



Does No One Read Vygotsky's Words?

Commentary on Glassman

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In the May 2001 issue of *Educational Researcher*, Michael Glassman proposed several commonalities in the thinking of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky. However, in addition to general problems in the article (misstatements about scholars' writings and a reliance on unsupported inferences), the discussion misconstrues major concepts and topics addressed by Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development—psychological tools, the role of the cross-cultural study, the zone of proximal development, and the nature of conceptual thinking. In addition, Glassman attempted to force Vygotsky's goals into a Deweyan framework. The result is a misportrayal of Vygotsky's work.

Sixteen years ago, Jean Valsiner (1988) noted that the depth of understanding of a theory is inversely related to its popularity, citing Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory as the most recent example. Since that observation, despite the appearance of reliable English translations of Vygotsky's published writings and a detailed study of his life (see van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991), major misconceptions continue to be identified (Gredler, 2002; Gredler & Shields, 2003; Green & Gredler, 2002, pp. 56–57, 66; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000).

A recent example of this phenomenon is Glassman's (2001) discussion, which is characterized by problems in five areas. They are general problems, as well as problems related to psychological tools and cross-cultural research, the zone of proximal development, and efforts to equate Vygotsky's thinking with that of Dewey.

General Problems

The first general problem is Glassman's (2001) omission of relevant historical information despite his comment that ignoring history would be a mistake (p. 5). For example, he stated that Dewey's critique of Russian education may have started a rift that led to a 1931 resolution of the Central Committee condemning progressive educational practices (p. 5). Omitted are (a) the widespread resistance to Deweyan methods by parents, teachers, and party members prior to 1928 (see Fitzpatrick, 1979, pp. 8, 34–37; Holmes, 1991, p. 51–60, 69–83),¹ (b) the subsequent denunciation of Deweyism as “a social fascist philosophy” (Novack, 1975, p. 274), and (c) the “wildly disorganized and experimental school of the First Five-Year Plan” (Novack, p. 252)², which actually precipitated the August 1931 resolution.

A second problem is Glassman's (2001, p. 5) assignment of concepts to scholars, including Vygotsky, that are not found in

their writings. An example is the citation to Novak [*sic*] (1975) as discussing “socially determined goals in activity” as a key issue in Marxist ideology, but Novack's text does not include this topic. Furthermore, contrary to Glassman's (2001, p. 3) statements, Vygotsky did not advocate bringing everyday activities into the classroom or the ways that human activity serves as an impetus to learning. Here, Glassman has made the classic error described by Kozulin (1984, p. 111). Specifically, Vygotsky's disciples turned his theory into an activity theory after his death, replacing the psychological tool as a mediator between objects of action and mental functions with material activity as the mediator, and careless scholars attribute activity theory to Vygotsky. Also, neither Vygotsky and Luria (1930/1993) nor Vygotsky's other writings state that cooperative activity separates humans from all other animals as Glassman (2001, p. 5) asserts. Instead, “the absence of at least the beginnings of speech . . . the lack of ability to make a sign or to introduce some auxiliary psychological means [in problem solving] . . . draws the line between the ape and the most primitive human being” (Vygotsky & Luria, 1930/1993, p. 73). In another work, Vygotsky (1931/1997f) identifies “*signification*, that is, the creation and use of signs” as the unique human behavior that differentiates humans from animals (p. 55).

In addition, Glassman's (2001) assertions that Vygotsky considered tools as “the means for specific, culturally approved consequences” (p. 5), believing that “tools and symbols are used in the service of culturally defined goals” (p. 6),³ and “free inquiry is . . . eclipsed by culturally significant and appropriate inquiry” (p. 6) are inaccurate. Vygotsky did not discuss inquiry, and he described psychological tools as “the means of which we direct and realize the psychological operations (e.g., memorizing, comparing, selecting) necessary for the solution of the problem” (Vygotsky, 1997i, p. 86).⁴

Moreover, Vygotsky (1997i) defined the instrumental act as including (a) the problem to be solved, (b) one's mental processes directed toward the solution of the problem, and (c) the [psychological] tool that dictates the coordination and course of the mental processes (p. 87). Examples of psychological tools include “language, different forms of numeration and counting, mnemotechnic techniques, algebraic symbolism, works of art, writing, schemes, diagrams, maps, blueprints . . . etc.” (p. 85). However, he cautioned that these symbols and signs are not automatically psychological tools. A stimulus “becomes a psychological tool by virtue of its use as a means of influencing the mind and behavior” (p. 87). Vygotsky (1997i) also stated that his “instrumental method has nothing in common (other than its name) with the theory of instrumental logic of Dewey and other pragmatists” (p. 88).

