Vygotsky and Literacy Research
A Methodological Framework

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In this book Peter Smagorinsky reconsiders his many publications employing Vygotsky’s theory of culturally-mediated human development and applies them through a unified and coherent series of chapters, to literacy research. This exploration takes previously-published work and incorporates it into a new and sustained argument regarding the application of Vygotsky’s ideas to current questions regarding the nature of literacy and how to investigate it as a cultural phenomenon that contributes to human growth in social context. To conduct this inquiry, Smagorinsky first provides an overview that contextualizes Vygotsky both in his own time and in efforts to extrapolate from his Soviet origins to the 21st Century world. This consideration includes attention to the current context for literacy studies. He then reviews current conceptions of literacy in the realms of reading, writing, and additional tool use, grounding each in a Vygotskian perspective. The book’s final chapters take a critical look at both research method and the writing of research reports, taking into account both research and research reports as social constructions based in disciplinary practices. On the whole, this volume makes an important contribution to Vygotskian studies and literacy research through the author’s careful alignment between theory and practice.
PRACTICE OF RESEARCH METHOD

Volume 2

Series Editor
Wolff-Michael Roth, University of Victoria, Canada

Scope
Research methods and research methodology are at the heart of the human endeavors that produce knowledge. Research methods and research methodology are central aspects of the distinction between folk knowledge and the disciplined way in which disciplinary forms of knowledge are produced. However, in the teaching of research methods and methodology, there traditionally has been an abyss between descriptions of how to do research, descriptions of research practices, and the actual lived research praxis.

The purpose of this series is to encourage the publication of books that take a very practical and pragmatic approach to research methods. For any action in research, there are potentially many different alternative ways of how to go about enacting it. Experienced practitioners bring to these decisions a sort of scientific feel for the game that allows them to do what they do all the while expressing expertise. To transmit such a feel for the game requires teaching methods that are more like those in high level sports or the arts. Teaching occurs not through first principles and general precepts but by means of practical suggestions in actual cases. The teacher of method thereby looks more like a coach. This series aims at publishing contributions that teach methods much in the way a coach would tell an athlete what to do next. That is, the books in this series aim at praxis of method, that is, teaching the feel of the game of social science research.
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to four scholars whose work and model of professionalism, humility, and generosity have profoundly influenced my career: Mike Cole, Shirley Heath, Vera John-Steiner, and Jim Wertsch. I can only hope that I meet their standards in representing the issues I explore in these chapters.
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FOREWORD

REALIZING VYGOTSKY’S PROGRAM

In 2007, my colleague Yew Jin Lee and I published a paper in *Review of Educational Research* entitled “Vygotsky’s Neglected Legacy: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory” (Roth & Lee, 2007). The title suggests that the legacy of this great Russian scholar, the founder of a concrete human psychology based on fundamental Marxist principles, has been forgotten. However, after having published a number of articles and chapters that bring together concrete data representing human activities in real time and Vygotsky’s (1986) work on the relationship between thought and speech, I have come to realize that much of Western (Anglo-Saxon) scholarship referring to this work has fundamentally misread it. Whereas Vygotsky wanted to develop a Marxist psychology, what remains of his work – as a result of frequently poor and ideologically shaped translations into English – is but a simulacrum that lacks the substance and proper qualities of the work of this great scholar. In this book, Peter Smagorinsky has set as his goal to set at least some of the record straight. To set us up for the importance of a Vygotskian approach to the study of literacy generally and to the study of thinking and speaking more specifically, let us take a look at a concrete instant from a lecture in a third-year university physics course on thermodynamics. Looking at concrete cases and deriving from them general principles of psychology is at the very heart of the Vygotskian approach, exemplified, for example, in the manner in which he approaches the psychology of art (Vygotsky, 1971). In the transcript fragment, the professor is in the process of developing a different way of looking at the phenomenon currently under consideration: the cooling of a substance by repeated application and removal of a magnetic field (Wikipedia features an easy to understand entry under the keyword “magnetic refrigeration). This is already the second time that the professor is giving it a try, for at the end of the preceding lecture he concluded by saying that there was something wrong with his explanation without being able to say why this is so. The fragment comes from the part of this second time where the professor has drawn a diagram and now illustrates what happens when the magnetic field is turned off and on – represented by vertical and horizontal lines between the two curves (Figure 1), one representing the absence of the magnetic field \( B = 0 \) and the other one the presence of a magnetic field \( B \neq 0 \). The fragment – the transcription notation is explained in the appendix of this *Foreword* – picks up when the professor has already drawn two steps, the first one involving the turning on the magnetic field in which the substance is emerged, while holding the temperature constant (vertical line), which leads to a drop in entropy; and the other one turning the magnetic field of, while holding the entropy \( S \) constant, which leads to a drop in temperature \( T \). After presenting the fragment and describing the various hand-arm movements visible in Figure 1, I suggest
that this entire episode, seen through a Vygotskian lens, provides evidence for the
time relationship between speaking and thinking.

Following the statement that the temperature is lowered, the professor steps
back, and gazes at the graph (Figure 1a). A pause unfolds. He turns slightly, brings
up his right arm and hand toward the left part of the graph (Figure 1b) and slowly
utters a drawn out “and,” while his hand moves to the right and toward a point on
the $B = 0$ graph (Figure 1c). The hand rests at that location for a brief while he pro-
duces the interjection “uh,” and then another pause develops. Until now, his hand
has rested in approximately the same position. There is a 2.25-s pause during
which he first moves his right hand slightly toward the right, then, while producing
a rasping sound “khm,” the hand moves near the left end of the $B = 0$ line (Figure
1e), moves back to the right some 10 cm to the left of the intersection between this
and the horizontal line he had previously drawn (Figure 1f). The hand moves rapid-
ly to the left (Figure 1g) and then, as he places the chalk to the chalkboard, the
professor produces a thin line parallel to the preceding one he has drawn and be-
inning at the point where the $B = 0$ line intersects with the ordinate axes ($S$) (Fig-
ure 1h, line 07). In reading the following transcription, readers should note the long
pauses, the duplications, the interjections, and so on that make the real-time pro-
duction of the lecture. As a result of these features, the lecture does not appear like
a simple dumping of his memory content, which is the expression one can get from
traditional representations of communication. Rather, this transcription, together
with the video, exhibits the performative dimensions of thinking and speaking.

**Fragment 1**

1  12  13  14
   a | b c | c d e |
   (1.00) (0.32) a:nd uh: (0.44) kh:mm (0.25)
   [------------] [--------] [--------] [---] [--------]
   [forward] [l>R] [hold] [reposition] [R>l] [l>R]

2  15  16  17
   f g | h | i |
   (1.00) (1.00) and then i i said it by
   --------] [----] [-------------] [--------] [--------]
   [l>R] [R>l] [draws line l>R] [hand moves to $B = 0$
   {elbow hand, as if
   beginning to draw

3  18  19
   j k |
   the tIME you get to HE:a (0.65)
   [----------] [---] [steps left and back]
The professor then begins to speak again, rapidly articulating his words: “and then I, I said it by the time you get to here” (lines 2–3). During this time, his right hand moves from the end of the thin line to the $B = 0$ graph where it rests for more than a second (Figure 1i→j). The elbow and hand are oriented as if they were beginning to draw. Just as the last few syllables appear, the body begins to move backward now making available more of the graph to see (Figure 1k). There is a 2.13-second pause while the professor gazes at the display. He then utters, in a much faster than normal succession of syllables something that we can hear to be about putting a sample (“it”) into a magnetic field and how this action would be exhibited in the graphical display: “when you put it in a magnetic field and that we’re kinda putting, by the time you get to here, when you put it in the magnetic field, it goes like there” (lines 4–7). We can hear and see this as a kind of blending whereby generic scientists or other agents (“you”) come to be collated with an inanimate physical entity or its representation in a graph. During the initial part of this utterance, the hand is resting, merely twisting slightly to the left. The hand then lifts off to return, as if in a searching move, to a spot on the chalkboard somewhat closer to the intersection between $B = 0$ and the first horizontal line (Figures 1l→n). Just as he talks for the third time about “putting it” into the magnetic field, he produces a vertical line from the $B = 0$ to the $B \neq 0$ curve (Figure 1n→o); and he then steps back orienting his gaze at the display as if contemplating it from afar.
FOREWORD
Figure 1. Hand-arm movements during the production of an explanation of refrigeration by sequential magnetization and demagnetization.
In this episode, we do not see an idea all of a sudden appear. Rather, there is a slow unfolding. But this unfolding movement is slow, marked by pauses, hesitations, and interruptions. The hand movements – Figure 1a→b, b→c, c→d, d→e, e→f, f→g – are not direct but rather appear to give structure to the perceptual field. The resulting structure is then recorded in the final movement (Figure 1g→h) when the chalk is placed at and drawn across from the intersection of the ordinate with the B = 0 line horizontally to the right.

This line is the result of preceding events: it has emerged from the movements that have been produced before. If it had already existed as the intended movement, then there would not have been a need to do all this moving around and about. We see that the endpoint is a vertical line of the structure \{S_1, B = 0, T\} → \{S_1, B ≠ 0, T\}. The hand, however, moves to different places on the B = 0 line, from a lower to a higher temperature. It thereby enacts a search that is about the precise placement, that is, at which temperature T this process is to occur.

The first possible starting point is marked while uttering “and then I, I said by the time you get to here” (lines 2–3). The professor then moves backward, as if he wanted to get a better look. He articulates the experimental process of putting the sample in the magnetic field, at which point the hand lifts off the chalkboard (Figure 1a), moves to a new place (Figure 1a→b), and then draws the line. Verbally, the description is repeated once the hand is at the new place and the vertical movement then coincides with the verbal articulation of “magnetic field.” This is precisely the process iconically signified by the hand movement and denoted by the line drawn. Although the two signifiers have the same structure, they do refer to two different physical realities: two different states of the system under question. Most importantly, from an experimental point of view, how does the system get from the endpoint of the preceding process \{S_1, B = 0, T_1\} to the beginning point of the subsequent process \{S_2, B = 0, T_2\} with S_2 < S_1 and T_2 < T_1? The answer to this question is crucial, as the lowering of the temperature is precisely at the heart of the entire phenomenon under discussion: cooling by means of adiabatic demagnetization. In the diagram, the non-intersection of the two processes means that another process would have had to occurred. But this process does not appear in the verbal description.

Why did the professor place the chalk to the left of where he ultimately drew the line? Why did he draw the thin horizontal line when he did not subsequently use its endpoint in the way he would subsequently? Why, if it did not matter where the line meets up with the B = 0 line, did he not move upward from the intersection of thin line with B ≠ 0? When he ultimately does the correct representation of the process – some 20 minutes later and after abandoning the present attempt – he actually moves in step-like fashion from the top right to the bottom left of the diagram between the now-corrected curves that intersected at the origin. It is obvious that the professor is not simply dumping the contents of his memory in front of his students; what we see and hear is not a simple externalization of mental structures into the environment from where it can be picked
up by the students. If we were to work with a constructivist approach where there are mental frameworks and conceptions in mind, then we would have to assume processes and means that degenerate the original thought during the reading-out process so that what the audience hears is somehow flawed and faulty. But there are different ways of thinking about and studying such phenomena. I provide this lecture fragment precisely because it is an ideal case for studying the relation between thinking and speaking in the manner that Vygotsky (1986) suggested investigating such phenomena. This concrete case of thinking and speaking, full of the “mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egregious stupidity strokes of genius, and the like” (Rorty, 1989, p. 14) that characterize the real-time production of communication constitutes precisely the phenomenon that we need to describe and theorize. Such an “account of linguistic communication dispenses with the picture of language as a third thing intervening between self and reality, and of different languages as barriers between persons and culture” (p. 14). Vygotsky (1927/1997) takes the same position suggesting that what “we want to know [is] the content and not the language in which it is expressed. In physics we have freed ourselves from language in order to study the content. We must do the same in psychology” (p. 327). This approach erases the distinction between language and the world all the while recognizing the differences within this unity. This leads him to search for “a theory of the unity, but not identity of the mental and the physical” (p. 290). In the following section, I briefly sketch the direction in which such an analysis would go.

A VYGOTSKIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

Psychological functions] must be explained not on the basis of internal organic connections (regulation), but in external terms, on the basis of the fact that man controls the activity of his brain from without through stimuli. (Vygotsky, 2005, p. 1023)

Much of the literature concerned with the speaking act present it purely in intentional terms. Thus, a person is said to have an idea in the head and uses speech, perhaps gesture, to present this idea to the outside. If this were the case, then we would not understand the real-time performance of the professor in the preceding section, which contains elements of disfluency, conversationally long pauses, additional nonrepresentational gestures, (rasping) sounds (e.g., “khm”) and interjections, gazes across the entire inscription produced on the chalkboard, and so on. This disfluent, real-time production is especially astonishing given that (a) he has prepared lecture notes containing the material that he is presenting here, (b) he has already drawn the figure before and talked about it, and (c) he has previously concluded the preceding lecture saying that there is something, “if anything,” wrong with the graph and associated conclusions.
Moreover, he specifically stated that he wants to show them a way that will assist them in understanding — only to realize that there is something wrong with what he has developed so far. Especially interesting are situations such as the one preceding the lines 1–2, where there are hand movements that have no apparent representational functions because they are reversed and superseded by other hand-arm movements. These movements, however, do not have to be seen as disfluency or as errors, because the very fact that they are produced, the have an effect of structuring the perceptual field that opens itself to the eyes. In the very production, the speaker perceives that the movement is not the one that will allow the unfolding (thought) process to proceed. This is precisely what cognitive scientists proposed while analyzing players of the game Tetris, who were moving objects faster in response to the unfolding game context than would be possible if they had processed the information available to them on the computer monitor, interpreted it, and used the result of the interpretation to mobilize subsequent actions. These are *epistemic* actions, which serve to learn about the environment; they are in contrast with *pragmatic* actions, which serve to get things done. That is, actions or, more generally, movements of the body — including the movements of such disparate things as the vocal cords and ideas — and things in the world constitute a form of thinking even in the case when the person has no intention to move in a particular way, that is, does not yet know what the movement will yield. This, then, would be consistent with the introductory quote to this section, in which Vygotsky states that the external stimuli are tools humans use to control their brain activity. The body as a whole moves and relative to it the hands and arms; in the words articulated, sonorous productions concretize ephemeral and undeveloped ideational possibilities. These concretizations shape the setting and, together with it, constitute the external stimuli that Vygotsky is writing about as stimuli that govern brain activity. This is precisely what we can distill from the account that James Watson provides of the instant when he and Francis Crick discovered the DNA structure. They moved about paper representations of the structures of the four bases involved. These external movements of shapes allowed the two to see what they later formulated as an idea: the double helix structure of DNA. In the same way we have to see the activity of the professor. Rather than thinking of him as engaging in a memory dump, we may see him as realizing and unfolding a rather indistinct and undeveloped thought. Both Vygotsky (1986) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) suggest just that: communicating in real time and the thinking it articulates are two developing processes themselves related by a process that is in development. That is, new structures, signs, emerge from movements that cannot have specific goals because that which is learned in the process is unknown.

Vygotsky (1986) is concerned with understanding and theorizing “the process of verbal thinking from the first dim stirring of a thought to its formulation” (p. 217). He proposes a framework subsequently confirmed in Soviet
psychological studies. Thought and word are one-sided manifestations of a higher unit. Speaking and thinking form a unit and their relation is a process, a continual, to-and-fro movement from one manifestation to the other. This process itself undergoes change such that it “may be regarded as development in the functional sense. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them” (p. 218). Vygotsky expands, “thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form” (p. 219). In the process, thought “moves, grows and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem” (p. 218). Each of the two processes has its own law of development, the inner semantic aspects, on the one hand, and the outer, phonetic on the other. Thus, “the structure of speech does not simply mirror the structure of thought; that is why words cannot be put on by thought like a ready-made garment” (p. 219). Simultaneously, the “flow of thought is not accompanied by a simultaneous unfolding of speech. The two processes are not identical, and there is no rigid correspondence between the units of thought and speech” (p. 249).

Many find thinking such a relation difficult – it is fundamentally a dialectical relation. Thinking and speaking simply are one-sided manifestations of a higher-order unit much like the wave and particle aspects are manifestations of the higher-order unit of light. Even though these different manifestations may appear to contradict each other, they are both the same in that they reflect the unity as a whole and are not the same. Vygotsky (1986) theorizes such phenomena as expressing a unity rather than identity. Most importantly, “thought is not the superior authority in this process. Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by motivation, i.e., by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions” (p. 252). To him, the unit is “verbal thought” the development of which he summarizes in the following way:

Verbal thought appeared as a complex, dynamic entity, and the relation of thought and word within it as a movement through a series of planes . . . from the motive that engenders a thought to the shaping of the thought, first in inner speech, then in meanings of words, and finally in words. It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that this is the only road from thought to word.

The development may stop at any point in its complicated course: an infinite variety of movement to and fro, of ways still unknown to us, is possible. (pp. 251–252).

The to-ing and fro-ing that may occur is precisely what we observe in the fragment of the lecture I present above. It begins with the declared motive of providing students with an additional perspective on the phenomenon of magnetic cooling, which he intends to help them in understanding. This motive engenders thought, which, in articulation, develops itself from an undifferentiated seed into a mature expression.
We can see from the quotation that Vygotsky almost entirely focuses on speech. But human communication does not simply occur by means of speech. An initial expansion of the Vygotskian framework had been proposed in psycholinguistics, where hand gestures are integrated with speech into one psychological unit. In subsequent work, we have expanded this fundamental unit of communication to include any modality of expression, including body movements other than the hand, body position, prosody, and perceptual aspects of the ground. In a chapter entitled “The body as expression, and speech,” Merleau-Ponty (1945) suggests that it is through the whole body that I both express thought and comprehend the thought of others. “The sense of the gesture thus ‘understood’ is not behind it, it confounds itself with the structure of the world that the gesture designs and that I take up on my own account, it spreads itself over the gesture” (pp. 216–217). In the same way as Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty speaks of an inner relation that relates thought and word, and he rejects as implausible the outer relation that would exist if speech were merely a signifier of thought. But the philosopher goes beyond the psychologist in taking the body in its entirety as constituting an expression rather than the sound-word alone. “If speech presupposed thought, if talking were first of all a matter of joining the object through an intention of knowledge or through a representation, we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion” (p. 206). More importantly, the author notes that even the “thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them” (p. 206).

The thought concerning the different processes come into being through the externalizing expression, and, as such, becomes a possible subject of revision as the now objectified thought comes to be subjectified again. It is through the expression that we both estrange a thought and then make it our own: “The movement of being consists, on the one hand, in the becoming an other than itself, and thus becoming its own immanent content; on the other hand, it takes back this unfolding or this existence of it, that is, it makes itself a moment and simplifies itself in something determinate” (Hegel, 1979, p. 51). That is, Vygotsky is realizing a program outlined by the German philosopher that consciousness develops by externalizing thought, realizing itself in a one-sided, determinate moment – the word – and taking itself back. In the externalization, thought becomes other than itself – i.e., becomes a word, something concrete and therefore determinate. But in the form of the word, consciousness simplifies itself but can do so only in a simplified form, as something other than itself, as a moment. What Vygotsky adds to the idealist philosopher is the aspect of real material life, the emotions and motivations that are at the origin – and therefore are the drivers – of thought.

In the case of our professor, we do not know whether a movement is an intended gesture. The intention for a particular gesture itself emerges from the movements. Thus, the movement from right to left (Figure 1d→e) and left to
right (Figure 1e—f) seem to be “searching” for placement of a line. They are epistemic movements, movements to learn from. They are not yet signs: specific signifier or signified do not yet exist – even though there may be an vague notion that some yet-to-be-determined signifier may exist to stand for a process that is articulating itself. But they constitute material and therefore objective manifestations (content) of thought, which thought can take back – in a process of subjectification – and thereby changes itself. Some movements observable just prior to this fragment anticipate subsequent drawing, a movement in the same direction leaving a trace, and other movements can be seen as iconic gestures over and against a line. Some of these are movements toward the emerging signifier, and some movements may become signifiers whereas others, such as the drawing of a line, become signifieds. A line is signifier and signified simultaneously, when a gesture seen over and about it provides an iconic image.

From the perspective articulated here, we can therefore understand the lecture as an unfolding event of communicating and thinking, which are not ready-made but develop in real time. Thus, any movement – be it visible as whole-body movement, hand-arm gesture, changing gaze, or prosody – provides material to the unfolding thought process, in the words of Vygotsky, provides stimuli for controlling the activity of the brain. In the process, specific signs (e.g., a specific line or gesture) actually emerge from the possibilities produced in hand-arm movements that do not yet have a signifying function. The emergence of signs and the emergence of thought therefore are united in the same overarching process of which both are but manifestations.

