

Pigeonhole Questions and Comments Paper 7. Poehner

Q: So basically the teacher should interact with students' mediated learning process, but how do teachers understand such process since it's much more complicated than S-R learning process?

The activity of understanding and guiding learner development is undoubtedly more complicated than the old Behaviorist S-R model would suggest. One of the central challenges, in Vygotskian terms, is that an individual's emerging capabilities – and therefore next or proximal level of development – cannot be predicted solely on the basis of his/her actual or current level of development. Put another way, we cannot know with certainty which abilities are in the process of forming and coming within an individual's control according to his/her present independent performance. This is a theoretical argument Vygotsky made and it has been borne out in numerous research studies. In fact, logically there would be no need for DA or attempting to take account of the ZPD in assessment if it were a simple matter of looking at where an individual currently is and then inferring his/her next stage of development (as, for example, Piaget might contend). All this to say that for teachers what is most useful, in my view, is not merely a technical understanding of DA or ML as a set procedure to follow; rather, only through a theoretical understanding of development can teachers come to appreciate the potential for their interactions and for the curriculum to promote learner abilities. This is perhaps a tall order, as most teacher education programs, to my knowledge, do not provide an in-depth treatment of any theory of development. At best, candidates are treated to surveys of various theoretical perspectives without gaining the depth of understanding in any of them that would allow the theory to really guide their thinking and practice. For this reason, much of my own work has been undertaken in cooperation with teachers and has begun by introducing teachers to Vygotskian theory.

Q: What do you propose for implementing DA and ML in large classes? (Provided that individual sessions are often hard to conduct)

*A: Yes, this is indeed a key issue. Vygotsky himself mentions the possibility of a Group ZPD (rather than individual) although he does not report any studies or data pertaining to this idea. There is a 2009 paper I authored that appeared in *TESOL Quarterly* on the idea of Group Dynamic Assessment. I suggest there a couple of lines that might be worth pursuing in classroom settings. In brief, one of these involves a teacher working to mediate a class or group of students as they collaboratively work through specified texts. In this format, a teacher's mediating prompt or question might be in response to a particular individual or might be directed at one learner but it is mediating the activity of the group. I refer to this as concurrent Group DA. The other format I discuss in that piece, cumulative Group DA, follows the logic of individualized or one-to-one DA interactions that occur in the social space of the classroom, with other learners looking on as secondary interactants. In this way, each learner has the potential to benefit from the interactions that have already occurred, and so the teacher's mediating efforts are aimed primarily at the student with whom s/he is interacting but secondarily at the rest of the class. There is thus a potential for a cumulative effect of DA interactions. There are some dissertations currently under way that examine these approaches but this work has not yet been published. To be sure, there are other formats that one might consider developing and pursuing, and this will be important for the future of DA/ML.*