A third problem in Glassman's (2001) discussion is the use of unsupported inferences as the basis for further generalizations. After inappropriately identifying tools as a determinant of everyday culture, Glassman then states, "Dewey would applaud Vygotsky's emphasis on everyday culture as the lynchpin of the educational process" (p. 4). However, Vygotsky did not advocate bringing everyday culture into the classroom.

Psychological Tools and the Cross-Cultural Study

Glassman (2001, p. 6) cites Vygotsky and Luria (1930/1993) as the source for his statements that (a) Vygotsky would agree with Dewey that society has "a vested interest in the development and maintenance of these [psychological] tools" and (b) Vygotsky wanted "to use the educational process to teach new members of the social community how to 'use' important, culturally developed tools in an effective manner (a top-down/determinate approach)." In contrast, Vygotsky and Luria (1930/1993) neither stated nor alluded to such an agenda. The text, which addresses cognitive development, discusses important landmarks in the three different paths that account for human behavior—evolutionary (phylogenetic), historical, and ontogenetic (p. 36). For example, numeric operations and other early psychological tools transformed the memory and thinking of primitive peoples. Also discussed were the authors' experiments on the development of children's cognitive processes and the cognitive development of mentally retarded, physically impaired, and gifted children.

Glassman (2001) then states that the cross-cultural research of Luria and Vygotsky "hypothesized that the introduction of new tools by a strong social organization (i.e., the Soviet Union) would lead to the development of a 'new' type of citizen" (p. 6). Instead, the hypothesis the researchers *actually* tested was that "the structure of *psychological* processes changes as a function of history; consciousness does not have a constant, unchanging structure" [*italics added*] (Luria, 1971, p. 160). More specifically, Luria (1976) clearly stated,

We hypothesized that people with a primarily graphic/functional reflection of reality would show a different mental process from people with a system of predominantly abstract, verbal, and logical approach to reality. (p. 18)

Particularly important is that the study was a golden opportunity to test the long-standing and widespread debate among ethnopsychologists, sociologists, and others as to whether categories of thinking are universal (the Gestalt view) or whether primitive and advanced technological cultures produced different levels of intellectual development (see Luria, 1979; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).⁵ Conducted in the remote parts of the Soviet Union (villages in Uzbekistan and Kirghizia) that were undergoing rapid socioeconomic change, the study included two isolated and illiterate groups and three groups with varying literacy levels and some exposure to technological change. The 600 interview protocols (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 248) indicated that practical activity and concrete situations dominated the perception, classification, and reasoning skills of the nonliterate subjects whereas the others engaged in categorical, abstract thinking (Luria, 1976, pp. 117–134; 1979, pp. 66–74).

The Role of the Zone of Proximal Development

In denoting the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as an "educational model," Glassman (2001, p. 4) appears to be following current portrayals of the ZPD as those tasks that a learner can complete with the assistance of an adult.^{6,7} He cites, for example, situations like learning "how to use the jack-in-the-box in a socially appropriate manner" (p. 11) or learning a number reproduction game with adult assistance (p. 7). In addition, he portrays the role of adults in these situations as "creating doubt through their development of . . . indeterminate situations" (p. 11). However, Vygotsky did not include the assistance of another in his definition of ZPD.