ISSUES CONCERNING VYGOTSKY SCHOLARSHIP

This book constitutes an important addition to the literature for all those new and experienced scholars who intend to conduct research from and consistent with a Vygotskian perspective. Smagorinsky lays out a framework that includes the theoretical and topical dimensions, issues that arise from the area of literacy, and aspects of methods and the writing of methods sections. As I show in the preceding sections, there are tremendous opportunities that arise from taking a Vygotskian perspective on thinking and speaking, which allows us to understand the real-time production of communication without presupposing that thought already exists in its mature form even when we study adult thinkers. In fact, Vygotsky (1986) does not distinguish between children and adults and draws on the latter to exemplify the development of the thought-language relation in chapter 7 of Thought and Language where he specifically addresses the relation between thinking and speaking: “Since functional problems are most readily solved by examining the highest form of a given activity, we shall, for a while, put aside the problem of development and consider the relations between thought and word in the mature mind” (p. 217, emphasis added). In the opening lines of this foreword, I already intimate that much of what Vygotsky has to say
is misrecognized in Western scholarship (which is a main tenor of the message of this book and a reason for its production). This is so because of numerous reasons, two of the most important of which include issues of translation and the inappropriate rendering of the Marxist underpinnings and method that characterizes Vygotsky’s work.

On Translation

Many scholars in the areas of education and psychology apparently assume that thought is independent of culture and language. Concrete evidence for this can be seen in discussions scholars have in the xmca forum that accompanies the journal Mind, Culture and Activity where some work with and recommend automatic translations (e.g., using Babel Fish). Being fortunate enough to be fluent in three languages (German and French besides English), I can assert that while the very nature of language makes any text translatable, it also makes any text untranslatable. Scholars concerned with translation from very different disciplinary background – e.g., Paul Ricœur, who is a traditional philosopher steeped in the hermeneutics of biblical texts or Jacques Derrida, celebrated by many as the foremost post-structuralist thinker – agree on the dialectical nature of the problematic of translation, which involves the assumption an underlying master language that relates different forms of expression within the same language or between two different languages.

Because this double postulation

– We never speak but one language . . .
(Yes but)
– We never speak only one language . . .

is not only the law itself of that which we call translation. It would be the law itself as translation. A law a little bit crazy, I am ready to admit. (Derrida, 1996, p. 25)

That is, speaking means making oneself intelligible to another, which is premised that despite the heterogeneity within and across languages, humans manage to communicate. This communication occurs even though “we never speak one language only.” This contradictory relation of the unity of heterogeneity – which in fact points to the non-self-identity of any language – also has been stated from within a more traditional philosophical approach. Thus,

[e]ither the diversity of languages expresses a radical heterogeneity – and then a translation is theoretically impossible; the languages are a priori untranslatable one into another. Or translation taken as a fact can be explained on the existence of a common ground that makes the fact of translation possible; but then we find ourselves in a situation of having to find the route to the originary language, either reconstructing it logically, and this is the route
toward a universal language; originary or universal, this absolute language has to be shown, in phonological, lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical tables. (Ricœur, 2004, pp. 25–26)

The problem of translation is serious, because, as I could show in much of my writing, ideas are not rendered in the same manner in another language, even leading to a falsification of what an author has written in his/her original language. This also is the case of the translations of Vygotsky’s work. For example, he uses two adjectives – obščestvennyj and social’no – both of which Vygotsky’s translators into English tend to render as “social.” But the German translation suggests that the former term is used in the sense of “societal” and only the latter is used in the sense of “social.” In fact, the translators of a recent German version of Thought and Language, Joachim Lompscher and Georg Rückriem (Vygotsky, 2002), point out the notorious problems with the translations of Vygotsky’s original text into European languages. The problems may reside partly in the writings of Vygotsky himself. For example, his original Russian text (Vygotsky, 2005) translated and published as “Concrete Human Psychology” (Vygotsky, 1989) contains citations to Marx, where he correctly uses obščestvennyj to translate Marx’s German gesellschaftlich (societal) but then state ideas that he grounds in Marx by using the adjective social’no (social). The English translation does not distinguish the terms and simply uses “social” throughout, thereby not rendering Marx’s original text in the proper manner. Similar problems exist with other terms, for example, obučenie, which is instruction in the form of the relation of teaching and learning. This term is often misused in the Anglo-Saxon by making it a one-directional flow of knowledge from a more competent or knowledgeable teacher to a less competent or knowledgeable student. As we show in recent work, this renders the kind of relation Vygotsky was thinking about – something symmetrical – in a totally inadequate manner (Roth & Radford, 2010, 2011).

The result of such inadequate translations can be seen in the misunderstanding many Western scholars have concerning the relationship between Vygotsky and Alexei Leont’ev. There are some who believe that the former attended more to the individual and the latter more to the collective (society). But this is absolutely not the case. Thus, for Vygotsky (1927/1997)

> each person is to some degree a measure of the society, or rather class, to which he belongs, for the whole totality of social relationships is reflected in him. . . . We must reconquer the right for psychology to examine what is special, the individual as a social microcosm, as a type, as an expression or measure of the society. (p. 317)

I am quoting the translation without being able to ascertain whether Vygotsky used the adjective obščestvennyj or social’no. Elsewhere he writes: “development proceeds not toward socialization, but toward individualization of societal functions (transformation of societal relations into psychological functions)”
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(Vygotsky, 2005, p. 1025). The English translation of the text (Vygotsky, 1989) not only translates the two occurrences of общестvennyj as “social” but also replaces “societal relations” as “social functions” (Vygotsky, 1989, p. 61). Without doubt, thinking higher psychological functions as the result of societal relations is very different from thinking them as the result of social relations. The former imply, as Vygotsky suggests in the quote, the relations of (social) classes, with all the issues of inequity that these imply, whereas social relations may be reduced to person–person interactions that have no political connotations whatsoever.

Turning to Leont’ev, we find precisely the same orientation to the individual as constitutive moment and result of society:

the real basis of man’s personality is the totality of the by nature societal relations of man to the world, that is, relations that are realized. This occurs in his activity, or more precisely, through the totality of his manifold activities. (Leontjew, 1982, pp. 175–176)

Again, the English translation renders Leont’ev’s Russian adjective общестvennyj as “social” whereas the German version translates the passage using gesellschaftlich (societal). That the latter term is to be used can be seen from the fact that the Russian term translates Marx’s German equivalent, and the German translation of Leont’ev correctly re-translates the term into German. More important perhaps than the linguistic issue is the fundamental equivalence of the way in which Leont’ev has taken up Vygotsky, both grounding themselves in Marx. Leont’ev does not offer a different perspective on the individual in society but the same as Vygotsky, though in much more elaborate form. The role of Marx in the work of Vygotsky is worth a look, for it characterizes his entire work rather than being – as some scholars claim – a mere nod to the emerging totalitarian government in the USSR at the time of Vygotsky’s writing.

Marxist Foundation of Vygotsky’s Work

Some scholars deny that Vygotsky was a Marxist thinker often suggesting that he referred to Marx to please the Soviet rulers of his days. My sense, however, is very different. He does not merely drop the names of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin but exhibits, in his way of writing and theorizing, precisely the same approach that characterizes Marx, Engels, or the Marxist approach of the Bakhtin group. It does not behoove me to produce a full and exhaustive proof here. Instead I hope that the following pointers to his thinking and method suffice to exhibit his deep grounding in and debt to the dialectical materialist approach Marx has given rise to. This approach also characterizes those of his successors, including Leont’ev and Klaus Holzkamp, who worked out the program Leont’ev had framed based on Vygotsky’s ideas.

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When our Marxists explain the Hegelian principle in Marxist methodology they rightly claim that each thing can be examined as a microcosm, as a universal measure in which the whole big world is reflected. On this basis they say that to study one single thing, one subject, one phenomenon until the end, exhaustively, means to know the world in all its connections. (Vygotsky, 1927/1997, p. 317, underline added)

Vygotsky then refers to the individual human as a microcosm of society, the case I quote from above. He articulates how Pavlov and others proceed and then suggests, “when I am experimenting, I am studying A, B, C. . ., i.e., a number of concrete phenomena, and I assign the conclusions to different groups: to all people, to school-aged children, to activity, etc.” (p. 318). He elaborates the description of his method:

I have tried to introduce such a method into conscious psychology and deduce the laws of the psychology of art on the basis of the analysis of one fable, one short story, and one tragedy. In doing so I proceeded from the idea that the well-developed forms of art provide the key to the underdeveloped ones, just as the anatomy of man provides the key to the anatomy of the ape. I assumed that Shakespeare's tragedy explains the enigmas of primitive art and not the other way around. Further, I talk about all art and do not verify my conclusions on music, painting, etc. What is even more: I do not verify them on all or the majority of the types of literature. I take one short story, one tragedy. (p. 319)

That is, Vygotsky refers to Marx’s method, states a characteristic of it, then provides examples from the work of others, and follows this by suggesting that his own study of the psychology of art (Vygotsky, 1971) is an example of introducing this “method into conscious psychology.” After describing his method of finding the general dimensions in the analysis “one fable, one short story, and one tragedy,” and after elaborating further on the sameness of this method with the approach of Pavlov, he then suggests that this is precisely the same method that Marx used in his analysis of economy. Thus,

Marx [1867/1981, p. 121 says essentially the same when he compares abstraction with a microscope and chemical reactions in the natural sciences. The whole of Das Kapital is written according to this method. Marx analyzes the “cell” of bourgeois society – the form of the commodity value – and shows that a mature body can be more easily studied than a cell. He discerns the structure of the whole social order and all economical formations in this cell. He says that “to the uninitiated its analysis may seem the hair-splitting of details. We are indeed dealing with details, but such details as microscopic anatomy is also dealing with.” He who can decipher the meaning of the cell
Clearly, there cannot be any doubt that Vygotsky draws on the same dialectical materialist method that characterizes Marx. He provides concrete examples that exhibit the parallels between his own approach and that of the philosopher. With those readers who still doubt, I want to turn and return to *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1986). The approach to theorizing articulated above pervades the entire book, beginning with chapter 1, apparently written shortly before his death and after the remainder of the book has written. Here Vygotsky advocates a “unit analysis,” which is synonymous to the “cell” that he uses in the preceding quotation.

After critiquing traditional psychology, Vygotsky suggests: “Psychology, which aims at a study of complex holistic systems, must replace the method of analysis into elements with the method of analysis into units” (p. 5). He then suggests *word meaning* to be the “unit of verbal thought that is further unanalyzable and yet retains the properties of the whole” (p. 5). He proposes that “the conception of word meaning as a unit of both generalizing thought and social interchange is of incalculable value for the study of thought and language” (p. 9). Unit analysis “demonstrates the existence of a dynamic system of meaning in which the affective and the intellectual unite” (p. 10). That is, much as the commodity form value is the “‘cell’ of bourgeois society,” word meaning is a unit that unites the affective and the intellectual. Moreover, this suffices “to show that the method used in this study of thought and language is also a promising tool for investigating the relation of verbal thought to consciousness as a whole and to its other essential functions” (p. 11). That is, Vygotsky not only claims word meaning – the relation of the processes of thinking and speaking – constitutes a unit, but that this unit is a “promising tool” in the study of thought and its relation to consciousness. But consciousness is a collective, human phenomenon, which individualizes itself in self-consciousness. “Consciousness,” Vygotsky suggests, “is reflected in a word as the sun in a drop of water. A word relates to consciousness as a living cell relates to a whole organism” (p. 256). More so, “a word is a microcosm of human consciousness” (p. 256) much like a raindrop reflects the entire world, and much like the word and consciousness are related in the way “an atom relates to the universe” (p. 256). That is, he articulates precisely the same relations as in his text on the crisis of psychology, with which I begin this subsection. Just as his study of art by means of close analysis of three specific texts leads him to understand the psychology of art generally, including primitive art, so does word meaning lead him to understand the relation of thought and human consciousness.

This is also where we can observe the undeniable relation to the thought of one of his contemporary: Mikhail Bakhtin. Vygotsky suggests that “the word is a thing in our consciousness . . . that is absolutely impossible for one person, but that
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becomes a reality for two” (p. 256). His contemporary has exactly the same take in his Marxist approach to language:

Whatever moment of the expression-utterance we consider, it will be determined by the real conditions of the utterance in question, that is, before all by the most immediate social situation.

In effect, the utterance is the product of the interaction of two individuals socially organized and, even if there is no real interlocutor, one can substitute to him a average representative of the social group to which the speaker belongs. The word addresses itself to the interlocutor; it is a function of the person of this interlocutor: It will vary depending on whether or not it is a man from the same social group, whether he is inferior or superior in the social hierarchy, whether or not he is linked to the speaker by more or less close social links (father, brother, husband, etc.) (Bakhtine [Volochinov], 1977, p. 123, underline added)

In this quote, we see the same emphasis on the societal relation – although Bakhtin calls it “social,” he subsequently specifies it in terms of social hierarchies that are really the product of a society and its division of labor. Like Vygotsky, Bakhtin suggests that the word is a reality for two, even in situations where the interlocutor is absent. An individual never is the owner of a word – not in the least because language is a feature of the collective. Thus,

[i]f language is as old as consciousness itself, and if language is a practical consciousness-for-others and, consequently, a practical consciousness-for-myself, then not only one particular thought but all consciousness is connected with the development of the word. (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 256)

This leads Bakhtin to ask how to think about the speaker. He concludes: “[i]n effect, if he does not completely own the word, because it is situated in something like a border zone, he can claim at least a good half” (Bakhtine [Volochinov], 1977, p. 124). Here, then, we have a very close connection to the often-decried “post-modernist” and “post-structuralist” approaches, which in fact do not differ from the deep structure of Marxian thought also pervasive in such philosophical works as that by Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida (Roth, 2006). The equivalence of the approach is obvious in the following quotation:

Monolingualism of the other still means another thing, which will reveal itself little by little: that in any case one speaks only one language – and one does not have/own it. One never speaks but one language – and it exists asymmetrically, returning from the other, always, for the other, from the other, kept by the other. Having come from the other, having remained with the other, having returned to the other. (Derrida, 1996, p. 70).

These are interesting ideas that any study of literacy will have to pick up and address. Using the Vygotskian approach will be ideal because the object, language,
as outline here, and the method of studying it, are co-extensive – a point made over
and over again in Vygotsky’s (1927/1996) chapter on the crisis of psychology. In
this book, Smagorinsky is laying a foundation for changing the ways in which
Anglo-Saxon scholars will approach the problems of language and literacy from a
truly Vygotskian perspective, not from a semblance of it, which has emerged in
part because of the ideological differences between two world powers at the time
of the first translations of the scholars work into English.

CODA

There is much that I share with Peter Smagorinsky, beginning with the fact that
I was trained in Piagetian constructivism and moved on to do work in informa-
tion processing. As he, I did not begin to do serious scholarship within a
Vygotskian framework until after having worked through a range of theoretical
paradigms – including radical constructivism, social constructivism, phenomenol-
ogy, ethnomethodology, discursive psychology, and the Helsinki version of
cultural-historical activity theory that Smagorinsky frequently refers to – before
discovering the importance of Vygotsky’s work for my own interest in the
emergence of thinking and speaking processes (e.g., Roth, 2009, 2010). It was
in and through my deep engagement with Thought and Language particularly
that I discovered (a) the relationship between Marx and Vygotsky in their ways
of thinking about phenomena, which is grounded in their praxis of materialist
dialectics and (b) the relationship between Vygotsky and Bakhtin, which again
can be attributed to the manner of theorizing to understand processes “in the
Heraclitean stream” (Vygotsky, 1927/1997, p. 274). It is in and out of this
recognition that I have supported the author of this book in his project to articu-
late a Vygotskian approach to the study of literacy practices. What we need – as
seen in the preceding sections, and what Smagorinsky is helping us developing
toward – is a working out of the possibilities that exist within the Vygotskian
approach as he himself conceived it. Too much Western scholarship at this in-
stant of the educational sciences only cursorily touches upon Vygotsky rather
than engaging deeply not only with the contents of his writing but also, and
more importantly so, with his method of developing new understanding through
the careful analysis of concrete cases. The point is to find and work out in each
concrete case that which in fact is general.

To find the general in the concrete specific means to think genetically, where
this term refers to the developmental aspects rather than to the genes. ForVygot-
sky, as for all those who use a dialectical materialist perspective, the general is like
a seed that concretizes itself in the mature organism as a function of the condition,
including its own current state and relations to the environment. That is, the general is
always present in the concrete particular, because the latter actually realizes the possi-
bilities inherent in the former. Vygotsky (1927/1997) describes the approach in this
manner after discussing a variety of approaches to the psychology of art:
This is all true, but it does not change the veracity of a principle, because it is abstracted from all this. It only says that the aesthetical reaction is like this. It is another matter to find the boundaries and sense of the aesthetic reaction itself within art.

Abstraction and analysis does all this. The similarity with the experiment resides in the fact that here, too, we have an artificial combination of phenomena in which the action of a specific law must manifest itself in the purest form. It is like a snare for nature, an analysis in action. In analysis we create a similar artificial combination of phenomena, but then through abstraction in thought. . . .

Each lyrical poem is such an experiment. The task of the analysis is to reveal the law that forms the basis of nature’s experiment. But also when the analysis does not deal with a machine, i.e., a practical experiment, but with any phenomenon, it is in principle similar to the experiment. It would be possible to prove how infinitely much our equipment complicates and refines our research, how much more intelligent, stronger and more perspicuous it makes us. Analysis does the same. (p. 320)

In this excerpt, Vygotsky critiques the traditional (Kantian, idealist) way of abstracting from phenomena, which retains only externalities (manifestations) that are related to the externalities (manifestations) of similar phenomena. But externalities, as Hegel (1979) says, “are indifferent to one another and therefore lack the necessity for one another that out to lie in the relation of an outer to an inner” (p. 236). Vygotsky suggests that the best we can say that one thing “is like” another phenomenon, which is the case because “such an arbitrary combination of entities that are externalities for each other makes no law” (Hegel, 1979, p. 236). Vygotsky recommends a different approach by saying that “it is another matter to find the boundaries and sense of the” phenomenon itself within the concrete case, which, in the quotation, is art. Incidentally, Vygotsky has chosen as concrete objects a fable, a short story, and a tragedy, all from the domain that is at the center of Smagorinsky’s concerns: language and literacy. The articulation of a Vygotskian approach therefore is not only of general relevance (to the study of knowing and learning) but also of particular relevance to the area that Smagorinsky has studied for over two decades.

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APPENDIX

The time measurements for the sound track have been made using PRAAT, a freely downloadable software package common among linguists (www.praat.org). The measurements are accurate to ± 10 milliseconds. The video was recorded at a picture rate of 33 ms/image. The coordination between the sound track and video therefore is accurate to 33 ms. The transcript contains the following elements:

| a and when you; (0.95) | b | c |
------------------------|---|---|
| hand moves up |

The transcription attempts to preserve the sound that can be heard rather than the spelling of the words. The following conventions have been used: when – capital letters for emphasized syllables; a:nd – colon, to indicate lengthening of sound by 1/10 seconds per colon; ,?; – punctuation indicates pitch movement rather than grammar, slightly rising, strongly rising, slightly falling, strongly falling; (0.95) – pause in seconds; =r – equal sign indicates latching

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NOTES

AUTHOR’S PREFACE

In a sense, I have been writing this book for twenty years. This version of my text represents what I hope is a relatively mature account of what I have come to understand to be a Vygotskian perspective on literacy research. I deliberately hedge this understanding because my grasp of Vygotskian concepts continues to evolve as I grapple with new readings and my ongoing studies of the teaching and learning of literacy practices. In this preface I will briefly outline my own development of a concept of what a Vygotskian perspective means when applied to literacy research.

I did not begin my career in education with any knowledge of L. S. Vygotsky or his research program. When I began teaching in 1976, Vygotsky was little known in my field of English Education, i.e., the domain focused on the teaching and learning of literature, writing, and language (i.e., English grammar), as opposed to teaching and learning English as a new or foreign language. My primary focus was on learning a principled approach to teaching these three traditional strands of the English curriculum in an integrated fashion to high school students in public schools in the Chicago area. The reigning educational psychologist of the day was Piaget, although he was not featured by my major professor, George Hillocks, at the University of Chicago where I earned my M.A.T. in English Education. Rather, I learned to teach in the context of Benjamin Bloom’s new work on mastery learning (Bloom, 1976) and his classic work on educational objectives (Bloom, 1956), and in tradition of Ralph Tyler’s (1949) views on curriculum alignment, all in the long shadow cast by John Dewey, who had once directed the adjoining Laboratory School while a faculty member in Chicago’s Judd Hall.

