't need to do that, let him be just a soldier; no better have him rob them; no, that wouldn't fit the proverb," they said. All the children participated in writing the story. They got interested and carried away with the process of creation itself, and this was the first nudge in the direction of creative inspiration.

"Here," writes Tolstoy, "they obviously were experiencing the charm of capturing artistic details in words for the first time." The children composed, created the characters, described their appearance, a series of details, and individual episodes and all this was realized in a certain clear linguistic form.

"His eyes shone with unshed tears," writes Tolstoy, about a boy working on the story, "he wrung his skinny, dirty hands convulsively; he got angry at me and constantly urged me to hurry. '*Have you written it, have you written it?*' he kept asking. He treated the other children angrily and despotically, he wanted to be the only one to speak, not to speak the way people ordinarily do, but to speak the way people write, that is, to use words artistically to depict images and feelings; he could not stand, for example, to have his words rearranged. If he said '*My legs were wounded,*' he would not allow '*I was wounded in my legs.*'"

This last example shows how strong this child's feeling for verbal form was, even though this was the first time he had attempted creative writing.

Rearrangement of words, word order, is to literature what melody is to music, or pattern is to a picture. And the feeling for this verbal pattern, the painterly details, the feeling of proportion—all this, according to Tolstoy, was highly developed in this child. The child was playing a part when he wrote; when he had his characters speak words at times he spoke "taking on such a weary and calm, habitual serious, and, at the same time, benevolent tone, supporting his head with his hand, that the other children roared with laughter." The children understood this real joint work with an adult writer to be a true collaborative effort, in which they felt themselves to be equal partners with the adults. "And will we publish it?" the boy asked Tolstoy. "If we do we need to say, written by

Makarov, Morozov, and Tolstoy.” This reveals the child’s attitude to the authorship of this joint work.

“It was unmistakable,” writes Tolstoy. “This was not chance, but conscious creation. . . . I never encountered anything like these pages in all of Russian literature.”

On the basis of this experience, Tolstoy advanced the following hypothesis: in his opinion, in order to develop creative writing in children, all you have to do is provide them with the impetus and the material for their creations.

All he needed from me was the material in order to fill it out harmoniously and completely. As soon as I gave him complete freedom, stopped trying to instruct him, he wrote a poetic work whose like had never been seen in Russian literature. And thus, I am convinced, we must not try to teach children in general and particularly peasant children how to write and compose, how to set about writing.

If what I did to attain this goal can be called techniques, then these techniques were as follows. First: offer the greatest and widest choice of topics, without selecting those you think are particularly suited to children, but proposing the most serious topics that interest you yourself. Second: give the children works by children to read as models, and only such works. Third (of particular importance): never criticize the child when looking over his composition, either for neatness, penmanship, spelling, and especially not for the structure of sentences or logic. Fourth: because the difficulty of creative writing lies not in the length or content, but in the artistic value of the topic, then the sequence in which the topics are presented must be determined not by length, nor content, nor language, but by the nature of the mechanism underlying the creative work.

No matter how instructive Tolstoy’s experience is, his interpretation of this experience shows an idealization of childhood and the negative attitude to culture and artistic creation that distinguished his religious/didactic theories during the last period of his life.

According to Tolstoy’s reactionary (e.g., reactionary means “wrong” in this context NG) theory:

Our ideal is not ahead of us, but behind us. Education ruins rather than improves people; teaching and instructing the child is impossible and senseless for the simple reason that the child stands closer than I do, closer than any adult to the ideal of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness, toward which I, in my pride, want to lead him. Consciousness of this ideal is stronger in him, than it is in me.

This is an echo of Rousseau’s theory, long imprinted in science that says “Man is born perfect. This is Rousseau’s great statement, and this statement, like a rock remains firm and true. At birth man is the prototype of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness.”

This incorrect view of the perfection of the child’s nature contains a second error Tolstoy made regarding education. If perfection lies behind us and not ahead of us, then it is

completely logical to deny the significance, sense, or possibility of education. However, if we reject the first proposition, which is not confirmed by the facts, then it will become perfectly clear that education in general and teaching children creative writing in particular is not only possible but completely inevitable. It is easy to see, even in our secondhand account, that what Tolstoy did with the peasant children, cannot be described otherwise than the teaching of creative writing. He awakened in these children a method of expressing their experience and attitude toward the world that had been completely unknown to them previously. He constructed composed, and combined jointly with the children; he transmitted his excitement to them and gave them a topic, that is, basically directed the entire process of creation, showed them its techniques, and so forth.

This is education in the precise meaning of the word. Correctly and scientifically understood, the concept of education does not at all mean artificially inculcating children with ideals, feelings, and moods that are totally alien to them. The right kind of education involves awakening in the child what already exists within him, helping him to develop it and directing this development in a particular direction. Tolstoy did all this with the children he tells us about. What is important for us now is not Tolstoy's general theory of education, but his marvelous description of the excitement engendered by the process of literary creation that he provides in these pages.

As we can see from Vygotsky's case study analysis, the most important characteristics of Zone of Proximal Development are fully present in his thinking about what and how Leo Tolstoy was teaching peasant children.

Despite having a "wrong" educational theory, Vygotsky maintains, the pedagogy that guided Tolstoy's teaching reflects his understanding of the need to create motivation for learning (*"he transmitted his excitement to them"*), his understanding of need for co-construction and co-operation in learning community (he *"constructed composed, and combined jointly with the children"*), and the need to focus on the ways students' own abilities and capacities could be developed. (*"He awakened in these children a method of expressing their experience and attitude toward the world that had been completely unknown to them previously."*)

All of these events happened in the process of interaction between the greatest Russian writer and a group of peasant children. And although Tolstoy himself didn't reflect on it, Vygotsky points out that it was Tolstoy who *"gave them a topic, that is, basically directed the entire process of creation, showed them its techniques, and so forth."*