Instead, Vygotsky (1932–1934/1998d) defined the ZPD as the "area of immature, but maturing [psychological] processes" (p. 202) and first used it in the context of assessing cognitive development. In contrast to Glassman's view, the content of the ZPD is the higher psychological functions and their interconnections that are beginning to mature (Vygotsky, 1930–1931/1966, p. 19; 1934/1987b, pp. 187–188). Specifically,

the state of development is never defined only by what has matured. . . . The psychologist must not limit his analysis to *functions* that have matured. He must consider those that are in the process of maturing. . . . the psychologist must consider not only the actual level of development but the *zone of proximal development*. (Vygotsky, 1934/1987b, pp. 208–209)

Vygotsky also posits a role for instruction that is "based not so much on already mature functions and properties of the child as on maturing functions" (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/1998d, p. 204). Useful instruction, according to Vygotsky, "impels or awakens a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation lying in the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987b, p. 212).

Of importance is that different functions are in the ZPD at different times. At school age, the foundational functions, conscious awareness and mastery (volitional control) of one's mental activities, begin to mature. However, true conceptual thinking only develops at adolescence (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Vygotsky, 1934/1987a, 1930–1931/1998a, 1930–31/1998c), and requires the development of logical relationships among subject matter concepts. This approach contrasts with Glassman's (2001) interpretation that instruction based on Vygotsky "uses the social environment to 'build' specific activities" (p. 12).

An additional key point is that the functions in the ZPD can be addressed in different situations. For example, the school-age child operates in the ZPD as he or she solves problems at home "on the basis of a model he [*sic*] has been shown in class." That is, the child imitates the teacher through a process of re-creating previous classroom collaboration. The "help," according to Vygotsky, is "invisibly present" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987b, p. 216). Another example is a 6-year-old who, growing up in a home with many books, newspapers, and magazines where the parents are avid readers, imitates them and learns to read without explicit instruction (Valsiner, 1988, p. 148).

In summary, the ZPD is an important concept in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. "It allows us to penetrate into the internal causal-dynamic and genetic connections that determine the process itself of mental development" (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/

1998e, p. 203). Judgments about the educational value of an activity, mentored or not, depend upon the contribution of the activity to the development of the higher psychological functions identified by Vygotsky.

Vygotsky's View of Conceptual Thinking

Glassman (2001) attempts to force Vygotsky's approach to concept development into a Deweyan mold. His assertions are another example of his use of unsupported inferences as a basis for further generalizations. That is, Glassman uses Dewey's primary and secondary experience to discuss Vygotsky's everyday (spontaneous) and scientific concepts (pp. 8–9). However, Vygotsky's everyday and scientific concepts stand in a different relationship to each other than Dewey's primary and secondary experience. The key difference between everyday and scientific concepts is the presence or absence of a *system* that affects their psychological structure. Whereas everyday concepts are formed from a child's concrete experiences, they do not form systems and, as a result, are not characterized by conscious awareness. In contrast, scientific (subject matter) concepts "not only reflect reality, but also systematize it, include data of concrete perception into a complex system of connections and relations, and disclose the connections and relations that are inaccessible to simple comprehension" (Vygotsky, 1930–1931/1998c, p. 79).

In addition, children acquire everyday and scientific concepts in different social environments (Vygotsky, 1934/1987b, p. 178) rather than from the consequences of activities as described by Glassman (2001). Scientific concepts develop as children learn new content in collaboration with the teacher in formal instruction.

The teacher, working with the school child on a given question, explains, informs, inquires, corrects, and forces the child to explain. All this work on concepts, the entire process of their formation, is worked out by the child in collaboration with the adult in instruction (Vygotsky, 1934/1987b, p. 215–216).

In this way, learning new subject-matter content in school instruction leads the individual to develop higher psychological functions.

There is a certain content of thought that can be understood adequately only in certain forms of intellectual activity. . . . For example, mathematics and the natural and social sciences cannot be adequately communicated and presented other than in the form of logical verbal thinking. (Vygotsky, 1930–1931/1998a, p. 38)

In addition, Glassman's (2001) discussion of everyday and scientific concepts uses other Deweyan terms, like "organizing principle" (p. 9), that do not appear in Vygotsky's writings. Finally, Glassman presents the concept of "culture" in ways foreign to Vygotsky.