Through this preparation I learned the systematic planning of instruction in concept-based units, something I still emphasize in my current work on instructional design (e.g., Smagorinsky, 2008; Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2010). This preparation served me well as a high school teacher in terms of my ability to think in terms of how to organize instruction according to themes and other concepts (e.g., studying literature and engaging in writing around such conceptual problems as coming of age, considering the question of human progress, and so on). And as a beginning teacher, that was my focus. I was not yet concerned with how my teaching might interact with the backgrounds that my students brought to class—my schools had fairly homogeneous student populations—as I later came to do through my reading of the sociocultural literature (see, e.g., Smagorinsky, 2002, 2007a, 2009) and my resultant reconsideration of the effects of my teaching.
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My return to graduate school in 1983 involved me in a more research-rich environment than did the practice-oriented, if theoretically framed, orientation of my master’s program. My decision to return for doctoral studies was motivated by my interest in learning more about how to teach writing, which at the time was a highly contested area of the curriculum. The primary tension at the time was between product-oriented instruction presented by teachers through models of such forms as the five-paragraph theme, and teaching that focused on the processes that one goes through to produce such forms. Form-oriented instruction was viewed as “traditional teaching” and thus archaic; the new wave emphasized knowledge of procedures and strategies.

Even within the process-oriented camp, there were major sources of tension. My master’s and doctoral advisor, George Hillocks, believed that one learned how to write by learning different procedures for different sorts of writing tasks (see Hillocks, 1995, for a comprehensive outline of his method; and Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992, for a review of the terms of the debate). Learning to write a personal narrative and learning to write an argument, he asserted, required different kinds of knowledge of purpose, process, form, and readerly expectations. Teachers thus had to learn how to scaffold different sorts of processes by planning activities that engaged students in how to think about the problems their writing was designed to address.

His primary process-oriented antagonists—and the disagreements were quite contentious—viewed writing as something undertaken by people to suit their own interests and needs such that a teacher’s instructional design was considered to be inappropriate and heavy-handed (e.g., Atwell, 1987). Taking a perspective more grounded in Piagetian constructivism and Rousseauian Romanticism, this approach emphasized the need for teachers to stand back and let children and adolescents set their own writing course in terms of topic, process, form, purpose, and audience. As Graves (1983) memorably stated his position, teachers needed to stand back and follow the child, rather than leading her, as advocated by Hillocks. As a student of Hillocks, I was inclined to accept his premises; but at the same time, my high school faculty was strongly influenced by Emig (1971), a leader along with Graves of the nondirectional group of process advocates. My doctoral studies thus began in the midst of this tension surrounding writing instruction: to emphasize form or process, and if emphasizing process, to focus on particular task-related strategies or to let students determine their own directions, topics, and processes.

The early 1980s were heady times for writing research. The protocol analysis studies of Flower and Hayes (1980a, 1980b, and many others) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1986, 1987), grounded in the information processing paradigm that sought to use the computer as a metaphor for human cognition, spearheaded the effort to understand the process of writing by eliciting think-alouds from writers as they composed. I immersed myself in this scholarship as a way to understand how writing unfolded, and my dissertation (Smagorinsky, 1991) explored the thought
processes of writers producing a single type of writing—extended definition essays—in response to three instructional approaches differentiated by the variables representing the major approaches I have reviewed: the traditional presentation of models essays, a Hillocksian structured process approach focused on task-specific definitional strategies, and a nondirectional process approach in which students used the process of free writing to generate ideas. Rather than studying the essays themselves, I contrasted pre-instruction and post-instruction think-alouds to see how the different instructional treatments, as they were known in the parlance of the experimental paradigm in which I worked, affected students’ thinking as they wrote. The links I made between the variable of instruction and the students’ cognition in this early work had no sociocultural basis, however; my interpretive efforts were grounded in how to construct cognitive models of composing as they unfolded in relation to different methods of teaching writing.

This emphasis began to change within a few years of completing my degree in 1989 and taking my first university position at the University of Oklahoma in 1990. My curriculum and instruction department at OU was heavily Piagetian at the time, with faculty in some programs deliberately selected for their fit with Piagetian constructivism and its assumptions about human development unfolding in predictable stages, with such concepts as conservation becoming available to children with their biological maturation rather than in relation to instruction or other environmental factors. At the same time, through my national networks and at the insistence of one colleague, Steve Witte, I was hearing more and more about an alternative way of thinking about how people learn that emerged from the work of L. S. Vygotsky. Steve gave me a reading list and I got to work engaging with the ideas of Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and scholars working in his considerable wake: Cole (1996), Moll (1990), Rogoff (1990), Wertsch (1985, 1991), and many others.

Based on this reading, I began to re-examine the assumptions behind my early work and think about how to reconceptualize it based on Vygotsky’s premise that the psychology ought to be fundamentally developmental in focus, with volitional, goal-directed, tool-mediated action in its social, cultural, and historical context serving as the unit of analysis for studying human growth, understanding, and action. I was fortunate to be able to attend the September, 1994 International Conference on Lev Vygotsky and the Contemporary Human Sciences in the conference center in Golitsyna, about an hour from Moscow, an event I consider to be a landmark occasion in my career given the ideas to which I was exposed and the new network of scholars that I joined. At the conference I also made one connection that has survived to this day, that being my followup on advice to subscribe to the XLCHC online discussion network hosted by Mike Cole.

In the absence of a robust discussion surrounding Vygotsky at Oklahoma, this network provided me with a community of scholars from around the world who were interested in discussing and applying Vygotskian ideas to new international developments and challenges. Its original name of XLCHC indicated
its role as a crossroads for those with a history of participation in the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at the University of California-San Diego. The opportunity to subscribe was subsequently opened to any willing participant. The network was renamed when The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition went from an in-house publication designed to keep LCHC participants in touch with one another’s emerging work to a refereed journal, Mind, Culture, and Activity. The newly-named XMCA discussion network then took on the role of discussing and exchanging ideas, with the journal MCA serving as a vehicle for more polished presentations of research and theory.

Like anyone trying to grasp a new and difficult concept, I experienced a learning trajectory that resembled what Vygotsky (1987) terms a “twisting path” rather than a linear one (cf. Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003). Even though I began immersing myself in Vygotskian scholarship, my publications through 1994 were slow to take up his work in a consistent and substantive way. For example, Michael Smith and I wrote an article (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992) reviewing the nature of knowledge in writing and reading, identifying three stances available in research on each: that knowledge is general across tasks (e.g., the general process approach of Emig and Graves), that knowledge is specific to tasks (e.g., the structured process approach of Hillocks), and that knowledge even within tasks is specific according to the values of different communities of practice.

This trifurcation is evident in argumentation, in which some believe that learning general writing strategies (e.g., writing freely to generate ideas) is sufficient to write effectively for arguments or any other writing task; some believe that writing arguments requires different formal and procedural knowledge than do other tasks such as writing narratives; and some believe that arguing within one community of practice (e.g., the bellicose and antagonistic means of exchange that characterize television political pundits) requires different knowledge than does arguing within another (e.g., the perspicuous writing and speaking of lawyers presenting briefs to judges in a court of law).

This last position would greatly benefit from a Vygotskian framework, given that it posits the importance of culture in the development of a worldview and its associated practices. Yet in my early stages of concept development, I did not have a sufficient grasp of Vygotsky’s principles to provide this grounding. Similarly, in 1994 I published an edited book on research method in which I persisted with an information processing framework for using protocol analysis for the study of writing, even as I was reading heavily in Vygotskian scholarship that contested the “in-the-head” view of cognition central to that tradition, one that Leont’ev (1981) dismissed as “the traditional bourgeois psychological approach to consciousness” (p. 223). Within a few years I was ready to challenge those assumptions, both with regard to writing (Smagorinsky, 1997) and protocol analysis (Smagorinsky, 1998). My halting, fitful path of development, however, is evident in my two-steps-forward-one-step-back process of coming to understand what a Vygotskian perspective provided for literacy.

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research and the contradictory positions I was taking from conversation to conver-
sation and article to article in the early 1990s.

Gradually my writing and thinking began to cohere in a more consistent view
that culture mediates human development such that thinking reflects social
practices while in turn helping to shape them. Simply coming to a greater under-
standing of Vygotsky, however, provided only a new channel to provide contours
to guide my thinking; it did not provide me anything approaching conceptual clar-
ity. My first references to Vygotsky came in my efforts to make contextual sense
of students discussing literature in small groups as a function of larger patterns of
localized classroom discourse (Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993) and students’ interpreta-
tions of literature through art (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) in
the context of an alternative school in which their teacher encouraged nontradi-
tional compositional tool use. Note that the publication dates indicate that as I was
beginning to take a Vygotskian perspective in some publications, I persisted with
information processing assumptions in others.

Even after adopting Vygotsky’s ideas more wholeheartedly, my twisting path of
concept development took a few errant turns with my effort to frame my studies as
motivated by activity theory, which I broadly took to mean a view of situated and
distributed cognitions that are culturally and historically grounded, socially situ-
at ed, and locally practiced. When I referred to my research with this term in manu-
scripts submitted for publication, however, I was scolded by reviewers for not ref-
erencing Engeström, who had assumed the activity theory mantle in his workplace
studies in which he used his activity triangle as a mediating device for workforce
collectives to “expand” their knowledge into new forms of learning and activity
(e.g., Engeström, 1999).

According to Engeström and Miettinen (1999), “a theoretical account of the
constitutive elements of the system under investigation is needed. In other words,
there is a demand for a new unit of analysis. Activity has a strong candidate for
such a unit of analysis in the concept of object-oriented, collective, and culturally-
mediated human activity, or activity system” (p. 9; emphasis in original). This sys-
tem involves analysis at the level of “collective motive-driven activity, individual
goal-driven action, and automatic operations driven by the tools and conditions of
action” (p. 9), a focus that they derive from Leont’ev (1978). This emphasis on the
activity system, argue the authors, is distinct from Wertsch’s sociocultural theory
of mediated action (Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995) and Lave and Wenger’s
(1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation because of what Engeström
and Miettinen see as too great a focus on the individual rather than the collective in
the work of Wertsch et al. and Lave and Wenger.

Engeström and Miettinen (1999) summarize their differences with these
approaches by asserting that, although their semiotic and interactional dimensions
are potentially productive, they are problematic when considered in an attempt to
understand context. Individuals act in collective practices, communities, and insti-
tutions. Such collective practices are not reducible to sums of individual action;
they require theoretical conceptualization in their own right. When the individual action is the privileged unit of analysis, collective practice can only be added on as a more or less external envelope. Human conduct appears to appear as a string of goal-directed acts of rational actors.

This assertion of activity theory as oriented to collectives rather than contextualized individuals appears to have become orthodox to many, particularly those who were enlisted as reviewers of my manuscripts. My engagement with these critiques led me to reject the notion that I was an activity theorist, and I began referring informally to myself as a defrocked activity theorist, one who once believed but now was scorned because I was more interested in contextualized individuals than collective activity systems, as seemingly required in scholarship claiming an activity theory perspective. I thus began to disassociate myself from activity theory and the terminology that became associated with Engeström’s work, not because I find it wrong but because it did not characterize my interests, which are more aligned with Wertsch’s sociocultural theory of individuals engaged in action mediated by cultural tools.

Work that I had undertaken thus, in short order, became subject to theoretical revision because of the social and disciplinary pressure I felt to conform activity theory claims to Engeström’s formulation, and my disinclination to do so. In Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999), for instance, we framed our studies of early-career teachers’ development of literacy teaching approaches and appropriation of pedagogical tools in terms of activity theory, referencing Wertsch’s claims to be employing a theory of activity and Cole’s (1996) CHAT perspective. I cannot speak for my coauthors in terms of this perspective’s appropriateness for their work. My own approach of working from individual, situated cases, however, soon came in conflict with the field’s association of activity theory with Engeström’s collectivist insistence and I began to distance myself from its emphasis, vocabulary, and orientation (e.g., Smagorinsky, 2009).

Those of us in the U.S. are raised from birth to think in terms of individuals and independence rather than collectives and group action, such that if Engeström is right, a perspective like activity theory is difficult to integrate into our prior frameworks for thinking, even as they are emphasized (with or without proper understanding) in discussions, presentations, and publications and more appropriately applied by researchers from more collectivist social backgrounds (see, e.g., the Scandinavian contributors to Ellis, Edwards, & Smagorinsky, 2010).

I am not in a position to say who is right, however, given the limitations of what is available to me as a typical American who lacks fluency in European languages. In writing this book, however, I had to make another correction, and no doubt it will not be my last. Roth and Radford (2011) argue that Leon’t’ev, in the tradition of historical dialectical materialism, offers a new way in which to theorize the question of the subject (its consciousness, its psychic processes, its personality) in ways that are not dualis-
tic in nature. Leont’ev’s answer is this: development occurs in and through relations with others in the pursuit of collectively motivated activity. From this point of view, the psyche is a culturally and historically evolved form of reflection. Hence something that can exist through two mutually constitutive terms: an ‘I’ and an ‘Ego’ (a complex that includes subjects and the symbolic and material reality that surrounds them). Thus, we agree with Leont’ev when he says that ‘any psychic reflection is the result of a real connection, of a real interaction of a living, highly organized, material subject and the material reality around him’ (Leontyev 1981: 225). Psychic reflection, consciousness, mind, or abstract knowledge cannot exist or ‘arise without the subject’s activity. It cannot help depending on activity, cannot help being subordinated to the subject’s life relations realized by activity’ (ibid.: 225). (p. 2; emphasis in original)

Here Roth and Radford (2011) read Leont’ev differently than does Engeström, asserting that Leont’ev allows more space for the individual’s goal-directed action than does Engeström. Neither Roth nor Engeström reads Leont’ev in Russian, but both do in German, providing each with a broader perspective than is available to me yet finding something different in the translations. Both characterize themselves as activity theorists or cultural-historical activity theorists (e.g., Roth & Lee, 2007), drawing on Leont’ev (1981 and other texts). My position as a researcher of individuals-in-context is available through Roth’s reading but not Engeström’s, who would argue that by focusing on situated individuals, I thus cannot sufficiently account for context, even though my attention to cultural-historical aspects of settings is, I believe, sufficient for the claims I make. Even as I write this book, therefore, I come across new ideas (if not entirely new understandings) that complicate my efforts to situate myself with respect to the research tradition that I believe I am working within.

This book represents an effort to update, consolidate, and extend my prior work as a literacy researcher operating from a Vygotskian perspective. In doing so I return to some earlier work, some of which holds up well and some of which requires revision and reconsideration in order to fit conceptually with my present understanding of what my research has amounted to thus far, with the expectation that this understanding will continue to grow. By articulating how I see Vygotsky informing literacy studies, I hope to accomplish a more clearly conceptual understanding for my own purposes and to provide some illumination and insight, I hope, for other readers. With that as my goal, I next introduce this volume and then get down to the serious and difficult work of trying to write myself into a new understanding of issues that have perplexed me for many years now and that I continue to wrestle with as each new effort helps to refine the last.

Athens, Georgia
June 2011
NOTES

1 The contents of the newsletter have been archived at http://lchc.ucsd.edu/Histarch/newsletters.html, and selected publications are collected in Cole, Engeström, and Vasquez (1997).

2 I’m reminded of the old joke—whose punch line relies on listeners’ recognition of its truth value—that those who speak three languages are trilingual, those who speak two are bilingual, and those who speak one are American. Like many Americans, I took foreign languages in school to little long-term effect. I studied Latin for one year, and took many years of French and one year of Spanish, both using the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and the dialogues I was required to memorize, and can still recall (“Bonjour Jacques, comment vas-tu?” “Tres bien, merci. Et tu?” “Pas mal, merci.”). I also took a year of French in college, where I was ultimately required to read Camus’s existential novel *L’Étranger* in French, which was a truly mystifying experience until I discovered that everyone else in the class was taking the shortcut of reading an English translation, a practice I gladly embraced. I was also required to pass a French exam as part of my doctoral program at the University of Chicago, in which I translated a set of French social science article excerpts into English, passing the exam on my third try when the material finally matched my meager level of fluency. Shortly thereafter I watched a French film, but couldn’t understand a word the actors said.
PART 1

THEORETICAL AND TOPICAL FRAMEWORK
CHAPTER 1

THE CHALLENGES OF CLAIMING A VYGOTSKIAN PERSPECTIVE

Claiming Vygotsky as a theoretical source has become a common practice in much recent scholarship on teaching and learning. Doing so, however, is problematic given the reliance of most non-Russians on translated versions of Vygotsky and given the different ways people have found to appropriate what appears in both the original Russian versions and in the translations. A single text, *Myshlenie i Rech': Psikhologicheskie Issledovaniya* (Vygotsky, 1934), has been translated three different times under two different titles (as *Thought and Language* in Vygotsky, 1962, 1986; and as *Thinking and Speech* in 1987). Moll (1990) sees Vygotsky's work as sociohistorical psychology, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) characterize his project as sociocognitive, Wertsch (1994) argues that Vygotsky's perspective is sociocultural, Atherton (2011) views Vygotsky as being a social constructivist, Rodina (2006) he is a social constructionist, Mikhailov (2006) describes Vygotsky as a cultural-historical psychologist, Engeström (1987) characterizes his work as activity theory, and Cole (1996) has chosen the term cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to describe his work in Vygotsky's tradition as what he calls cultural psychology.

My goal with this book is not to tease apart these related constructs in all their substantial detail, or to analyze them to determine which characterize a Vygotskian perspective better than others. Rather, it is to try to explain what I see as available to literacy researchers based on the perspective provided by Vygotsky's work in human development. I do engage in some terminological interrogation, but not at the expense of the focus of my effort. Each of these terms has currency regarding some aspect of Vygotsky's work, and no single term can possibly capture the complexity of his perspective, one that posits a historical, cultural, social theory of volitional, tool-mediated cognition and action that contributes to human development toward teleologically contoured, goal-oriented ends.

Even when people can agree on the terms of a Vygotskian approach, they often disagree on the substance of his concepts. His best-known construct, the zone of proximal development (or ZPD, which I treat in detail in Chapter 3), has been interpreted in at least three completely different ways (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It has been invoked to account for the success of theoretically incompatible pedagogical approaches, such as whole language practices that minimizes teacher direction (Goodman & Goodman, 1990), and reciprocal teaching in which “membership in the group is not democratic; the adult teacher is definitely a first among equals” (Brown & Palincsar, 1989, p. 417). Cazden (1996), in surveying modern citations
to Vygotsky, has argued that most readings of Vygotsky are "selective," revealing more about Vygotsky’s appropriator than about Vygotsky's psychological theories. Undoubtedly, this observation will apply to me in this volume as much as it applies to anyone.

In claiming a Vygotskian perspective, I thus engage in a social practice of knowledge construction, using my understanding of Vygotsky—mediated by my encounters with a variety of Vygotskian viewpoints in conversation, print, and cyberspace, based entirely on translated versions rather than his original Russian texts—for grounding in advancing my points. My use of Vygotsky reflects my own approach to theory-building as I consider problems involved in conducting literacy research.

Assertions of a Vygotskian perspective are often tenuous at best. I too often see references to selected sections of *Mind in Society* that do not suggest a richer reading or consideration of either his own more extensive writing or the body of work produced by people conversant with his career project. When a theorist becomes popular or trendy, many people seek to find some association between the theorist and their own work and thus claim an influence, even if that association does not connect their work in substantive and comprehensive ways, and even if they discovered the theorist long after they developed the ideas that they claim were influenced. I’m reminded here of the fact that Adolf Hitler was a vegetarian, and so am I. That, however, does not make me a Nazi. Similarly, people who find some similarity between their own views and practices and those expressed somewhere in Vygotsky’s voluminous writing cannot claim to be Vygotskian, simply because they have found an area of overlap.

Vygotsky sought to resolve the crisis of fragmentation that he saw in the psychology of his day. The crisis remains in the 21st Century, as evidenced by the abundance of psychologies and their different foci still available. Vygotsky’s solution was to propose and lay the foundation for a comprehensive psychology of human concept development. His ambitious plan included three central facets: It was fundamentally genetic1 (i.e., developmental), it relied on the premise that frameworks for thinking are social in origin and are appropriated through cultural practice, and it employed the axiom that mental processes are mediated by tools and signs (Wertsch, 1985) or, as Cole (1996) combines them, by *artifacts*. Wertsch summarized a Vygotskian perspective as being concerned with human concept development as goal-directed, tool-mediated action, which I have interpreted to imply that the action is volitional and that the tools that mediate thinking and action emerge from cultural practice and are used toward culturally-appropriate ends.