Vygotsky recognizes two levels of culture, much the same way that Dewey sees two levels of experience. There is the culture that emerges through everyday concepts, and there is the culture that emerges through scientific concepts (Vygotsky, 1987). (Glassman, p. 9)⁸

However, this depiction does not appear in any of Vygotsky's writings. In other words, Glassman's repeated substitutions of Dewey's concepts for those addressed by Vygotsky results in a significant distortion of Vygotsky's theoretical system.

The Gulf Between the Thinking of Dewey and Vygotsky

Several factors negate Glassman's (2001) efforts to equate the thinking of Dewey and Vygotsky. The first is Vygotsky's habit of discussing and dissecting ideas that interested him, often adapting and integrating them into his own thinking. Included are the well-known (e.g., Ach, Darwin, James, Koffka, Köhler, Montessori, Piaget) and the now-forgotten (e.g., Claparède, Janet, Ribot, Durkheim, Bühler, Lévy-Bruhl, Thurnwald; see van der Veer, 1991). Dewey's ideas are not among them and Vygotsky's few references to Dewey are one-liners (see Vygotsky, 1931/1997f, pp. 60–61; 1997i, p. 88). In other words, Glassman's (2001) statement that the translation of Dewey's early works into Russian and the interest of some Russian educators "probably led to a Deweyan influence" (p. 4) on the young Vygotsky is not supported by either Vygotsky's writings or historians of this period (see Joravsky, 1989; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Yaroshevsky, 1989).

The second factor consists of the different perspectives of Dewey and Vygotsky. They held different philosophies (pragmatism versus Spinoza⁹ and Hegelian synthesis), developed knowledge in different domains (philosophy and curriculum versus explaining human intellect), and used different methods in their thinking (pragmatism versus Hegelian synthesis and experimentally testing hypotheses with human subjects). Specifically, Hegelian synthesis (the process of the integration of opposites at a higher qualitative level)¹⁰ is antithetical to the states of action/consequence staked out by pragmatism. In other words, Dewey was "a professional ideologist" (Novack, 1975, p. 9). Ever the philosopher, he dissected and analyzed such topics as truth, logic, nature, ethics, and the role of education in society.

In contrast, Vygotsky, like Thorndike and others, was a theorist/researcher who advocated "a causal psychology that uses objective means to yield replicable results" (van der Veer, 1997, p. 6) and he conducted experiments on children's cognition. In his unwavering goal to construct a science of the mind (Joravsky, 1989, p. 263),¹¹ Vygotsky first examined then-current theories, finding their explanations of human cognition inadequate (see Vygotsky, 1931/1997a, pp. 65–69; 1997g; 1925/1997b; 1926/1997e, pp. 149–151; 1931/1997f, pp. 27–38; 1926/1997g, 1926/1997j). Then, drawing on his analyses of Western anthropological and ethnopsychological writings (see Knox, 1993; van der Veer, 1997; Vygotsky & Luria, 1930/1993, pp. 79–137), Vygotsky delineated the role of signs and symbols in the development of attention, abstraction, language, memory, numeric operations, and reasoning (Vygotsky, 1929, 1931/1997h; Vygotsky & Luria, 1930/1993). Subsequent works, also detailed psychological analyses, are his identification and discussion of the outcomes of cognitive development, labeled the higher psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1931/1997h, 1930–1931/1966, 1930–1931/1998a; 1930–31/1998b, 1960), the role of scientific (subject matter) concepts in developing thinking (Vygotsky, 1934/1987a, 1934/1987b, 1930–1931/1998c), and the relationship of thinking and speech (Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, 1934/1987d). Glassman (2001), however, does not acknowledge the nature of this work. Instead, for example, he draws on Vygotsky's (1926/1997c) educational psychology text, an early publication in which Vygotsky's "view of the relationship between education and development . . . was hardly original at this time . . . [but] was also different from

the views he would espouse in the thirties and for which he became famous" (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 53). Glassman's statements of the "vital importance" of activity to Vygotsky (p. 4) may be based on this unrepresentative text.