Vygotsky has been referenced to account for learning and development in many scholarly fields, particularly with regard to the ZPD. Wells (1999) argues that these citations are often ill-informed, saying that the ZPD “is the only aspect of Vygotsky’s genetic theory of human development that most teachers have ever heard of and, as a result, it is not infrequently cited to justify forms of teaching that
seem quite incompatible with the theory as a whole” (cited in del Río & Álvarez, 2007, p. 313; cf. Smagorinsky, 2007a). In addition to reading the ZPD referenced to explain accounts of teaching and learning without attention to their cultural and historical dimensions—a central feature of a true ZPD analysis—I have also read publications in which Vygotsky’s consideration of the importance of “play” is extrapolated to support the claim that Vygotsky believed that learning should be “fun” (e.g., Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube, 2001). And yet as Hedegaard (2007) argues, Vygotsky’s notion of play refers to experimental activity designed to create possibilities, and not to the idea that learning should involve merriment. Such learning might be frustrating, difficult, laced with failure, and decidedly lacking in an immediate experience of pleasure.

Vygotsky, from what I can gather, was not a fun guy, but rather an extraordinarily intense and formidably brilliant man. References to his work that do not take into account his larger project ought to be subjected to severe review and critique. That is, if the ZPD is invoked without attention to issues of culture, intersubjectivity, the historical role of tool-mediated action in the setting of teaching and learning, and other issues that tie his ideas together, any reader ought to view the reference with skepticism. Otherwise, as is now the case, Vygotsky’s work will continue to be treated superficially and misappropriated to suit authors’ purposes and not to advance scholarship within the framework of his ideas.

Researchers are at least as guilty of these trivial applications of Vygotsky as are teachers, who were the concern of Wells (1999). I regard this superficial referencing by researchers as a more severe problem in that they have time to think more carefully about their work than overburdened teachers, and so should take more seriously their responsibility to read their sources and their attendant scholarship with care. When a theoretical source is employed more as a means of membership in a club than to advance a point—as I think is too often the case with citations to Vygotsky—then the reference strikes me as, at best, disingenuous, and at worst, unethical.

I next review challenges that face the 21st century reader in terms of problems with translation from Russian to English, the context that helped to shape Vygotsky’s career, inconsistencies across his many manuscripts and lectures, the difficulties involved in postulating what are essentially the invisible processes of human cognition, and the challenges that Vygotsky presents his readers by engaging in what he refers sardonically to as his “tedious investigations” into the problematic thinking of the leading theorists of his day.

PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATION

Reading extensively in Vygotskian scholarship seems critical to referencing him knowledgeably, given the challenges that Vygotsky’s writing presents to the 21st Century reader. Among these challenges is the problem that most of his readers, particularly in North America, encounter him through translation. In Daniels,
CHAPTER 1

Cole, and Wertsch’s (2007) collection of international papers outlining a Vygotskian perspective, a number of the contributors are fluent speakers of Russian. However, even those whom I consider to be conversant with Vygotsky’s original writing—those whose publications are rife with references to works of Vygotsky that are only available in Russian—are cautious about their grasp of both the language and the concepts.

Michael Cole, who has spoken Russian for many decades, who lived in the former Soviet Union during his internship with A. R. Luria, who served as co-editor and co-translator of Mind in Society (Vygotsky, 1978), whose leadership in the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition has helped to shape worldwide extensions of Russian psychology, who was the founding editor of the journal Mind, Culture, and Activity, and who has produced a number of foundational works in the Vygotskian tradition, wrote in response to my inquiry that “I have been writing jointly with [Russian Natalia Gajdamaschko] precisely because I feel so strongly the need for more than simple translation help in dealing with the meta-psychology and national ethos that is the relevant context for understanding the local words” (M. Cole, personal communication). James Wertsch, who has spent considerable time in the Soviet Union, Russia, and many former Soviet states where Russian remains the lingua franca, and who has translated Vygotsky into English (e.g., Wertsch, 1981), also backs off from claims that his knowledge of Russian could be termed fluent (J. Wertsch, personal communication).

As someone whose only linkage to Vygotsky’s Byelorussian roots comes through my grandparents’ origins in Vygotsky’s hometown of Gomel, I read the qualifiers by Cole and Wertsch as cautions regarding any claims to understanding Vygotsky for those of us who speak no Russian at all. I rely on the translations of others, including those who express limited confidence in their own fluency. Most North American readers face this same problem, and so the challenges of reading a major thinker only in translation—especially translation that spans alphabets, cultures, concepts, and other formidable barriers—are thus worth reviewing here.

At present there are abundant Vygotskian texts available to the English language reader: six volumes of collected works in publication, additional books from his oeuvre available (e.g., Vygotsky, 1971, 1997; Vygotsky & Luria, 1993), key texts subjected to multiple translations, and a major project now underway in Russia to make his entire output available to English-speaking readers. Yet Vygotsky remains a complex figure and difficult scholar to grasp, and for a variety of reasons. In his “Translator’s Foreword and Acknowledgements” to The Collected Works, Volume 3, Van der Veer says, “I have not attempted to improve Vygotsky’s style of writing although it was at times difficult to refrain from doing so. It is clear that Vygotsky . . . never rewrote a text for the sake of improving its style and readability. Hence the redundancy, the difficulty to follow the thread of his argument, the awkward sentences, etc.” (p. v).

Meshcheryakov (2007) notes that Vygotsky produced 190 works within the ten-year span that comprised his career, many of which “were written very quickly,
in almost telegraphic style. Some works remain unfinished. It is certainly possible that some of the works that were published posthumously were not yet intended for publication” (p. 155). Daniels et al. (2007) assert that “It is difficult to reconcile some of the writing from the early 1920s with that which was produced during the last 2 years of his life. These rapid changes, coupled with the fact that his work was not published in chronological order, make synthetic summaries of his work difficult” (p. 2). So in addition to the difficulty of the ideas Vygotsky produced, his rendering of them into text made for challenging reading, no matter how well-prepared the reader is.

Even those with extraordinary fluency in Vygotsky’s work typically consult others to help with their understanding. Van der Veer, a native of the Netherlands, relates in his translator’s introduction to the *Collected Works, Volume 3* that “After I had translated the whole volume [from Russian to English], I carefully checked my translation against the German and Spanish translations of the same volume” (1997, p. v). With five languages at play in his effort to translate Vygotsky’s already-difficult prose and concepts (German, Spanish, Russian, English, and Dutch), Van der Veer further enlisted feedback from a host of colleagues (mostly European) in order to amend Vygotsky’s “sloppy” approach to citation by including appropriate references and footnotes to provide depth, detail, and clarification to the text.

Van der Veer’s (1997) meticulous approach to rendering Vygotsky into English suggests one key lesson to be learned from reading Vygotsky with any insight: that claims to understanding or implementing ideas must be undertaken with care and caution. I refer again to Van der Veer’s work in underscoring the importance of reading more than just excerpts (or summaries of excerpts, or summaries of those summaries in textbooks) from *Mind in Society* in claiming a Vygotskian perspective. In his review of an Italian translation of *Thinking and Speech* that post-dates any version of the text available in English, Van der Veer makes the remarkable point that

Unfortunately, neither in English nor in any other language has a reliable republication of *Thought and Language* been available. Leaving aside the questions that can be raised concerning the original Soviet 1934 edition (Vygotsky did not see the book in print and the editor, Kolbanovsky, changed some of the wordings to make the book more palatable for the ideological leaders), we know that the later 1956 and 1982 Soviet editions were marred by many mistakes and plain falsifications. All of the existing translations into English, or any other language, took these unreliable later editions as their point of departure. As a result, readers unable to read Russian or find a copy of the original 1934 edition have had, until now, no authoritative text of *Thought and Language* available. (p. 83; cf. Van der Veer, 1987, for a critical review of Kozulin’s 1986 translation of *Thought and Language*, which to Van der Veer is more properly translated as *Thinking and Speech*).

I am impressed that Van der Veer is now sufficiently fluent in at least six languages to read Vygotsky and then make this judgment; I am alarmed that he nonetheless states that “Vygotsky obviously preferred principled opponents,
such as Pavlov, who made their own original contribution to science and invented their own scientific vocabulary to mediocre university professors, such as the present writer, who can only summarize what others have discovered” (2007, p. 37). If I’m not sufficiently daunted to learn that Van der Veer regards himself as a relative mediocrity, I cringe yet further when I realize that even though I’ve been referencing Vygotsky in my own work since the early 1990s, I probably am basing my understanding on inaccurate and incomplete translations. It becomes important, then, for me and no doubt others to engage with the work of Vygotskian scholars who have read his Russian texts in order to develop a clearer grasp of the ideas that I believe I am drawing on.

If problems of direct translation of Vygotsky’s work were not enough of a challenge, the fact that he did not necessarily pen his own texts presents another. His magnum opus, *Thinking and Speech*, was published in 1934, the year he died; he dictated sections from his sickbed, no doubt contributing to the text’s notorious difficulty (Zinchenko, 2007). Further, some of what is published under his name is taken from his student’s lecture notes or other stenographic records, undoubtedly with gaps in transcription and reformulation in expression (e.g., a set of lectures included in the *Collected Works, Volume 5*: “The Crisis of the First Year,” “Early Childhood,” “The Crisis at Age Three,” “The Crisis at Age Seven”; Vygotsky, 1998b). Making definitive claims, as do Gredler and Shields (2004), regarding what Vygotsky did and did not say, is thus a precarious undertaking that even the most reputable U. S. Vygotskian scholars should attempt with considerable caution and temperance.

**THE CONTEXT FOR VYGOTSKY’S WORK**

Vygotsky was born in 1896 and died of tuberculosis, which afflicted him throughout his short and fertile adult life, in 1934. When Vygotsky was 21, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian Provisional Government, and the Russian Civil War from 1917-1922 resulted in the creation of the Soviet Union in 1924. His decade-long career as a psychologist, then, took place concurrent with the launch of the Soviet Union and its foundation in a highly centralized Marxist philosophy.

Vygotsky’s mercurial ascension into the upper echelon of Soviet psychologists in this era was quite remarkable given his youth, his outsider status as a native of Byelorussia, and his Jewish heritage within the hierarchical and Balkanized social structure of Soviet life. During Vygotsky’s life, pogroms—organized genocide against Jews that was either sponsored by or tacitly allowed Eastern European governments—were still common, and caused many Jews from the region, including my grandparents and their two Byelorussian-born sons (two more, including my father, were born in New York City), to flee to other nations with less deadly policies. (See Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut, 2008, for an account of Jewish influences on Vygotsky’s world view.)
Vygotsky, however, stayed in Byelorussia as a young man. Given the “unmerciful reality of everyday life in his hometown of Gomel during the civil war (1918–1922)” (Kozulin & Gindis, 2007, p. 332) that made existence precarious, the young Vygotsky, a 1917 graduate of Moscow University, took a teaching position in 1918 that enabled him to pursue his interests in literature and the humanities. He worked on his doctoral dissertation from 1915–1922, spanning the ages of 19 and 26. It was published posthumously as *The Psychology of Art*, and done so against his stated belief that it did not meet his standards for scholarship and therefore should not be published.

Yaroshevsky (1989) reports that Vygotsky wrote *The Psychology of Art* during a protracted illness, one of the many life-threatening bouts with tuberculosis that often led him to believe that his current work would be his last. Following a trip to study defectological institutes in Western Europe—those clinics that focused on the education of students whose learning was affected by blindness, deafness, and other losses or absences from normal functioning, including what was termed mental retardation3 (see Vygotsky, 1993)—he became so sick that he was ordered by doctors to take respite in a sanatorium. Bedridden and with no access to empirical research methods, Vygotsky (1971) nonetheless devoted his energies to scholarship. Drawing on his background as a teacher, he took the approach of a literary critic to conduct an astute reading of texts that produced a deep and careful analysis, the elucidation of criteria to guide the production and reading of literature, and the application of those criteria to texts. This initial work of scholarship was thus distinct from the empirical research that he conducted as a laboratory psychologist and pedologist during his mature period.

Once recovered from his illness, albeit temporarily as was always the case, Vygotsky gravitated to the Gomel Teacher Training College and became director of its psychological laboratory, an assignment that involved developing methods of psychological evaluation and supervising their administration in schools. At the end of the civil war, he relocated to Moscow and began an affiliation with the Section of Abnormal Children in the People’s Commissariat of Education and ultimately founded the Medical-Pedagogic Laboratory for the Study of Abnormal Children, which remains in place today as the Institute of Corrective Pedagogy. Kozulin and Gindis (2007) provide an account of Vygotsky’s career-long concern with special-needs children—those who fell under the aegis of *defectology*—who were in abundance in the early Soviet Union because, in addition to the normal percentage of such children in the population, many orphans and traumatized children survived the civil war and were in need of attention in the new Soviet Union.

The Soviet system has long been known for its brutal reinforcement of its ideology, and in its early days and through at least the 1950s monitored its psychologists with a vengeance (see Cole, Levitin, & Luria, 2006). Because of the excessive role he identified for individual development in social context, says Zinchenko (2007), “Vygotsky’s commitment to Marxist beliefs did not save him from criticism. His works were banned, denounced, and declared to be vicious and even evil.
He was lucky to have managed to die in his own bed in 1934” (p. 213). Some believe that Vygotsky allowed himself to die rather than face interrogation, torture, and execution by the authorities over his departure from the state’s more exacting interpretation of Marx (M. Cole, personal communication).

Others, however, were not so fortunate to die of natural causes. In Thinking and Speech, Vygotsky did not reference Gustav Gustavovich Shpet, one of his mentors. Vygotsky likely avoided acknowledging Shpet because did not wish to bring upon himself the fate of Shpet himself, who was dismissed from his academic positions on multiple occasions and subjected to “brutal interrogation and execution in 1937” by Soviet authorities (Wertsch, 2007, p. 184). Shpet made the fatal error of exhibiting “freedom and dignity and the independence of his thought from Marxist-Leninist ideology, which at the time was growing stronger and stronger” (Zinchenko, 2007, p. 212). Shpet’s literary contemporary Mandel’shtam, notes Zinchenko, met the fate of many Soviets, no matter how seemingly benign their field of endeavor, who in any way defied the party position: He died in the Gulag in 1938.

Vygotsky’s death coincided with harshly punitive edicts issuing from Soviet leaders. The Pedology Decree of 1936 banned both prior and future work in the area of pedology, the study of child development (Shmeleva, 2002), which was the general area in which Vygotsky’s work fell. It is no coincidence that the Great Purge or Great Terror, in which Stalin took repression and persecution to astounding new levels, began the following year. The Decree declared pedology to be “false science,” eliminated university departments in the field, and dismissed or arrested its scientists. Ewing (2001) points out that the Decree was designed to purge the thinking that had produced tracking in Soviet schools through the assessment and classification of students by segregating students according to results of formal assessments. According to Ewing,

the Central Committee charged that pedologists’ “pseudo-scientific experiments” had called excessive attention to “the most negative influences and pathological perversions” in children, their families, and surrounding environment. Such testing meant that “an ever larger and larger number of children” were assigned to special schools after being categorized as “mentally backward,” “defective,” or “difficult.” In fact, the Central Committee declared, many of these children were perfectly capable of attending normal’ naia shkola (normal schools), but once these labels had been affixed, they were considered “hopeless” cases. (p. 480)

The 21st Century North American reader might see these charges as quite reasonable and in accord with current critiques of tracked schools; in a unique turn of irony, these criticisms have especially emerged from those working from a Marxist perspective (e.g., Apple, 1982). The fact is, however, that rather than pathologizing those who lacked normal sensory functioning or who exhibited what was termed
mental retardation, Vygotsky (1993) argued against the notion that they were defective. Kozulin and Gindis (2007) review the “mechanistic mentality of the 1920s that explicitly compared human beings with mechanisms” (p. 333), which produced the belief that extranormative conditions (see Smagorinsky, 2011b) can be diagnosed and corrected.

Vygotsky (2003) resisted the prevalent mechanistic approach that children with special needs were defective and should be fixed. He instead viewed the question of their condition “as a sociocultural rather than an organic or individual developmental phenomenon” (Kozulin & Gindis, 2007, p. 334). Kozulin and Gindis find that

The essence of Vygotsky’s approach to remedial education is in addressing the secondary disability, that is, by countering the negative social consequences of the primary disability. Vygotsky believed that physical and mental impairment could be overcome by creating alternative but essentially equivalent roads for cultural development. By acquiring the psychological tools, disabled children transform their natural abilities into higher mental functions as do their nondisabled peers. (p. 345)

To Vygotsky (1993), rather than “fixing” the “defect” in the child, an educator should strive to minimize or eliminate any environmental factors that could amplify the challenging effects of the original point of concern. Vygotsky further sought to identify “alternative but equally equivalent roads for cultural development” through the provision of alternative psychological tools. The notion of providing broader means of mediation would accommodate the special needs and abilities of such children, requiring changes in the environment so that alternative paths to performance are available to suit the unique interests and abilities of people outside the normal range of social functioning.

In spite of this humane dimension to pedology, the movement was undermined by the presence of other ideological agendas. Political leaders, Ewing (2001) notes, were concerned that pedologists were “displaying ‘pedological distortions,’ succumbing to ‘class-hostile elements,’ and engaging in ‘wrecking’ activity with ‘anti-Leninist’ objectives” (p. 472), suggesting that the welfare of children was viewed and interpreted solely within the framework of the state’s ideology. The Decree’s recommendations, he argues, were made as part of a broader move toward more repressive policies and government intervention in both daily life and science in the Soviet Union.

This shift was no doubt influenced by the fearful and nativist response to the rise of Nazis in neighboring Germany, the Soviet regime’s effort to find a scapegoat for shortcomings of their school system, and a rise in esteem for the proletariat accompanied by a distrust of “elite” intellectuals, many of whom found themselves suddenly and fatefully threatened in Soviet life. Ewing (2001) continues:
The Central Committee went beyond these complaints about school policies, however, by charging that pedological theory itself was based on “falsely-scientific and anti-Marxist foundations.” In particular, any suggestion that children’s fate was “determined” by “fixed” social or biological factors was condemned as directly contradictory to “socialist development,” which had “successfully re-educated people.” Such claims about environmental and hereditary influences allegedly revealed an “uncritical” borrowing of “bourgeois” theories intended to maintain the dominant positions of “exploiting classes” and “superior races” by perpetuating the “physical and spiritual doom of the working classes and ‘inferior races.”’ (p. 480)

In this climate, reading Vygotsky and his colleagues was forbidden almost immediately following his death; indeed, the translation of Thought and Language into English in 1962 predated its availability in the Soviet Union by a dozen years. Kozulin and Gindis (2007) note, “For political reasons, any open discussion of Vygotsky’s ideas was practically impossible from 1936 to the late 1950s” (p. 334); and Daniels (2007) reports that Vygotsky’s book Pedagogical Psychology “was considered to be so politically unacceptable to the rulers of the Soviet state that one had to have a special pass from the KGB that would admit one to the restricted reading room in the Lenin Library where the book could be read” (p. 307).

Vygotsky no doubt embraced much about Marxism, but not enough to suit the state. The environment of fear in which psychologists of his day worked, in which ideology always trumped science, surely helped to shape his writing, no matter how courageous he might have been in taking on the orthodoxies of his day—challenging the work, for instance, of Pavlov, the reigning titan of the era. Of course, the 21st Century United States has seen no shortage of ideology superseding science in such areas as debates about global warming and stem cell research; has seen “elite” intellectuals fall into distrust during times of threat; and has seen fear of ominous outsiders contribute to a more closed society. The Soviet Union was not unique in these matters. Those in the U.S. who hold positions opposed to those of political leaders, however, face little prospect of execution or lifelong imprisonment under brutal conditions, as dissidents did throughout the Soviet era. Vygotsky’s life and career were conducted within this environment of deadly repression, coupled with his own continual bouts with his fatal illness. His remarkable scholarly output could conceivably be partly attributed to the urgency his life took on under the constant specter of death from within and from without, in conjunction with the genius that earned him the title The Mozart of Psychology.

INCONSISTENCIES WITHIN VYGOTSKY’S WORK

Like many whose work develops over time, Vygotsky was not consistent over the course of his career with some of his key constructs. He also appeared to contradict himself even when working on a single text. Wertsch (2007) argues that Vygotsky
was inconsistent in his account of mediation, a central dimension of his account of human development. Mediation in general refers to the manner in which thinking occurs by means of a medium, particularly speech: without such a medium, there is no means by which to think or communicate. Listening to and engaging in speech with cultural elders and veterans is what provides a person with a worldview and the specific language through which to characterize it, allows for new ideas to emerge through the process of expression and articulation, enables the development of signs that embody concepts, and provides the means through which people communicate with others and act upon their worlds (see Chapter 3). Wertsch (1991) and others have since expanded the cultural tool kit to include a host of nonverbal mediational means (cf. Smagorinsky, 2001; see Chapter 8), with the recognition that, as Luria argued, speech remains the “tool of tools” (Cole, 1996, p. 108).

Wertsch (2007) argues that the inconsistencies he finds in Vygotsky’s account of mediation follow from Vygotsky’s simultaneous grounding in what appear to be contradictory ontologies in European thought. On a broad scale, these ontologies or traditions are realized in speech, including the written speech found in cultural texts, and so serve as mediational means for whole fields of thought. The contradictory traditions that shaped perspectives for Vygotsky included one that produces “explicit” mediation (through observable means) and one that produces “implicit” mediation (through intangible means). These perspectives follow from what Wertsch (2000) has called “designative” or Enlightenment (or what Bakhurst [2007] calls “rationalist”) traditions, and “expressivist” or Romantic traditions, both of which had influenced European thought for centuries at the time of Vygotsky’s career (see Chapter 7). While Wertsch (2000) has argued previously that Vygotsky seemed unaware of this contradiction and never resolved it, in 2007 he looks for more synthesis, arguing that “the two forms of mediation can be seen as part of a larger theoretical framework when one considers some commonalities in the way he treated these forms. In particular, he viewed both forms of mediation under the general dictum that sign meaning develops” (p. 191).

Cole and Gajdamaschko (2007) further note that Vygotsky used culture in three distinct ways: as artistic and creative processes and products, as mediational means in human mentation, and as a term to characterize groups of people who have produced particular sorts of rationalist artifacts considered more “advanced” than the means developed by “primitive” people—a sort of cultural judgment that seems out of synch with Vygotsky’s other conceptions of culture (see Smagorinsky, 1995a; Chapter 3). Knowing the implications of each definition, argues Wertsch (2007), helps “reduce the incidence of bogus disagreement as we seek to harness Vygotsky’s conceptual system” (p. 192).

Bakhurst (2007) makes the point that “Vygotsky’s brilliant portrait of the mind’s place in nature far outruns the empirical data” that prompted it. . . . [H]is legacy
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endures as a kind of prolegomenon to empirical psychology rather than an instance of it” (p. 57). Meshcheryakov (2007) further quotes Vygotsky as claiming that he had not yet fully defined his own terms, nor need he bother. Vygotsky wrote,

One might think that, in exploring the question of higher mental functions, it is necessary to begin by giving a clear definition of higher mental functions and indicating what criteria enable us to distinguish them from elementary functions. But it seems to me that a precise definition is not something that belongs to the beginning phase of scientific knowledge. Instead, I believe I can limit myself initially merely to empirical and heuristic definitions. (Vygotsky, 1982–1984, pp. 367–368; quoted in Meshcheryakov, pp. 160–161)

Indeed, Vygotsky’s work, as explained in his publications, reads more like a set of pilot studies than the sort of polished research published in 21st century journals.

Further, Vygotsky is driven to understand phenomena that are not visible, such as inner speech and how it comes into being. Inner speech refers to the cognitive processes that follow from the appropriation of both social speech and its ideological framework such that one adopts cultural means of mediation (particularly that provided by speech) for self-regulation, ideas, and other means of acting in the world in accordance with social standards and practices. The endeavor to name inner speech and understand its workings is entirely inferential and only indirectly supportable through empirical evidence.

In order to accept Vygotsky’s theory of the development of inner speech—to some, the cornerstone of his broader argument that learning to think is a function of appropriating speech-based concepts through cultural practice—one needs to accept the plausibility of his assembly of evidence from a broad range of observable phenomena, all of which ultimately rest on the acceptance of a web of related inferences based on research that does not quite meet 21st century standards for reporting findings. Perhaps the lack of empirical support in his own work, at least as reported in his writing, has contributed to the attempt by current scholars to conduct new investigations using many decades of accumulated knowledge, new technologies for collecting and analyzing data, and continued insights from the growing body of Vygotskian studies.

Zinchenko (2007) describes both Russian traditions for conducting scholarship and the elusive quality of the sociocognitive processes that Vygotsky sought to describe. Both Zinchenko and Vygotsky freely draw on the belles lettres to illuminate aspects of a cultural theory of the development of consciousness. Poets, psychologists, and philosophers have been equally perplexed and metaphoric about the nature of thinking and speech. I gather from my reading of Vygotsky and Zinchenko, and also from U.S.-based researchers such as Cole (1996) who work in this tradition, that Russian scholarship has been historically, and remains, more ecumenical in its search for viable sources than is customary in most U.S. scholarship. Zinchenko (2007) includes references to Russian poet and novelist Boris
Pasternak, U. S. and British poet T. S. Eliot, Russian poet Nikolai Zabolotsky, Russian poet and playwright Aleksandr Pushkin, and others from the world of arts to attempt to capture the more ephemeral qualities of how people think. After quoting Pasternak at length, Zinchenko notes that

No matter how far we move toward unraveling this mystery, we need to realize that there is an element of magic in the creative act. According to Pasternak, this act is “the tangible sorcery or alchemy, which makes the work of art seem to be an accidentally broken off piece of the very density of being or form making essence of being rather than reflection or descriptions of life” (Pasternak, 1990, pp. 366–367). It is a different question whether we can see this sorcery, whether we will be able to penetrate, see behind these purest forms the fringes of their internal forms, their sense and meaning. This is already an issue of our aesthetic culture or taste, an issue of the richness of poorness of our own inner form. (p. 241)

In relying on literary expression to make his points and openly acknowledging the mysterious and magical nature of his enterprise, Zinchenko accepts the evanescent qualities of the workings of the mind, yet forges ahead nonetheless. “[D]espite the possible, sometimes striking depth and transparency of thought, it is heterogeneous and syncretistic in its origins,” he says. “All the forces of the soul participate in its birth” (p. 239). Now, that’s one difficult claim to support empirically. And yet if one turns to poets for plausible, if not verifiable, truths about the world, it provides some insight into the challenge of developing a comprehensive psychology of the human mind and its development in its historical, social, cultural, and physical context—a context that, as the reciprocal notion of context suggests, each human in turns helps to construct.

I infer that in an explicitly atheistic, materialist, Marxist culture and the psychological theories that emerged from it, its architects cannot escape the need for a degree of mysticism in their formulation. Even with an effort to ground their psychology in as scientific a foundation as possible, Vygotsky and his colleagues and descendents must locate the discipline’s “soul.” In Soviet Moscow, religion was not a possible source of the more mystic and magical elements of an explanation of how people and their minds come into being, function, and develop. Poetry, I infer from my remote perch, was engaged with as a way to explain such acknowledged mysteries.

Anyone who knows me knows that I am not endorsing religion here (see Smagorinsky, 2011b, for the possibility that those on the autism spectrum, where I fall, are often atheists). Rather, I am making the point that at its least visible levels, mind remains an evanescent construct that can only take shape for many through non-scientific means. I take comfort in the fact that some of the most brilliant minds of the last century have had no more success in empirically explaining the human mind than I have; and at the same time, this mystic hole at the bottom of Vygotsky’s theory
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gives me and others something to attempt to continue to fill, if not sink into entirely, as we take up his unfinished project, whether we do so from pragmatic or anagogic methods and motivations.

VYGOTSKY’S “TEDIOUS INVESTIGATIONS”

Vygotsky’s writing is characterized by what he wryly refers to as his “tedious investigations” into extant views (1999, p. 119). In order to create space for his own revolutionary ideas, he first needed to unpack and refute, in excruciating detail, the ideas of those he sought to displace in accounting for human mentation. This tendency can test the patience of even the most devoted readers of Vygotsky as they endure his meticulous repudiation of scholars whose work dominated the field through the 1930s.

In a lengthy section of The Psychology of Art titled “Critique,” Vygotsky (1971) dedicates three chapters to his dissatisfaction with contemporary scholarship in the areas of art as perception, art as technique, and art as psychoanalysis. Fundamentally, Vygotsky critiques the “unilateral intellectualism” of art psychology in his day, in which “Art requires brain work; all the rest is incidental in the psychology of art” (p. 32), particularly the emotional substance that to Vygotsky is central. He rejects the idea that an art form “can be reduced to processes of perception, or to pure brainwork” (p. 33).

Vygotsky’s refutations of his antecedent and contemporary thinkers permeate his review of the fable, the short story, and the tragedy, which he undertakes in order to establish what distinguishes a text as a work of art. One must again wade through his exhaustive analyses of those whose views he considers to be based on inappropriate premises. Although on occasions critics such as G. E. Lessing (1864) are “quite right” and “quite correctly” make certain points (p. 98), Vygotsky inevitably points out “the weakness of the positions which Lessing tries so desperately to defend” (p. 108). Lessing is but one of many critics whose ideas Vygotsky outlines in detail and then rejects as hopelessly misguided. The modern reader must approach these investigations with a certain patience as the young Vygotsky dismisses what he views as both significant and flawed literary criticism of his day in order to outline a psychology of art that will inform current thinking about the psychology of both art and mediated thinking in general.

Vygotsky also referenced, without explanation, contemporaries whose careers remain obscure for the 21st century reader. After, for instance, a lengthy discussion of views of art based on theories of perception, he concludes,

Thus, anyone endeavoring to investigate the history of the Russian intelligentsia on the basis of the Chatskis and Pechorins risks remaining with the completely fallacious ideas and understandings of the phenomena under study. With such a brand of scientific investigation we may hit the target no more than once in a thousand times. This, more than any theoretical
When I came across this passage, I had to backtrack through the chapter, and then consult the book’s index, to discover that Chatskii and Pechorin have not previously been mentioned by Vygotsky, at least not in the 1971 English translation. Internet searches reveal that Pechorin is the main character of the Mikhail Lermontov’s novella *A Hero of Our Time*, written in 1839 and revised in 1841. Lermontov is mentioned once before in *The Psychology of Art*, but for a poem. Identifying Chatskii was just as difficult. Chatskii is the protagonist of A. S. Griboedov’s 1824 play *Woe from Wit* (one of many translations of the title); neither Griboedov nor his play is mentioned elsewhere in the MIT Press translation of *The Psychology of Art*. Vygotsky references this character in the final pages of *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1987a, pp. 281–283) in discussing Stanislavsky’s view that actors must discover their affective-volitional core in order to convincingly motivate the characters they portray (cf. Burkitt, 2002) and to argue that, because thinking is mediated by cultural tools such as speech—“thought is never the direct equivalent of word meanings” (p. 282)—another person’s thoughts can only be inferred by understanding “the most secret internal plane of verbal thinking—its motivation” (p. 283).

Chatskii was thus a common enough cultural reference for Soviets of his era for Vygotsky to reference him both early and late in his career. Perhaps these allusions were better situated in Vygotsky’s original text, but did not survive Scripta Technica’s editorial cuts for the English translation published by MIT Press. The modern U.S. reader, or at least this one, has no such heritage or complete text to employ in recognizing the import of these characters in Vygotsky’s discussion, making his explorations of his contemporaries perplexing in many ways to modern readers from outside the Soviet sphere.

The young Vygotsky, however, only set the stage for the mature Vygotsky. Throughout his work he presents readerly challenges by taking a contemporary or antecedent thinker, outlining his or her views, and then saying something along the lines of, “This explanation is clearly unsatisfactory” (e.g., 1987, p. 202) and providing his alternative interpretation. The dutiful novice reader often, as I did when first began reading Vygotsky, reads his account of a contemporary with pen in hand, underlining and producing marginalia to grasp the ideas, only to have Vygotsky then dismiss these views as pathetically ill-advised.

The scholars he eviscerates often rank among the most celebrated thinkers of the era: Freud, Piaget, James, Lange, Pavlov, and countless others. Readers must learn to recognize this technique of review-and-debunk and not get too bogged down in mastering the concepts outlined, only to have them dismissed as laughably and pathetically foolish and uninformed. Vygotsky’s “tedious investigations” served a critical purpose when he addressed his contemporaries in the 1920s and 1930s because he needed to take on the reigning assumptions of his time in order to offer
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his own vision. Such analyses are less important to the 21st century reader except to provide the historical context for Vygotsky’s revolutionary ideas. Being aware of his analytic method can spare such readers considerable frustration in attempting to grasp Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology.

MOVING ON IN SPITE OF THE CHALLENGES

I have outlined a daunting set of challenges facing the 21st Century North American in appropriating Vygotsky’s ideas for newly-undertaken literacy research. In the following chapters I continue to work within these problematic conditions as I attempt to lay out a Vygotskian framework for studying literacy as a socially-situated, culturally- and historically-grounded form of mediated action that shapes human development.

NOTES

1 I found the term “genetic” extremely confusing when I first began reading Vygotskian scholarship, because to me it sounded like a reference to biological development due to what appeared to be the root of “gene.” The Russian term from which it derives, however, is less concerned with fixed, gene-based factors than with all facets that contribute to human development. Significantly, Vygotsky opposed Piaget on the matter of whether human development proceeds according to biologically unfolding stages, or as Vygotsky proposed, is shaped environmentally through cultural practice.

2 I use Byelorussia to characterize the nation/state prior to 1990; it was renamed Belarus following its achievement of independence concurrent with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

3 The terms translated as “defectology” and “mental retardation” sound harsh to ears attuned to 21st century sensibilities. I use them here as they were translated from their original context, without presentist judgment about their sensitivity.

4 Throughout this book I use the formal convention of treating “data” as a plural term and “datum” as a singular term.

5 Lermontov, who died at age 26 from a gunshot wound suffered during a duel, is considered by many to be Russia’s greatest poet following Pushkin, who by coincidence also died following a duel at age 37.

6 The translation in The Psychology of Art suggests that the poem may be “Sail,” although I can only guess. See http://www.mostov.com/sail/ for an example of how this poem may be translated in seemingly infinite ways.
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KEY TERMS AND CONSTRUCTS IN ADOPTING A VYGOTSKIAN PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter I review key terms in Vygotskian scholarship and their conceptual basis in literacy research. The position I am outlining is based on the assumption that a person's frameworks for thinking are developed through problem-solving action carried out in specific settings whose social structures have been developed through historical, culturally-grounded actions. This perspective focuses attention on the predominant value systems and social practices that characterize the settings in which the learning of literacy practices unfolds. Undoubtedly, the value systems in which I have been embedded, and in which I have embedded myself, contribute to my interpretation of these constructs.

I next elaborate the key concepts of settings, signs and tools, appropriation, mind, and concepts, and subcategories of terms and their related concepts as they apply to literacy research. These terms play a prominent role in the chapters that follow. A glossary at the end of this book provides pithier accounts of each.

SETTINGS

The contexts for human development provide the means of mediation through which people appropriate ways of thinking and acting in the world. Borrowing terms from Sarason (1972), Wertsch (1985), and others, I refer to the contexts that mediate the development of consciousness as settings. Lave (1988) makes a distinction between an arena, which has visible structural features, and a setting, which represents the individual’s construal of that arena. A school-as-arena has properties that are indisputable (e.g., desks may be bolted to floors or students may sit at tables; metal detectors may be installed at external doors). As a setting, the school building and its activities may be construed by individuals in particular ways through their schematic representations of the situation.

Thus, while two teachers may work at the same school-as-arena, they may have distinctly different understandings of the school setting based on their own goals, histories, and experiences in the institution. One may construct chairs that are bolted to the floor as a way to fix students’ attention on the front of the classroom where it belongs and thus promote learning; another may view these same bolted chairs as a deterrent to flexible arrangements that enable students to form cooperative learning groups that promote learning. To understand schooling from a
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Vygotskian perspective, it is necessary to take into account the history that each participant brings in his or her construction of the setting (Smagorinsky, 2010; Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998a). The question of individual history and identity within settings, then, becomes part of the consideration of their dynamic and evolving nature. I next detail the aspects of settings that I see as relevant to understanding action that is mediated in three ways:

- **socially** (i.e., by immediate human interactions, such as those involved in particular classroom episodes, e.g., when a classroom is conducted according to a teacher’s preferred pattern of interaction, such as a lecture or discussion);

- **culturally** (i.e., by human interactions that are grounded in recurring patterns among people over time, such as those involved when routines and rituals are invoked, e.g., when middle-class turn-taking is indicated by students’ raising of hands to index their wish to take a public speaking turn); and

- **historically** (i.e., by the precedents through which cultural and social values have been developed over time, such as those involved in the establishment of guiding conventions, e.g., when the values of the white middle class have a history of being instituted as the predominant social and cultural practices that determine school decorum).

**Motive**

Settings encourage particular social practices that presumably participants will come to see as worthwhile means to a better future, grounded as they are in cultural-historical activity that has produced the present from which they emerge. Such settings provide **constraints**—i.e., those limitations that help to focus activity on what is most productive toward cultural ends—and **affordances**—i.e., those factors that promote opportunities toward those same ends—that channel, limit, and support learners’ efforts to adopt the prevailing social practices.

I began using the term “channel” mistakenly by improperly recalling and referencing Valsiner (1998), who uses the term “canalize” to refer to the manner in which activity is functionally and directionally shaped by both tacit and explicit means. I have come to prefer my corruption of “channel” because I find “canalize” to be a bit clunky, and so have used “channel” in my own work synonymously with Valsiner’s term. I also see it as a bit more flexible etymologically in that a canal is necessarily a human construction, while a channel may be created by either people or nature. While Vygotsky and the field of cultural-historical psychology have been primarily concerned with human social constructions, geography has often figured into the development of societies in terms of people’s need to adapt to local conditions and develop attendant cultural practices (e.g., the centrality of fishing in largely coastal Panama vs. the need to develop agricultural practices in the landlocked Republic of Niger, and the cultural practices that emerge from such essential activity).
Central to a setting is the motive or outcome implicit in the setting, one toward which action is channeled. Although I have found other definitions for such terms as motive, goal, object, and so on throughout Vygotskian scholarship, I find that Wertsch's (1985) interpretation of Leont'ev's (1981) notion of the motive of a setting to be useful in my conception of literacy practices and so rely on his account here and elsewhere. Wertsch himself acknowledges that others might not agree with his view of motive; I accept it while recognizing that my lack of understanding of Russian makes me reliant on the interpretations of others whose perspectives I have grown to trust.

According to Wertsch (1985), “the motive that is involved in a particular setting specifies what is to be maximized in that setting. By maximizing one goal, one set of behaviors, and the like over others, the motive also determines what will be given up if need be in order to accomplish something else” (p. 212). This motive provides a setting with a sense of purpose that implies a code of suitable conduct. The motive of a setting thus refers to the overall purpose of action within it, even if that motive might be contested, ignored, abandoned, or otherwise eschewed by some within the setting. A setting's motive may be disputed or simply elided by those whose goals—those more local forward-directed plans of individuals or subsets of people—suggest a different course of action and social future.

A setting has a cultural history through which community members have established specific outcomes that guide action within the setting. The condition of having a cultural history requires that a setting involve “two or more people coming together . . . over a sustained period of time in order to achieve certain goals” (Sarason, 1972, p. 1). Sarason, who is interested in the creation of new settings, foregrounds the ways in which people conceive, design, and enact practices and artifacts designed to sustain their newly-formed relationships and purposes for coming together; and the ways in which they typically overlook or underestimate factors that may work against their goals. Wertsch (1985), in contrast, focuses more on how existing practices and artifacts constrain and afford new action, saying that “a setting guides the selection of actions and the operational composition of actions, and it determines the functional significance of these actions” (p. 212).

Their different focuses aside, both Wertsch (1985) and Sarason (1972) regard the condition of sustained relationships as central to a setting. These relationships are mediated by tools and signs (which I review in a later section of this chapter) for which participants develop over time a general agreement over purposes and meaning. Without widespread agreement on the motive and mediational means, a setting could not exist. Central, then, to the existence of a setting is the condition that action within settings is goal-oriented—or more broadly speaking, motive-oriented—and that a set of consistently employed practices and artifacts exists to mediate development toward those ends.

Consensus on an overriding motive, however, is problematic. Multiple and competing desired outcomes often coexist within a setting, though typically some predominate. The overriding motive for a setting, then, provides channels that
encourage and discourage particular ways of thinking and acting. The Soviet Union itself provides a clear example of this phenomenon. The state had official positions regarding the motive of Soviet society, driven by Marxist principles that quickly became subsumed into totalitarian rule and thus were deeply compromised, given that pure communism’s ultimate theoretical outcome is the elimination of the state altogether. The government used brutal means of coercion to maintain this motive, which was nonetheless contested by schismatics who either fled, were imprisoned, were executed, or were forced to live double lives under the guise of compliance. These dissidents nonetheless persevered and maintained subcommunities of practice based on religion, ideology, and other driving perspectives. The official motive of the setting, established and reinforced by those with military power, dominated the Soviet state. Dissident motives were oppressed, even as those who opposed the state maintained their goals to produce a more open society.