Moreover, Glassman's (2001, p. 3) emphasis on Vygotsky's educational goals is inaccurate. Psychologists in the post-revolutionary U.S.S.R. were expected to address major educational problems, such as the millions of homeless and orphaned children (Knox & Stevens, 1993), and Vygotsky chose to work with children with mental and physical disabilities. Moreover, for Vygotsky, the importance of formal schooling was its contribution to the development of higher psychological (mental) functions (Vygotsky, 1934/1987b, pp. 167–241) in that "education is the artificial mastery of natural processes of development" (Vygotsky, 1997i, p. 88). Thus, to compare Vygotsky and Dewey on their "visions of social history, experience/culture and human inquiry" in order to understand the differences in their approaches to the *goals of education* (italics ours) (Glassman, 2001, p. 4) is misguided.

NOTES

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¹ The widespread resistance to the new methods forced a reinstatement of formal school subjects in 1927, one year *before* Dewey's 1928 visit (Holmes, 1991). Also, the State Publishing House (Gosizdat) resisted publishing large editions of the new texts proposed by the Ministry of Education, insisting that "real" texts were needed instead (Fitzpatrick, 1979, p. 35).

² Fitzpatrick (1979) noted that the radical ideas of the experimental school of the First Five-Year Plan were referred to as "methodological 'hare-brained scheming'" (p. 210).

³ The phrase "social goal" appears only once in Vygotsky and Luria (1930/1993, p. 107) and it refers to the use of a sign by an emissary to remind him of an important message to be delivered.

⁴ Glassman (2001) also miscites Kozulin (1990, p. 277) as stating that Vygotsky believed the characteristics of Russian life were determinants of nascent behavior. Instead, Kozulin (1990) clearly states that this view of Vygotsky's theories was that of his contemporaries of the 1920s and 1930s (p. 278).

⁵ The basic unresolved question was, Do the basic categories used to describe experience and the basic intellectual operations performed on information differ from culture to culture? (A. R. Luria, 1979, p. 58; see also van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, pp. 205–216, 242). Although the Gestaltists emphasized universal categories of thinking, cultural-developmental views were as follows: mind originates in society (Durkheim), complex forms of memory originate in the concrete history of society (Janet), primitive individuals generalize information differently from people in technological societies (Rivers) (Luria, 1979, p. 58; see also van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, pp. 206–210), and Western cultures were superior to others (Thurnwald) (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 212).

⁶ The erroneous view that the ZPD is constituted by tasks solved in collaboration seems to originate in *Mind in Society*, an early interpretation of Vygotsky in which the editors admit that they have taken "significant liberties" with his work (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978, p. x). Glassman (2001) draws from *Mind in Society* to support his interpretations (p. 11).

⁷ Vygotsky (1934/1987b) did not accept prior theoretical views of the relationship between learning and development. For a discussion of Vygotsky's argument for his perspective that learning leads development, see pp. 194–212 in Vygotsky (1934/1987b).

⁸ Glassman has cited Vygotsky (1987) as his source for Vygotsky's concept of two cultures. Because Vygotsky did not use the idea of two levels of culture, we are unable to ascertain which of Vygotsky's writings published in 1987 is his intended source for this view.

⁹ Yaroshevsky (1996) noted that Spinoza, whom Vygotsky first read as an adolescent (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991), was Vygotsky's "philosophical ideal." Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) noted that "Vygotsky's treatment of the development of the higher psychological processes and his emphasis on the growing control of the human mind owed a great deal to Spinoza. Both shared the idea of rational man whose intellectual functions controlled to a large degree the whole personality" (p. 240).

¹⁰ Vygotsky (1930/1997d), noted that dialectical thought considers processes of development "a process which, on the one hand, are uninterrupted and, on the other hand, are accompanied by leaps or the development of new qualities" (p. 112).

¹¹ Joravsky (1989) noted that "evidently Vygotsky liked Spinoza's philosophizing to prove that, in principle, mind and body *can* be explained by a single science of 'external substance,' but his twentieth-century mind turned deliberately away from philosophizing about such a science to the concrete problems of building it" (p. 263).

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