From the perspective of literacy development, settings may have motives that are defied or resisted by those with competing goals. A school might be run by administrators who value a cultural-heritage approach to education that inculcates students with Western perspectives on the arts, history, literature, science, and other disciplines. Yet individual teachers within this setting and its officially sanctioned motive might use methods grounded in Deweyan progressivism, Freirean critical literacy, or other epistemologies that contest the overriding values of the institution or are even explicitly designed to undermine them. Soviet-style crackdowns might suppress such teaching or eliminate the teachers entirely, or various means of dissent or freedom might be allowed to sustain these practices. In either case, the motive of the setting might be tacit or explicit and even contractual, which cannot entirely eliminate other goals from developing that point in other directions toward other sorts of social futures.

Fine (1987) has coined the term idioculture to describe cultures-within-cultures (cf. Cole, 1996; Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 2000), and I’ve adapted it to account for idiosettings, i.e., setting-within-settings. Within any given culture and its motive, local cultures may operate within the larger social structure yet be negotiated in ways that take a different direction from that suggested by the predominant motive of the setting. The presence of idiocultures or idiosettings helps to account for the ways in which subcultures may operate within larger settings. How effectively and with what recourse they function is a situational matter.

_Bakhtin and Dialogism_

Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984) construct of dialogism—frequently used by Vygotskian theorists (e.g., Wertsch, 1991) to help account for the ways in which people appropriate frameworks for thinking—is relevant to the effort to understand how people learn how to think in relation to the cultural practices of those who surround them in settings. This term, along with its associated constructs of heteroglossia and
multivoicedness, refers to the ways in which all new utterance involves a revoicing of a previous utterance. Thinking and speech are, in this sense, always derivative of prior thinking and speech, even as new juxtapositions of previously unpaired ideas may produce new, and thus seemingly creative, ideas (John-Steiner & Meehan, 2000).

Many prefer Bakhtin’s emphasis on the utterance—that is, a unit of speech that could range from single words to larger assemblies of text of presumably indeterminate length—to Vygotsky’s emphasis on word meaning as the unit of analysis for understanding cognitive development. As I will review in Chapter 8, many others dispute the exclusive emphasis on speech altogether in considering the mediational means through which consciousness develops. Differences in emphasis may well follow from theorists’ disciplinary orientations; in this case, of psychology (Vygotsky) and philosophy and literary criticism (Bakhtin).

Although they were contemporaries (Vygotsky lived from 1896-1934, Bakhtin from 1895–1975) from the same nation, they likely never met. Vygotsky was a Jew from humble beginnings in Gomel, Byelorussia who ascended quickly through the bureaucratic apparatus that controlled education and psychology in Moscow, where he spent the bulk of his career after his initial teaching job in Gomel. Bakhtin came from a wealthy family of the noble ranks in Oryol, Russia, yet spent an itinerant life as a teacher, bookkeeper, and practitioner of other literary professions. He lived in a variety of cities in the Western Soviet Union, only settling in Moscow for a brief period after Vygotsky’s death. During Vygotsky’s career in Moscow, Bakhtin lived in Leningrad, in exile in Kazakhstan following accusations of being affiliated with the banned Russian Orthodox Church (and only spared a worse fate because of illness), and in the small cities of Kustanai, Saransk, and Kimry. What Vygotsky and Bakhtin shared, even with such different lives and trajectories, was a history of poor health (Bakhtin required a leg amputation due to bone disease in 1938, four years after Vygotsky’s death; had his other leg amputated in 1969; and ultimately died of emphysema following a lifetime of heavy smoking), repression by authorities, and intellectual brilliance that followed Marxist principles yet was nonetheless viewed as subversive by The Party.

More germane to my current discussion is the fact that Bakhtin’s scholarship was grounded in philosophy and literary criticism, while Vygotsky, after his doctoral dissertation on the psychology of art in primarily literary works, became more of a laboratory psychologist. Vygotsky had ready audiences through his position as a lecturer in Moscow, while Bakhtin led a more obscure life, relying on handwritten manuscripts that, in times of desperation, he sacrificed as rolling paper for the insatiable tobacco habit that ultimately led to his death.

Of course, there are many more details that both join and separate these two oft-linked Soviet theorists (see especially Wertsch, 1991). Of relevance to the points I’m trying to make here is Bakhtin’s focus on longer texts of speech, including whole novels and the genres in which they are situated. Vygotsky was more concerned with the meaning of spoken or written words of briefer duration, perhaps the single word with which his work is often associated. Even if one
accepts this difference, which I believe follows at least to some extent from the sorts of texts available to them in their disciplinary fields, their ideas are related in important ways in terms of the manner in which the word or utterance does not appear out of thin air but instead is part of a larger dialogue or ongoing discourse.

U. S. literary critic Kenneth Burke was born in 1897, making him a contemporary of both Vygotsky and Bakhtin and thus part of the Zeitgeist that advanced the notion of cultural-historical, dialogic thinking. Burke illustrates, without naming Bakhtin, the notion of dialogism through his metaphor of a parlor conversation:

Where does the drama get its materials? From the "unending conversation" that is going on at the point in history when we are born. Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (1941, pp. 110–111)

Discourse in this sense is always a conversational turn directed to others, even if they are only anticipated or imagined. Dialogism produces the discourse of a particular community, such as educators who endorse the cultural heritage tradition; those who critique this tradition through such approaches as critical theory; or those who provide an alternative to this tradition through such approaches as progressive pedagogies that democratically engage students in joint activity designed to inquire. Such discourse typically becomes normalized in terms of its ideology when its practitioners' historical, ongoing conversation ceases to question certain axioms, a process that in turn marginalizes other perspectives on the topic.

Thus, for instance, in ongoing conversations in the U. S. about character education among people for whom a sacred text (e.g., *The Holy Bible*) prescribes morality, it may be axiomatic that character is composed of a set of fixed traits (e.g., honesty, responsibility) that are invariant and may be instructed to youth and sinners through didactic methods. Those who believe that notions of character are relative, situated, and locally constructed are marginalized and dismissed among such discussants when those who argue for “universal” notions of character (e.g., Lickona, 1991) dominate the debate (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005).

Dialogism may be exhibited explicitly (e.g., as part of an actual conversation) or through what Bakhtin (1984) calls *hidden dialogicality* in which texts are produced
as conversational turns that take into account prior texts, even if those texts are not present or acknowledged (Wertsch, 1999). In this sense texts are *emplotted* (Ricoeur, 1983) within a continuum of narratives or lines of argument. A text or utterance never stands alone, but is always in conversation with prior and anticipated conversational turns, including whatever historical corrections are necessary in order for the story to remain honorable or meet some other standard for public enshrinement. For example, U. S. history textbooks elide contradictions and uncomfortable facts in producing a grand narrative of the U. S. as a leading moral force in the development of society (Loewen, 1996). Similarly, Russian textbooks were rewritten following the fall of the Soviet Union to produce versions of historical events that met new political exigencies for the restored Russian state, with official accounts of the Russian Civil War and World War II revised to reflect new narrative needs (Wertsch, 1999).

In the current character education movement, narratives are presented about the bygone days of virtue and modern decline of morality, the story of the United States’ civic heritage and its current demise, and other efforts to “return” to what one state character education leader calls “a saner, simpler time in history,” in spite of the legacy of slavery by both the fabled Founding Fathers and many other landowners, a long history of lynching of Black and occasionally Jewish citizens, a century of Jim Crow laws that made life for African Americans cruel and bleak, the denial of women the right to vote, the danger of workplaces for powerless employees and the accompanying resistance to reforms by management, and other problems historically imposed on the lives of the defenseless people in his state.

As suggested by these qualifications, these narratives of halcyon days of yore are, as Loewen (1996) points out, *selective*, presenting the United States according to its most glorious mythology and ignoring its many contradictions and those events that might promote feelings of shame and anger. This selectivity was exhibited in the 2011 reading of the Constitution, initiated by a new wave of conservative politicians elected to the U. S. Congress, which they edited to eliminate its language characterizing Black people as only 60% human and thus maintain the illusion that the Founding Fathers were men of immaculate character, a perspective undermined by histories that reveal them to be just as vain, arrogant, and otherwise flawed as 21st century politicians are (e.g., McCullough, 2001).

Like the notion of dialogism, *intertextuality* refers to the ways in which any newly produced texts derive from prior texts. While dialogism refers to the fact of this ongoing conversation, intertextuality refers to the forms and social practices from which new texts take shape. Intertextuality thus helps account for the enduring traits of discourse as well as the variations made in conventional forms by particular communities of practice. Bakhtin’s notion of *heteroglossia* asserts that these intertextual links rarely come in pure form but are reformed and repurposed as they become hybridized through their intersections with other discourses and social languages, at times in contradictory ways. In the literacy arena, for instance, hip-hop culture is growing in recognition as a distinct genre based in African
American experiences, with attendant stances, ideology, tropes, and other recognizable features (see, e.g., Hill, 2009). At the same time, German rappers such as Fler, Bushido, and Sido have adopted American gangsta-style hip-hop, recasting the conventions in lyrics that glorify Aryan supremacist violence that would destroy the very culture whose customs they employ.

The contributions of Bakhtin point to the dialogic and intertextual nature of all utterance. The processes involved contribute to ideological perpetuation as individuals revoice perspectives they have appropriated in prior settings. The availability of multivoicedness undermines the notion that settings are fatalistic, given that it provides other possibilities for individuals and groups, as is evident in political uprisings throughout history.

The History of Settings

The very existence of structures such as different settings for literacy—from Montessori schools to military schools to spoken word collectives—is rooted in history. This perspective calls attention to the cultural goals of development (telos) and the ways in which environments are structured to promote development toward these goals (prolepsis) (see Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 2000) to produce its eidos: the formal sum of its culture available through its value systems, intellectual life, sense of purpose, organization, and social practices. Both telos and prolepsis contribute to the motive of the setting, often in tacit ways. Cultures are infused with notions of ideal personal and societal futures that are promoted through the ways in which cultural activity is structured. Understanding the kinds of culturally defined futures that motivate people's activity and the sorts of tools they develop in order to help mediate one another's progress toward those futures is a central feature of a Vygotskian approach.

A teleological consideration is inextricably tied to the notion of progress in that it specifies or suggests an optimal outcome or destination for a group of people. This group may exist on a national level (e.g., the Soviet belief that communism was a more advanced form of society whose superiority would inevitably cause capitalism to ultimately fall by the wayside), on a spiritual level (e.g., the belief within the Baptist Church that faith, and not earthly works, will lead to salvation), on a subnational level (e.g., the different trajectories written into law for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer/Questioning (GLBTQ) people in the states of Arizona and Massachusetts), and within smaller entities of any size (e.g., the individualized, child-centered path of development in a Montessori school vs. the cultural heritage indoctrination emphasized in many other types of schools based on Hirsch’s [1987] notion of cultural literacy).

The notion of telos is thus often explicit in founding documents and other sorts of charters and mission statements. Prolepsis is less tangible, referring to the invisible and subconscious ways in which activity is directed toward particular ends. Rommetveit (1974) used the term to describe, as Wertsch (1985) summarizes his work,
a communicative process whereby individuals must identify others’ implicit assumptions in order to interpret their utterances. Rather than viewing communication as a process that presupposes fixed and shared background knowledge and involves the transmission of information, Rommetveit suggests that a listener often must create background knowledge as part of “what is made known” in communication. That is, an understanding of the activity setting emerges for the junior participant as a “by-product” of communicating in it. (p. 216)

Rommetveit (1974) describes here the tacit understandings that make clear communication possible. I draw on Cole’s (1996) adaptation to broaden this aspect of interpersonal communication to a whole society’s tacit channeling of broad cultural activity toward a common teleological endpoint. Wells (1986), without using the term, describes prolepsis as follows:

As mature members of a human culture, parents have quite specific ideas about what sorts of behavior have meaning and so, in interpreting the baby’s gestures, noises, and so on, parents assimilate them to behaviors that they themselves find meaningful. The meanings attributed are therefore cultural meanings and, in their responses, parents provide culturally appropriate feedback that has the effect of shaping the infant’s behavior towards what is culturally acceptable and meaningful. (p. 35; emphasis in original)

An example of how prolepsis works comes from Rubin, Provezano, and Luria (1974), who studied adults interacting with babies in a nursery. Regardless of the child’s actual genitalia, which were hidden beneath the diapers, those babies wearing pink diapers were treated sweetly and gently, while those wearing blue were bounced more robustly and spoken to in louder and more vigorous tones. The social future of these infants was thus projected into their current treatment, in turn making a conventionally gendered future more likely. Rheingold and Cook (1975), studying how parents prepare homes for babies following their initial introduction to the world in hospitals, found that parents often both anticipate and help to construct their children’s gendered futures, decorating boys’ rooms with transportation motifs and other worldly pursuits and girls’ rooms with dolls, lace, and similar domesticalia. The shaping of children’s environments by adults projects a life trajectory that is often reinforced across the many settings in which young people are socialized into appropriate adult roles. These projections undoubtedly contribute to the dissonance experienced by GLBTQ youth when awakening to other sexual possibilities that might lead to gender dysphoria: the troubled feelings that may follow from how their orientation is perceived and responded to by others.

Through the process of telos, society perpetuates its practices and truisms, at times to the detriment or limitation to some groups within it, such as GLBTQ residents of U. S. Southern Baptist communities that adhere to the doctrine that “Christians should oppose . . . all forms of sexual immorality, including . . .
homosexuality” (Rogers, 1999). As Cole (1996) describes the proleptic means by which cultures channel their inhabitants toward particular sorts of social futures, “when neonates enter the world they are already the objects of adult, culturally conditioned interpretation. . . . They come bathed in the concepts their community holds about babies just as surely as they come bathed in amniotic fluid” (pp. 183–184). The notion that people are products of culture, then, refers to the ways in which society embeds its assumptions in daily social practice, thus codifying the world in particular ways and suggesting the naturalness, appropriateness, and often inevitableness of conventional ways of living within it. The world thus coded typically establishes authoritative ways of reading meaning into signs that privilege one perspective over another (cf. Kalantzis & Cope, 2000; Luke, 1988; Michaels & Sohmer, 2000; Street, 1984).

The notions of telos and prolepsis are inevitably implicated in the developmental approach undertaken by Vygotsky. The idea of development, however, is problematic, suggesting a relatively clear path toward a desired, positive, or optimal sense of completion. Wertsch (1998) complicates this notion by posing the question, Development toward what? This inquiry must be part of any consideration that assumes that action is mediated in service of a life trajectory.

Many Vygotskian researchers find Piaget’s theory of biological development, which he developed based on studies of his own children, to be culture-specific and thus parochial in its view of human potential. Hundeide (1985), for example, questions the universality of the cognitive stages described by Piaget and the specific optimal developmental outcome toward which they lead. She says,

> When we study other cultures with different institutions and episodic structuring of reality, we may find that the definition required for the proper execution of certain mental operations that are of interest to us are outside the episodic repertoire of that culture. In such cases, an orthodox Piagetian diagnostician runs the risk of diagnosing an entire culture as “preoperational.” (pp. 310–311; emphasis in original)

Her insight could well describe the problem created by Vygotsky’s collaborator and student A. R. Luria in his studies of Islamic cultures in Kazakhstan, in which he characterized them as “backward” because of the responses they gave to Western item sorting tasks (see Chapter 3). From a Vygotskian perspective, then, a sense of telos may be grounded in unexamined cultural assumptions about the ways in which people have historically developed in particular societies and be inappropriate in judging people from other cultures, as frequently happens when members of technologically advanced societies encounter members of technologically limited societies. One clear example of this sort of characterization is found in the description of 17th–18th century Native Americans as "savages" by European “explorers” (National Humanities Center, n. d.), or as the Europeans are often viewed from the Native American perspective, “invaders” (Native Village, n. d.).
Especially in English classes, the site of much literacy instruction, prolepsis works in service of the traditional culture of school in which canonical texts make up the curriculum and the analytical written text is prized as the highest form of interpretation (Applebee, 1993). These cultural practices, facilitated by a limited tool kit of mediational means used to produce a small set of textual forms, restrict students in terms of the meaning available for them to construct. Furthermore, because the cultural practices drawn on most resemble those found in the homes of middle-class students, school success is less likely for those whose home cultures provide them with a different tool kit, a different set of goals for learning, and different notions of what counts as an appropriate text (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Lee, 2007; Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

The emphasis on cultural history presents a conundrum because, while considered essential, it is often difficult to document clearly. Although some efforts have been made to study classrooms over time in order to understand the development of the prevailing practices, routines, and values (Gutiérrez & Stone, 2000), a deeper sense of individual or institutional history is available primarily through interviews and suggestive artifacts rather than direct, empirical study. A limitation of a cultural-historical theory, then, is that there has been a whole lot of history, the great majority of which is impossible to recover and document; and even the limited amount of documented history can fill entire libraries. This problem no doubt helps to account for the selective manner in which contexts are constructed to serve particular points and perspectives by those who interpret them.

**Overlapping and Intertwined Boundaries**

Settings typically overlap rather than existing as insular social contexts. Settings involve sets of relationships that coexist and intersect with others. Each classroom participant, for instance, acts within a setting bounded by the classroom, which is a subset of different, coexisting settings. The classroom is part of a school, which is part of a district, which exists within a statewide system, in what Cazden (1988) has called “nested” contexts. At the same time, an English class is situated within a set of departmentally-governed English classes that are typically responsive to local and state English/Language Arts frameworks (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994). And that is just the side of the equation provided by the institution; each student brings a host of overlapping cultural settings to the mix, no doubt too complex to describe for any individual student, much less the teeming masses that populate any given school.

The question of a cultural history and its enduring relationships and practices requires attention to temporal, conceptual, and physical boundaries. They are rarely discrete, however, typically overlapping in some way with other settings in dynamic ways. Perhaps the most problematic and challenging situations occur over the confluence of public institutions such as schools and the many and varied
backgrounds that shape and inform students’ lives. As many have argued for many years (e.g., Heath, 1983; Moll, 1990), schools are designed to fit the cultural practices of the White middle class, a group that is far less homogeneous than this classification suggests. Feminists have contended that schools are designed more for the detached and analytic orientation of boys than the relational and cooperative disposition of girls (e.g., American Association of University Women, 1995), given the prevalence of the “essayist tradition” in school writing (Farr, 1993), the competitive and individualistic manner in which grades are awarded, and other staples of school life. In spite of this disadvantage, by all accounts girls outperform boys in virtually every area of school achievement, including disciplines such as mathematics and science traditionally considered to be masculine domains (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000).

A much clearer distinction occurs with the performance of students of Latin@, African American, Native American, and working class backgrounds in school relative to their White counterparts. These students become acculturated to ways of knowing and being in the world that are often distinct from those normalized in U.S. schools. Eckert (1989) describes the ways in which working class students view school as an adolescent holding pen and defy adults’ efforts to treat them as children in need to external structure. Instead they orient themselves to the adult world of work and adopt presumed adult behaviors such as smoking, skipping class, and engaging in other rules violations as a way of gravitating toward the world they seek to occupy. They tend to place little value on the picayune nature of school assessment and, more than their middle-class counterparts, refuse to comply because they see no future for themselves in the destinations afforded by educational channels.

A number of studies have further found that, at least in some African American communities, the behavioral values of school are quite different from those that the students might practice in their home lives. In church, for instance, their congregation might be continually exhorted to participate in the service. Indeed, if the congregation is not sufficiently involved through loud vocal expressions and testifying, the preacher will shout “Y’all can’t hear me!” to increase participation. Further, in public debates between White and Black citizens, Kochman (1981) found that most Whites employ a dispassionate and logical mode of debating and problem-solving while African Americans are much more likely to present themselves as emotional and fervent. As a result, the White participants think that the Blacks are overcome by emotion and are therefore illogical, while the Black participants think that the Whites are not sufficiently committed to their beliefs because they express them with so little affect.

Many African American students have thus been acculturated to believe that appropriate behavior in formal settings includes loud and passionate involvement. This engagement might come in the form of spontaneous participation that builds on and reinforces another speaker’s contribution, including and perhaps especially the leader’s; the ritualistic insults that are involved in what is variously known as
“signifying,” “dissing,” “playing the dozens,” “snapping,” and other names (see Gates, 1988; Lee, 1993); employing the conventions of African American English such as double negatives or profanity to emphasize a point (Spears, 1998); and otherwise violating the norms of what middle-class White women—who make up the largest segment of the teaching population—believe to be appropriate in school. These violations often result in discipline. Frequently, after being disciplined for acting in ways that they believe are appropriate, African American students feel that they have been punished for what they believe to be acceptable public behavior, thus creating even greater separation between them and the school that is trying to socialize them into a different set of norms than they have learned at home.

Establishing and enforcing a motive for a setting thus can be problematic and contentious, and ultimately inequitable. The overlap of boundaries contributes to the difficulties involved in moving whole groups of people toward a relatively stable and uniform end; and yet that is what schools typically attempt to do in service of broader societal beliefs about the value and process of education.

MEDIATION BY SIGNS AND TOOLS

Psychological tools, like the more familiar tools of handiwork and construction, enable people to act on their environments. From the standpoint of literacy development, signs and tools typically involve the use of words to create texts. A tool such as speech or writing can create signs such as words and texts that serve to structure the developmental environment of an individual; through this structuring, signs potentially serve as tools for regulation and mediation. As I have reviewed, some view the sign-and-tool relationship as a single phenomenon, e.g., Cole’s (1996) merging of the two into the construct of an artifact, which he sees as the residue of cultural practice. I prefer to keep them distinct, even as I recognize that signs often serve a tool function.

Signs mediate a person’s appropriation of cultural values and the means through which people communicate them. Understanding how cultures sanction particular tools and signs thus becomes critical. Much school writing instruction, for instances, focuses on the sign potential of speech; that is, it centers on what written texts look like and emphasizes to students their need to approximate the conventions found in model texts. What it often lacks is any attention to the process of how to produce those texts, which is the tool function of speech (Smagorinsky, 1997a). The “writing to learn” movement, for instance, focused almost exclusively on the tool function of writing, emphasizing that the process of articulation itself can contribute to the writer’s construction of meaning, as Vygotsky (1987) postulated. (See Chapter 7 for an elaboration of these issues.)

Another factor involved in the tool-and-sign relationship is the development of broad patterns of communication known as speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986; Wertsch, 1991). Speech genres, or ordered systems for using linguistic signs,
mediates the ways in which people learn to think in particular social settings. From an educational perspective, various academic speech genres tend to structure discussions in school, such as the pattern in which teachers lead students toward conventional, canonic interpretations of literature by providing a broad interpretive outline that leaves students with limited agency (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). Extensive attention to non-analytic response such as emotional engagement with literature is unusual (Applebee, 1993) and indeed has been ridiculed when recommended to teachers (see Stotsky’s [1999] scathing opinion of teachers who attend to students’ emotional readings of literature). The analytic emphasis of schools thus circumscribes the speech genres available in classrooms and muffles, discourages, or prohibits other sorts of responses, at least those expressed in formal classroom discussions.

The formal, analytic emphasis in school further restricts the use of speech so that it often short-circuits students’ use of talk as a means of discovering what they have to say. Barnes (1992), for instance, identifies final draft and exploratory speech, arguing that in schools students are expected to speak only when their ideas are well-formed. Informal talk through which new ideas may come into being is discouraged, as are settings (e.g., small group discussions) that might promote exploratory thinking and speech.

The expansion of Vygotsky’s emphasis on speech to include other sign systems in a cultural tool kit has proven provocative to literacy researchers (see Chapter 8), even to the point where some have labeled their own work in this vein as “new literacies studies” (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Locating their work within the field of semiotics—the study of signs—these researchers have undertaken studies of the role of dance (Hanna, 1987; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995a), art (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994; Whitin, 1996), video games (Gee, 2003), physical space (de Certeau, 1985), color (Eco, 1985), drama (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995b), and other types of signs in providing mediation and enabling self-regulation among members of various cultures (John-Steiner, 1987, 1995).

The mediational process is predicated on the ways in which people invest signs with meaning (Wertsch, 1985), particularly the ways in which members of a culture structure society according to shared meanings for signs (Cohen, 1989), a phenomenon I take up in Chapter 6. The point here is that researchers have begun to explore the manner in which various sign systems and the psychological and material tools through which they are produced are implicated in literacy development, often comparing them with the processes and texts available in written literacy. These studies have rich potential in revealing how learners make sense of their worlds through their literacy activities.

APPROPRIATION

Appropriation (Leont’ev, 1981; Wertsch; 1991) refers to the process through which a person “takes up and makes use of” (Newman et al., 1989, p. 15), i.e.,
adopts and modifies (Newell, Tallman, & Letcher, 2009), the tools available for use in particular social environments (e.g., schools, online communities) and through this process develops ways of thinking endemic to specific cultural practices (e.g., using jargon, employing particular scripts). The term appropriation has been used interchangeably with a set of terms that describe the same process yet characterize it differently. Newman et al. (1989), for instance, critique Piaget’s use of assimilation to account for the ways in which people adopt practices from others. Meshcheryakov (2007), in discussing Vygotsky’s terminology, refers to the term interiorization (p. 162) to describe what appears to be the same process.

Newman et al. use the term internalize throughout their book to account for the manner in which knowledge moves from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal planes; and in revisiting my own prior publications to produce this new account of my thinking that I present in this book, I have found in the past, including the recent past, I have relied on the term internalize to account for how people adopt the social practices, including ways of speaking, from the people who surround them. Recently, however, with the understanding of tool-mediated psychological functioning better explored and understood, the term appropriation has become preferred (M. Cole, personal communication). Each of the other terms—assimilation, internalization, and interiorization—suggests an intact transition from a tool or sign from outside the body to inside the skull. Given that the construct of mind (see below) is now viewed as a highly distributed entity, the language of external and internal suggests a notion that betrays Wertsch’s (1991) assertion that mind “extends beyond the skin” in at least two senses: it is often socially distributed and it is connected to the notion of mediation” (p. 14; cf. Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Bateson, 1972; Geertz, 1973). The term appropriation thus resolves the conceptual problem of accepting the mind’s distributed nature while also accepting the Vygotskian tenet that cognitive processes are social in origin, and the rhetorical problem of articulating this tension via a single, accurate term.

The extent of appropriation depends on the congruence of a learner's values, prior experiences, and goals with those of more experienced or powerful members of a culture such as parents, faith community leaders, cultural icons, and so on (see Cole, 1996; Newman et al., 1989; Smagorinsky, 1995a; Wertsch, 1991). The learner's active role in these practices is fundamental to appropriation, which enables them to reconstruct the knowledge they learn, thus transforming both their conception of the knowledge and in turn that knowledge as it is construed and used by others. Cazden's (1988) idea of performance before competence is useful in understanding appropriation because it emphasizes the role of active participation as a means of becoming competent in social practices.

Different tools are appropriated for use in different settings through different means. Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999) differentiate among five degrees of appropriation, each representing a depth of understanding of a particular tool's functions. They consider the appropriation of a tool as it is being conceived in the context of learning, suggesting that these conceptions are social
constructions rather than stable ideals. Grossman et al. propose that appropriation can take place in varying degrees, including a lack of appropriation. Following is their account of these levels, which they developed for the study of teachers’ appropriation of pedagogical tools, yet which may have relevance for literacy research as well.

**Lack of appropriation** Learners might not appropriate a literacy tool for several reasons. The concept may be too difficult to comprehend at the point in someone's development when it is initially encountered. Alternatively, the concept may be too foreign to their prior frameworks at that point in their development. Learners might also understand the concepts as intended but reject them for a variety of reasons.

**Appropriating a label** Assuming that a learner has some intent to appropriate a tool, the most superficial manner comes when a person learns the name of a tool but knows none of its features. For instance, a student in school might be exposed to the idea of an indirect object in a sentence, yet not understand its features or how to identify or produce one.

**Appropriating surface features** The next level of appropriation comes when a person learns some or most of the features of a tool yet does not understand how those features contribute to the conceptual whole. The authoritative version of the concept is assigned a particular, officially-articulated meaning, and teachers provide this meaning to students as a conceptual tool. For a concrete tool such as an indirect object, the authoritative version is relatively indisputable. For something more abstract such as a “well-formed paragraph,” the features might be more open to different conceptions.

**Appropriating conceptual underpinnings** At the conceptual level one grasps the theoretical basis that informs and motivates the use of a tool. Learners who grasp the conceptual underpinnings of a tool are likely able to make use of it in new contexts and for solving new problems. A learner could conceivably understand and use the conceptual underpinnings of a tool but not know its label, as is often the case for fluent writers in a particular genre who lack formal knowledge of that genre’s features, such as the notion of “warranting” in arguments (see Toulmin, 1969).

**Achieving mastery** An understanding of both a concept and its formal properties could conceivably lead to a state of mastery, which Herrenkohl and Wertsch (1999) view as an achievement that involves a learner’s fully realized grasp of a concept that most likely would take years of practice to achieve. This distinction argues for a longitudinal look at learners' development, since they may only be able to master the use of literacy tools after several years of practice. I have been writing since I was a young child and have written almost incessantly for over
thirty years without having achieved anything I’d call “mastery,” and so I view this state as more of an ideal than a destination at which most people can conceivably arrive for the development of complex literacy skills. The notion of “mastery” seems consistent with the notion of telos in that both represent optimal destinations that may always, like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, remain out of reach in the course of individual human development and indeed may shift locations as one moves toward it.

Factors Affecting Appropriation

The idea that a tool may be appropriated “properly” assumes that it has an official use. Yet those of us who have opened paint cans with screwdrivers know that a tool’s official purpose can have little to do with the ways in which individuals actually use it. It is critical to understand, then, how and what appropriation means to the learner who is trying to adopt and modify a tool for personal use. What follows is a set of factors that may be involved in how learners come to employ the literacy tools that contribute to their communicative needs.

Social context of learning

The social context of learning provides the environment in which one learns how to use tools. The notion of context is often associated with a physical structure (e.g., an arena such as a school, an after-school program, a book club) that embodies a set of human values (Chin, 1994). The sense of context outlined here primarily refers to the related set of social practices in and through which learning takes place among people whose lives intersect in a particular activity in what they construct as the setting for their learning. Social contexts in this conception serve as structures that are products of cultural history in which individual histories converge, and are thus inherently relational and value-laden.

The social context of a setting also includes how, and by whom, tools are introduced and used. A tool may be presented through a text, instructor, school-based teacher, or classmates in varying degrees of faith to its authoritative conception and in varying degrees of complexity corresponding to the levels of appropriation previously outlined. If a tool is presented without its conceptual underpinnings, students mayappropriate only what is available, i.e., the label and surface features. One widely-used book for training teachers, for instance, includes a set of bumper-sticker slogans along the lines of “Celebrate diversity!” and other bromides that encourage a complex disposition without providing any concrete means toward putting it into practice (see Smagorinsky & Whiting’s [1995] analysis of English methods course syllabi).

Although school is the primary formal setting in which students learn literacy skills, they often participate of their own volition in other communities of literacy practice, such as the online fanfiction collaboratives in which many young people
participate (see Black, 2008). Teachers often view the formal conventions valued in school as official and authoritative and discourage deviations from their norms, yet in doing so may violate the conventions that are expected in students’ self-chosen literacy communities (Alvermann, 2010). What becomes appropriated and in what manner then depends on the degree to which the learner understands the expectations of different settings and adjusts her literacy practices accordingly. What becomes problematic is the manner in which official school-sanctioned conventions and speech genres predominate over what students might most usefully employ to find meaning in their schoolwork.

**Individual characteristics of the learner**  Vygotskian theory focuses primary attention on the cultural-historical settings in which the development of both individuals and their social groups takes place. Individual characteristics of learners serve as factors that are implicated in the process of appropriation within these settings. Wertsch (1998) has argued that debates about human development typically cast the individual and society as antimonies in ways that caricature opposing perspectives. He argues instead for the need to view the individual as fundamental to the construction of social groups, rather than as a separate entity.

Vygotsky’s concern with the individual-in-society suggests a need to understand how a person has come into being in relation to what cultural-historical settings expect of their participants. Both biological and sociocultural factors—that is, both nature and nurture—contribute to what a person brings to a setting and its conventions, rituals, and practices. Biologically, for instance, one can have a particular sort of “extranormative” or “neurotypical” disposition, i.e., one that departs from mental health norms (see Smagorinsky, 2011b, for a rationale for resisting deficit language such as “disorder” for such makeups). Those on the autism spectrum, for instance, may be constrained in their capacity to grasp particular sorts of tools, such as those that enable communication and relationships.

A more pervasive problem comes from the cultural ways of knowing that different types of learners bring to classrooms. The stereotype of the “silent Indian” student, for instance, often follows more from a sense of alienation from the conduct of schooling than from a broad disposition to refrain from talking, as evidenced by observations of Native American students who rarely speak in classrooms yet are very vocal in other settings (Philips, 1972, 1983). I have reviewed this phenomenon with other cultural groups, often identified by racial characteristics (e.g., Alim & Baugh, 2006, on African American students; Li, 2005, on Asian American students; Valenzuela, 1999, on Latin@ students; and McCarty & Lomawaima, 2006, on Native American students) or those following from social class differences (e.g., Eckert, 1989; Hicks, 2002) or the intersection of multiple factors (e.g., Healey, 2005).

The effort to standardize schooling in terms of uniform curricula, standardized tests, behavior policies based on middle class norms, and other efforts can create disadvantages for many such students in school. Indeed, the dropout rates of many
from marginalized groups greatly outpace those of the middle class students for whom schools appear to be designed (Fine, 1991; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). The fact that Orfield et al. and Stotsky (1999) both employ a similar titular claim for different ideological ends is most striking. Orfield et al. title their report Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis; Stotsky titles her study of glossary items in multicultural textbooks Losing our Language: How Multicultural Classroom Instruction is Undermining our Children’s Ability to Read, Write, and Reason. To Orfield et al., “we” are the people broadly speaking who stand to lose “our” future if we abandon particular cultural groups because of their differences. To Stotsky, “we” are the keepers of the gate warding off the onslaught of unwashed barbarians who threaten “our language” by persisting with their own.

The fact that so many students leave school based on what appear to be cultural differences should be alarming to educators who are concerned with the life trajectories of students from across the range of communities that make up the U. S. polity. Taking Stotsky’s (1999) position that “we” are the keepers of the pure and right version of English—one rooted only in Greek and Latin—suggests that “we” have a duty to impose the norms of the established, dominant culture on all. This dispute over the motive of education illustrates the challenges facing literacy educators over the question of how to educate students of diverse backgrounds in a single institution and the settings it affords.

**MIND AND MEDIATION**

The notion of “mind” is somewhat elusive. Major Vygotskian texts include “mind” in their titles without having an index reference to the term, including Vygotsky’s *Mind in Society* and Wertsch’s *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind* and *Mind as Action*. Many psychologists view the human mind as a distinct entity that is firmly encased within the skull. As one might infer from Wertsch’s (1991) assertion that mind extends beyond the skin, a perspective grounded in Vygotsky’s cultural theory of the socialization of mind would view it as inextricably linked to the mediational cultural tools through which it acts and is acted upon. It is further linked to neurological functions within the body, particularly those implicated in emotional life. Defining such a distributed entity with clarity appears problematic, even as the construct of “mind” is a central focus of any psychology. To Wertsch (1991), mind is more or less equivalent to *distributed mental activity in sociocultural engagement*. And yet such a notion of mind would never appear on a brain scan.

**Cultural Schemata**

Newman et al. (1989) describe mind as part of their consideration of socially, culturally, and historically situated cognition. They wrote their book in an era when...
cognitive psychology and its information processing paradigm—in which cognition is considered almost exclusively as taking place between the ears (see Chapter 9 for an exploration of the different theoretical underpinnings of cognitive psychology and cultural-historical psychology)—provided the conversational turn that anyone proposing an alternative needed to address. They contrast their work with that of information processing pioneer Herbert Simon⁴, saying,

> We agree with Simon’s [1980] characterization of the mind as an artifact rather than as a “natural” system. This position is consistent with the sociohistorical theory (Vygotsky, 1978, Luria, 1978; Leont’ev, 1981) that we draw upon in our analysis of cognitive change. Where we differ from many of our colleagues in cognitive science is in our primary interest in man-made systems of social activity. A game of poker, work in a factory, a classroom lesson and a psychological experiment are all artificial systems in Simon’s sense. But they are systems organized among as well as within human beings. The physical symbol systems that constitute cognition are materially present in the organization of people—in their interactions—as well as in their brains. (p. 3; emphasis in original)

Again addressing the predominance of cognitive psychology, Cole (1996) later drew on ideas proposed by his UCSD colleague and cultural anthropologist D’Andrade (1990, 1995). D’Andrade and Cole emphasize the relation between cultural practice and human mentation to adapt information processing’s schema theory, the widely accepted view that people develop frameworks for thinking that in turn guide their approach to new situations, to conform to cultural-historical principles. They thus reformulated schema theory to produce the notion of cultural schema to indicate the ways in which frameworks for thinking are rooted in cultural-historical social practices that learners appropriate and use to frame new experiences. Newman et al. (1989) distinguish their perspective from that of the reigning cognitive paradigm of the 1980s (see Chapter 9 for further differentiation):

> In cognitive psychology, . . . an abstract and general structure would usually be called a “schema” and would be considered a feature of a subject’s internal conceptualization. . . . We will be looking for this “schema” outside of the laboratory, and we will be careful not to give it an exclusively mental status. . . . it would be found as much interpsychologically (i.e., mediating social interactions) as intrapsychologically (i.e., mediating an individual’s action). (p. 41; emphasis in original)

The development of cultural schemata suggests the distributed nature of cognition (Salomon, 1993). Questions abound concerning how culture shapes specific paths of development, even within societies whose predominant sign systems promote regulation through similar general processes such as Piagetian stages of cognitive development. Many cultures lead people to appropriate "higher" or sociocultural
mental processes that, from other perspectives, are not "positive" or optimal. Urban youths participate in street gang activities, for instance, appropriating codes of behavior that are antithetical to civil law. Genocidal societies such as Nazi Germany provide signs and tools that lead its citizens to believe in and participate in the extermination of other groups of people, a practice labeled by members of other cultures as war crimes and atrocities. Wells (1995) has attempted to solve the developmental conundrum by arguing that development can be considered a function of a learner's immediate sense of an activity's worth, regardless of other judgments. Children whose environments teach them anti-Semitism and genocide as a reasonable practical solution, then, can be said to be "developing" toward a positive end-point within the bounds of their cultural values, even though members of other cultures might find the developmental path to be evil.

A person, especially in a technologically-connected world in which contact with other cultures is a feature of daily life, is rarely limited to a single developmental focus, however. Most people are developing in several ways at once. Tulviste's (1991) principle of heterogeneity is informative on this point. He maintains that an environment, or overlapping social networks, can present a learner with a variety of types of problems to solve, thus allowing individuals to develop a number of frameworks for thinking. Development can thus take several directions simultaneously; a person can learn the value of care from a personal relationship and aggression and competition from involvement in sports. The heterogeneity principle helps account for the complexity of human life and the many roles that people play in their daily relations.

The extent to which a person appropriates the values of any cultural way of knowing depends on the degree of consonance the person has with the cultural tools that mediate development. Tools enable meaning construction when they are sanctioned by the cultural environment of learning, are recognized by the learner as tools, and are used volitionally by the learner (Smagorinsky, 1995; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). Children who are abducted and raised in a child pornography industry against their will would not, in this conception, be in a state of social or cultural development. Even though they are immersed in a cultural value system that provides them with tools and signs for mediating mental activity toward a certain optimal endpoint, they presumably do not agree with that endpoint, do not act volitionally, and do not value the cultural tools provided to them. They thus resist the effort to shape their higher mental processes toward the culture’s teleological ends.

The conception of development I am presenting assumes the learner's acceptance of the value system underlying the semiotic structure of the environment and the need for intersubjectivity—a shared understanding of the situation—with the sense of meaning communicated through the signs that order thinking and activity. This sense of consonance includes not only a mutual agreement on the meaning of signs, but on the ways in which tools are used to produce them. Such congruent tool use might require intersubjectivity in a variety of social relationships,
including the participant structure of activity (Philips, 1972) and the ways in which community members share an understanding of task and tool use in the process of appropriation (Leont'ev, 1981; Newman et al., 1989).

**Mind and Emotion**

In addition to being tied medially to culture and its tools and practices, mind includes a neurological element that involves an emotional dimension. Beginning with his exploration of *The Psychology of Art* (1971) in his doctoral dissertation, Vygotsky included attention to the role of emotions in human development at a variety of points during his career. I review these at length in Smagorinsky (2011a) and for the purposes of this chapter will confine my attention to the fact of the neurological system in emotional, and thus cognitive development, rather than covering all of Vygotsky’s work in this area.

Yaroshevsky (1989) relates that in 1929, Vygotsky jotted the following notes: “Dynamics of the individual=drama. . . . The individual as a participant in a drama. . . . Psychology is humanised” (Yaroshevsky, p. 217), suggesting that the principle focus of psychology should be on personality, “a character of the drama of life on the social stage” (p. 219). Vygotsky’s sense of drama concerns people in relation to both others and themselves, with drama emerging through relationships with other people in social settings. Dramatic tensions are also present within the individual, indicating that the development of personality is a consequence of the intrapersonal and social dramatic conflicts a person experiences in everyday life.

Vygotsky’s (1971) use of Aristotle’s term *catharsis* provided him with an early effort to relate cognition and emotion as associated developmental processes. A catharsis, in his conception, involves the generalization from personal emotions to higher human truths that becomes available through a transaction with a work of art. Both emotion and imagination are central to this process, with a key aspect of each being its indefiniteness and thus its capacity to promote a raised awareness in a respondent. An aesthetic response to art, he argues, is not strictly visceral. Rather, it involves a delay in which the imagination elevates the response: “The emotions caused by art,” he says, “are intelligent emotions” (p. 212).

Catharsis involves “an affective contradiction, causes conflicting feelings, and leads to the short-circuiting and destruction of these emotions” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 213). This process leads to “a complex transformation of feelings” (p. 214) resulting in an “explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions” (p. 215). Because emotion and imagination are implicated in instances of profound engagement with art, Vygotsky asserts that “art complements life by expanding its possibilities” (p. 247) as one overcomes, resolves, and regulates feelings through a process of generalization of those feelings to a higher plane of experience.

Vygotsky (1999) returned to emotional issues a few years later, challenging the reigning mechanistic conception of psychology of his day, particularly those predi-
cated on any Cartesian separation of mind from environment or internal functions (e.g., the James-Lange hypothesis; see James, 1890). Such an approach, he felt, “not only bypasses the problem of development, but factually resolves the problem in the sense of a full and complete denial of any possibility of emotional development in man” (p. 205). By viewing cognition as a discrete phenomenon, he argued, psychologists posit a person for whom “The body acts as a soulless robot wholly subject to laws of mechanics” (p. 163), one that is fundamentally dualistic and intellectualistic and in which feelings are reduced “to a purely cognitive process” (p. 176), such as the person as conceived of by Stotsky (1999) in her angry denunciations of the role of emotions in the construction of meaning in reading. In contrast, Vygotsky argued that “Consciousness must not be separated from its physical conditions: they comprise one natural whole that must be studied as such” (p. 228).

These emotions are further related to the setting in which emotional behavior is learned. One learns proper emotional etiquette from societal values such that in one culture, death is celebrated as a transition to a higher plane of existence, while in another, it becomes the source of wailing and lamenting. On a more local level, one need only watch a tennis match and football game to understand the manner in which an emotional response to athletic excellence may be expressed in different contexts. The social construction of emotional response is further evident in learning environments, such as the different means of interacting by the same English teacher in the leading of school-based literary discussions and in book club settings with selected adult friends (Marshall et al., 1995).

Shortly before his death, Vygotsky (1994) adapted the Russian term *perezhivanie*, possibly from Stanislavsky (2007), to account for the central role of affect in framing and interpreting human experience. This term has been associated with efforts to overcome trauma; its meaning appears to suggest that it is grounded in the process of emotional response to experience, particularly in its regulatory function. Vygotsky employs the term for the dramatic process of the development of personality in everyday life rather than on the stage. He argues that environmental factors are “refracted through the prism of the child’s emotional experience” (p. 339) to help shape a developmental path.

People frame and interpret their experiences through interdependent emotional and cognitive means, which in turn are related to the setting of new experiences. Smagorinsky and Daigle (2011) offer the term *meta-experience*—that is, how one experiences one’s experiences—to indicate the process through which people render their socially and culturally situated activity into meaningful texts of events. Vygotsky (1994) argues that “an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] is always related to something which is found outside the person—and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*].” Consequently, in “an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in the emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]” (p. 342; emphasis in original).
Cole (1996) has linked cultural-historical theory to Damasio’s work relating cognition and emotion from a neurological perspective that provides empirical grounding for theories that link cognition and emotion. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue that what appears to be strictly rational cognition is guided by “hidden emotional processes” (p. 5) that may play a dynamic role in the ways in which people learn. Emotional strategies help to frame an affective approach to learning that suggests that tasks are manageable and learners themselves are capable. They thus serve as mediational tools through which experience is interpreted and applied to new problems in ways that make success appear plausible and manageable.

Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue that rational thought and logical reasoning “cannot be recruited appropriately and usefully in the real world without emotion. Emotions help to direct our reasoning into the sector of knowledge that is relevant to the current situation or problem” (pp. 7–8). One’s construction of experience thus produces frameworks for interpreting new experiences. Emotions, rather than being strictly spontaneous, may be managed strategically to interpret experiences in ways that dispose a learner to view a new situation as replete with potential for success, and thus to help bring about that success (see Smagorinsky, Daigle, & O’Donnell-Allen, 2010). A learner, then, is potentially less at the mercy of an environment and more able to manage how events are interpreted, if not entirely controlled, in that setting.

CONCEPTS

Scribner and Cole’s (1981) and Heath’s (1983) pioneering work established that literacy learning may take place anywhere that people use reading and writing as a medium of exchange and communication, and their insights have spawned a generation of research into literacy development in work settings, community practices, families, and other settings outside formal schooling (see Beaufort, 2006; Christenbury et al., 2009; Cushman, Barbier, Mazak, & Petrone, 2006). Attention to such diverse settings, although less of a concern of Vygotsky’s for much of his career, has brought into focus a major point of his theory of concept development.

Vygotsky distinguished between what have been translated as scientific or academic concepts and spontaneous or everyday concepts. A scientific concept is not necessarily about science. Rather, in Vygotsky’s parlance it refers to concepts that are learned in a formal setting, particularly school. Such learning, as he observed it in the Soviet schools of his time, involved what Wertsch (1985) has called the decontextualization of mediational means. This phrase refers to the manner in which a concept is detached from its original context of learning and applied to new situations where it is appropriate.

Wertsch’s (1985) term decontextualization has more recently become viewed as inconsistent with notions of situated learning, which postulate that nothing occurs outside a context, making decontextualization impossible. Rather, in schooling as
Vygotsky knew it or envisioned it, a concept is not tied to the setting in which it was originally learned. Instead, it is subjected to an analysis that extracts generalizable features that make it amenable to application and adaptation in solving new problems in new contexts that share general properties. This abstractability often serves as the instructional focus, with the generalization presented initially and illustrations of various applications provided subsequently.

For example, in grammar instruction, students might be presented with the concept of the compound sentence, and then be required to identify whether a list of sentences may be classified as compound or not. In this approach, the abstraction of the compound sentence is primary, and efforts to identify it in new contexts—sentences that include them or not—follow from learning the rule. This approach stands in contrast to having students begin by writing ideas in which they have a vested interest and then returning to see if compound sentences are present in their writing, the degree to which compound sentences might improve their ability to communicate their ideas with given readerships, and other more inductive ways of attending to the grammatical concept of the compound sentence and its role in expression and communication.

Spontaneous concepts in contrast are not learned with the benefit of formal abstraction guided by a teacher. Rather, they are learned in situated, everyday practice, with the result that whatever concepts the learner derives are applicable primarily in similar contexts. As I review in Chapter 3, Luria’s (1978) research in Soviet Central Asia interpreted villagers’ difficulty with abstractions as a sign of cultural and cognitive backwardness because their knowledge came entirely from everyday experience. Given their isolation from other tribal groups, they had little need for abstraction to new settings in their pre-Soviet life; and given their lack of formal education and accompanying formal literacy instruction, they were not exposed to the rule-governed and abstractable forms of reasoning that Vygotsky considered available through instruction in academic concepts.

Although he treats spontaneous and scientific concepts as, in one sense, different, Vygotsky (1987) stresses the need for integration in order to ensure powerful learning and developmental experiences. He argues that in formal academic settings, instruction in principles alone will not result in the development of a concept. Rather, knowledge of abstracted governing rules must come in conjunction with empirical demonstration, observation, or activity. Vygotsky maintains that direct instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless. The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism that simulates or imitates the presence of concepts in the child. Under these conditions, the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken over by the child through memory rather than thought. Such knowledge turns out to be inadequate in any meaningful application. This mode of instruction is the basic defect of the purely
schiolastic verbal modes of teaching which have been universally condemned. It substitutes the learning of dead and empty verbal schemes for the mastery of living knowledge. (p. 170)

Vygotsky (1987) insists that principles cannot be divorced from application. His formulation requires the learner to establish a mindful relation between abstracted knowledge and experience in the world: "Conscious instruction of the pupil in new concepts (i.e., in new forms of the word) is not only possible but may actually be the source for a higher form of development of the child's own concepts, particularly those that have developed in the child prior to conscious instruction" (p. 172; emphasis in original). He argues that this interplay between formal knowledge of principles and knowledge gained through everyday activity enables people to think about problems beyond their range of experience. He maintains that the "process of concept formation requires . . . acts of thought which are associated with free movement in the concept system, with the generalization of previously developed generalizations, and with a more conscious and voluntary mode of operating on these existing concepts" (p. 181).

The development of a scientific concept thus relies on formal instruction—usually in an academic setting but available through communities of faith, apprenticeship relationships, organized activities, and other explicit and systematic instructional settings—and on the learner's conscious awareness and volition. It further relies on interplay between the learner's conceptual fields, with a dialectical relation developing between scientific and spontaneous concepts, those that involve "situationally meaningful, concrete applications, that is, in the sphere of experience and the empirical. . . . Scientific concepts restructure and raise spontaneous concepts to a higher level" (p. 220). The formal principles of the scientific concept create cultural schemata that enable a greater understanding of worldly experience and ability to act in relation to the world in confident, principled ways. By "principled" I refer to rule-governed action, which is not necessarily "principled" in the sense that it is scrupulous.

Vygotsky's primary interest in literacy-related development thus concerned school learning as informed by and anchored in real-world experience. His emphasis suggests the need to examine school as a particular kind of culture that fosters the development of scientific concepts. As many have argued, however, the current U. S. obsession with standardized testing has virtually eliminated attention to concept-driven thinking and action from classrooms, imposing instead imperatives to demand rote and literal performances from students. Vygotsky's focus on concept development as a school-based activity thus needs to take into account the fact that the Soviet schools of his era, at least as he envisioned them, had a different focus than do 21st century U. S. schools. Undoubtedly, a critic could further maintain that the concepts expected in Soviet schools were necessarily part of the state's fundamental task of imposing its ideology on its citizens (Wertsch, 1999). The Soviet Union was not unique in making its school curriculum conform to its ideology. Loewen (1996) argues that the
grand narratives of U.S. history textbooks establish their own ideology and sense of national identity that elide CIA-sponsored political assassinations, the exploitation of foreign resources to expand the U.S. economy, the history of racism and sexism within U.S. society, and many other sources of shame and embarrassment in schoolchildren’s appropriation of a sense of national affiliation.

One aspect of concept development that tends to be overlooked is that concepts enhance people’s ability to anticipate how future action will unfold. A generalization that is structured with formal, abstractable principles and grounded in extensive worldly experience enables, to some degree, one to infer what will happen next, given sufficient information about the present and how it has come into being. A concept is not simply a generalization, but one that is moved into action by an ideology or theory about how its principles function in relation to nature or social relationships and practices (Barrett, Abdi, Murphy, & Gallagher, 1993; cf. Gelman, 1999). Concepts are thus more than taxonomic structures. Rather, they serve as the basis for the planning of rule-governed, culturally-channeled worldly action.

This postulate holds for both the natural and social worlds. If I have a concept for how a particular plant will grow, for example, I can use that understanding to situate the plant in appropriate soil, light, and water conditions in order for it to thrive. If I misunderstand a plant’s needs and instead apply a generic and ill-advised principle, such as that plants require abundant water, then I might water a plant to death, as is common among novice gardeners who do not understand the fact that many plants have evolved to survive in arid conditions and so drown under excessive watering, a solution that many novices apply to any wilting plant, including those that have begun to die because they are already oversaturated. Even with relevant conceptual knowledge, I might install plants that die from other causes. But if I know a plant’s constitution and habits and thus can reasonably anticipate its needs and foresee how my program of care will produce particular results, I can increase its chances of survival.

The actions of people are more difficult to anticipate because they have volition. Nonetheless, a conception of particular culturally-mediated social action can enable greater anticipation of how human events will turn out than will the lack thereof. I have come to understand this likelihood through my studies of beginning teachers (e.g., Smagorinsky, Wilson, & Moore, 2011). Those with limited conceptions of teaching and learning tend to engage in trial-and-error instruction, retaining those practices that turn out to be effective but having little foresight regarding which will work. Those who can articulate the purposes behind their decisions based on a synthesis of formal and practical knowledge have had better success planning instruction that leads to their intended goals.

Many school reforms that lack a conception grounding in both abstract principles and empirical understanding make unwarranted assumptions about how teachers and students act, a major problem when policymakers such as U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan or major educational underwriters such as Bill Gates
have never taught at the classroom level. They assume, for instance, that by imposing a standardized testing system on children that is designed to weed out bad teachers whose students produce low test scores, they won’t (1) drive out the best teachers who find the test-oriented setting of school to be tedious and uninspiring, or (2) mismeasure students’ capabilities by confining high-stakes assessment to single-application test performances, or (3) penalize or advantage teachers for the economic conditions in which their students live, or (4) mistakenly assume that a single test item (or the aggregate of test items) is isomorphic across all children, or (5) fail in any number of other ways to assess students and teachers in sensitive and appropriate ways. Having a strong, empirically-based conception of social processes, then, can heighten the possibility that a plan will work as anticipated and reduce the likelihood that it will fall apart because it rests on a spurious foundation, particularly when billions of dollars are invested in them and millions of people are affected in negative and pernicious ways.

In the sense that concepts contribute to one’s ability to anticipate how the future will unfold, they can help lead to feelings of order and security, and thus happiness, a term I use in the manner of Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984), who view happiness as a state of deep-seated contentedness and satisfaction with one’s place in the world, rather than as a superficial condition of pleasure. The more formally grounded (i.e., scientific or academic) and abstractable a conception is to new settings and situations, the fewer disruptive surprises one will encounter and the more one will experience stability when engaging with the world. This is not to say that surprises and detours are necessarily unhappy occasions, for they often lead to happy outcomes, as I illustrate in Chapter 7 with student writer Doug, who deliberately creates unanticipated moments in his writing in order to build excitement in his own composing process. Rather, it is to say that a concept enables an orderly engagement with life such that unanticipated events are less likely to cause unwanted disruptions and decisions that produce negative outcomes. Indeed, one could infer that Doug’s conscious creation of suspense for himself as a writer is a concept-driven decision based on his experiences and understanding of how to structure his own reality to produce outcomes that he found stimulating.

By linking concepts to happiness, I also link it to the affective dimension of Vygotsky’s view of human development as comprehensive and integrated. In this view, cognition and affect are synergistic processes with a dialectic relation. As I illustrate in Chapter 7, student writer Susan Bynum’s positive sense of herself as a writer enabled her to overcome obstacles during her composition of an analytic essay that required her to explicate the relationships within a labyrinthian Shakespearean plot in the play *Much Ado About Nothing*. She was able to envision a positive outcome to her writing that enabled such strategies as not laboring over word choices because she understood that she could skip some decisions and return eventually to make improvements. This affective framework in turn helped her to produce an essay that contributed both to immediate feelings of satisfaction and to
her overall feeling of confidence as a writer. Future action that helps one reach
goals and experience the experience—what I refer to as a meta-experience in
discussing the construct of perezhivanie earlier in this chapter—as satisfying,
engaging, fulfilling, or other affectively positive feeling can in turn lead to a
happier and more affectively balanced and satisfying experience of life.

Concepts are fundamentally cultural as part of the frameworks for thinking that
people appropriate through their social experiences, suggesting that bringing them to
bear in settings guided by different motives and practices requires modification of
their principles and thus of the concept. I make this claim largely in relation to people
who have already developed some language fluency, given that, as Mandler (2007)
has found, even preverbal infants develop an extensive conceptual system to frame
their understanding of the world. This conceptual modification among people in ado-
lescence and beyond contributes to their development of a more complex understand-
ing, and development toward a modified life trajectory capable of adaptation to new
problems.

A young person might identify as “a writer” over a period of decades, yet have that
identity and understanding of it as an identity mediated and modified by different
settings, levels of maturation, goals, and other factors. He or she might say that “I
want to be a writer” in high school. Subsequently, he or she might engage in a variety
of disciplinary writing experiences in college that suggest the need for rhetorical
derifferentiation, learn especially the conventions of literary criticism as an English
major, take a job in an advertising agency writing copy that requires an adjustment
from the expansive and belles-lettres conventions of literary criticism to the economical
and functional limitations of producing snappy slogans, advance to writing jingles that
fit the parameters of music and include memorable rhymes that must be coordinated
with images, and ultimately gravitate to writing and performing songs on stage that
are more expansive and cover any conceivable topic. This trajectory is always
socially mediated, with the constraints and affordances available in one of these writ-
ing cultures not necessarily providing developmental channels in another.

As these examples suggest, concepts do not simply comprise empty theories, as
Vygotsky’s (1987) attention to the need for the interplay of spontaneous and scient-
ific conceptual fields indicates. Rather, concepts must have experientially- or
empirically-grounded utility to guide worldly action and engagement. Concepts
thus provide the means through which action takes on function, form, meaning,
and purpose. This action may be social, as in having a robust understanding of the
conventions of the genres through which one hopes to communicate, or in relation
to the natural world, as in understanding meteorological conditions and how they
suggest what awaits one in engaging with the geological world.
CHAPTER 2

SUMMARY

I could make the case that this entire book provides an account of Vygotsky’s key terms and concepts. I have chosen this set to foreground because of their recurring and pervasive role in understanding his work. In subsequent chapters I refer back to these constructs in outlining a Vygotskian framework for literacy research, in the process explaining my interpretation of how he uses them to develop more specific concepts in his effort to develop a comprehensive account of a historically and culturally grounded theory of the development of human consciousness.

NOTES

1 Piaget, born in 1896, was also a contemporary and a pioneer whose own considerable draft produced a different Zeitgeist, one based on human development according to biologically unfolding stages, that dominated U.S. colleges of education for much of the 20th century.

2 I use the term “Latin@” rather than “Latino/a” as a way to diminish the foregrounding of either gender in referring to this population. The @ symbol conveniently locates the α and α in the same figure such that neither is dominant. See, e.g., Fránquiz and Salazar (2007).

3 Note, however, that not all grammatical concepts are so clear-cut. The difference between a dangling preposition and an adverbial particle, for example, is a matter of perspective and interpretation.

4 Simon used protocol analysis studies to investigate economic reasoning, earning him recognition both as a key figure in cognitive psychology and as Nobel laureate in economics.

5 On those occasions when my sources employ what would now be viewed as sexist or phallogocentric language, I quote them directly without taking a presentist perspective of judgment. I am confident that in hindsight they regard such word choices as artifacts of particular times and places and that their language in their current writing reflects newer sensibilities.

6 The insertion of [perezhivanie] in the text is a translation device provided by editors Van der Veer and Valsiner (1994), who explain that “The Russian term serves to express the idea that one and the same objective situation may be interpreted, perceived, experienced or lived through by different children in different ways. Neither ‘emotional experience’ (which is used here and which only covers the affective aspect of the meaning of perezhivanie), nor ‘interpretation’ (which is too exclusive-ly rational) are fully adequate translations of the noun. Its meaning is closely linked to that of the German verb ‘erleben’ (cf. ‘Erlebnis’, ‘erlebte Wirklichkeit’)” (p. 354).

7 This trajectory is made up from a composite of real examples. The differences in disciplinary writing conventions have been well-documented in studies of rhetoric (e.g., Bazerman & Paradis, 1991); the qualities of literary criticism draw selectively on the broader conventions that govern argumentation and thus require highly specialized disciplinary knowledge (Fahnestock & Secor, 1991); English majors often have great difficulty adapting their writing from their college discipline to business environments in such areas as writing concise memos (Anson & Forsberg, 1990); and for the Beach Boys album Pet Sounds—widely ranked as among the most influential rock albums ever released—Brian Wilson employed a writer of commercial jingles, Tony Asher, as his co-composer.