

Vygotsky and Rogers on Education: An Exploration of Two Fundamental Questions

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Abstract

This article attempts to introduce the main ideas of Vygotsky's and Rogers' theories of education using two fundamental questions to guide the discussion: the purpose of education and how one can facilitate learning. Rogers believed that education should foster self-actualization and democracy. Learning can be facilitated through environments characterized by reciprocal empathy, unconditionality, and authenticity that are flexible to the varied demands of many different learners and the broader educational system. Vygotsky believed that education fostered individuals' development of higher level thinking in a socio-cultural context, where individuals learn their culture's ways of thinking and doing. Learning is facilitated primarily through social interaction with more competent adults or peers, who scaffold the learner's experiences. The reader is invited to consider some areas of potential overlap and difference between Rogers' and Vygotsky's theories of education.

The authors conducted a PSYCINFO search for "Vygotsky AND Rogers." Stunningly, this yielded only four publications, none of which actually referred to Carl Rogers and Lev Vygotsky (only different persons named "Rogers"). Hence, we found no publications

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that explored the relationship of the ideas of these two seminal psychologists.

As surprising as this seems, it appears that Vygotsky's and Rogers' spheres of influence have had little overlap. Though his work was largely unknown to Americans for decades due to Stalinist suppression, Vygotsky is now credited with being one of the most influential developmental psychologists in Western thought, and particularly influential in the last two decades (Langford, 2005). In a survey of American psychotherapists published in 2009, Cook, Biyanova, and Coyne found that Carl Rogers still ranks at the top of the most influential psychotherapists, among both psychologists and non-psychologists. Both authors have had an influence on educational thought, but Vygotsky's prominence overshadows Rogers' despite the strong empirical foundation that has grown out of person-centered education (Cornelius-White, 2007c). This article attempts to introduce the main ideas of Vygotsky and Rogers as these ideas relate to their theories of education using two fundamental questions to guide the discussion.

What is the Purpose of Education?

Rogers's (1951, 1969, 1983) proposed that the purpose of education was to foster "self-actualization" and "democratic unity." Self-actualizing people self-initiate, critically think, acquire knowledge, adapt flexibly, utilize all experience creatively, cooperate, and work in terms of their own socialized purposes (1951, p. 387-388). By democratic unity, Rogers (1951, p. 386) was referring to the process of sharing control and choice among members of a group, including the teacher and the students. Rogers developed his vision for what education might create with the terms, "fully functioning person" (1959) and "the person of tomorrow" (1980). While similar to the idea of increased self-awareness resulting from psychotherapy with which all readers are likely to be familiar, Rogers' educational theory emphasized a more extensional view of congruence. Cornelius-White (2007b) defines extensionality as "how the open, mature, adjusted person interacts with not just himself or herself (internal) or others (relational), but the world (systemic). It involves the practice of

personalizing perception and thinking critically and creatively to manage multiple realities.” (p. 196). Rogers (1969) became more dramatic in his later writings, asserting that the “goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning” for its own sake because “only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security” in an insecure world (p. 104). Ultimately then, the purpose of education is: “Learning becomes life” (p. 115).

To Vygotsky the purpose of education was to foster development of an individual in a socio-cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). Formal education is important in that it helps the child progress to adult thinking and understanding. Education, learning, and development are socially and culturally situated, i.e., learners acquire the ways of thinking and doing that are prominent in their social environment. Through education individuals become members of their particular culture, learning both how to think and how to act as members of their culture. Language and collaborative activities are ways to pass on understanding and ways of thinking from one generation to another, so that each generation builds its knowledge and thought on the social, historical, and cultural knowledge base of preceding generations (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984).

How Can One Facilitate Learning?

Rogers’ ideas of facilitation in education were similar to his ideas of facilitation in psychotherapy, with some differences. In both realms, Rogers asserted that the core of facilitation was a relationship between persons: empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence being characteristics of the facilitator and some form of motivation or incongruence as characteristic of the learner. However, in education, he emphasized more the reciprocal nature of these attitudes, the necessary power differential in educational systems, and the flexibility of the facilitator to not only facilitate by “a way of being.” (Rogers, 1969, 1983)

Just as the participants in an encounter group or community meeting help each other, learners in a classroom also facilitate each others’ learning, often as much as the facilitator or teacher does.

Students learn through cooperative endeavors and by internalizing the facilitator's way of being to foster others' learning. They help create a democratic atmosphere.

Rogers (1969) acknowledged the power differentials within educational systems inherent in age and role. He also considered the relationship between a teacher and her administrators and the teacher and her learners' parents to be important, expanding the realm of facilitation beyond the walls of the classroom (or office) (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010). Likewise, Rogers acknowledged the specificity of many educational systems' goals (e.g., spelling, maintaining schedules, etc.), believing that person-centered education can develop even within typical public schools. Indeed, empirical research, most notably by Aspy & Roebuck (e.g., 1977) and Tausch & Tausch (e.g., 1963/1998), but many others as well, has shown the viability of the facilitative attitudes and larger person-centered educational theory within a very wide range of educational contexts across many countries, decades, grade levels, ethnicities, and aptitude of persons (Cornelius-White, 2007c).

Third, Rogers asserted that flexibility in method of instruction was vital for learner success. Participants' authenticity guided this flexibility. When a student, or class (including the teacher), found a topic relevant, whether because of internal conflict (e.g., incongruence) or simply interest, the learner was likely to learn. The facilitator's role was to help the learner identify these tasks, but also adapt ways of doing to help them learn. For one student, a self-directed project might be best; for another, a lecture may be more appropriate. For two more students, a cooperative group might be most respectful and successful. Hence, Rogers advocated for the teacher to be a resource to learners, flexibly adapting to the requests and possibilities that emerge within a particular class or learning environment.

Vygotsky believed that people learn through social interactions, particularly with individuals whose development is more advanced. In Vygotsky's (1978) theory, learning is facilitated through scaffolding, a complex process involving collaborative interaction, assisted performance, and shared understanding (Berk & Winsler, 1995). This process has also been termed guided participation (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993) or guided discovery (Mayer, 2004). In guided

participation an adult or more competent peer works together with the learner in an activity or to solve a problem. Learning occurs as the individual collaborates with the more competent person. The more knowledgeable person does not necessarily make the task easier, but varies the amount or level of assistance and gradually hands over the responsibility for the performance of the task to the learner. Vygotsky (1978) thought that children could learn more through interacting with others than by working alone. He proposed the idea of the “zone of proximal development” or ZPD where a child’s ability to understand or perform independently defines the lower end of this zone and the learner’s potential to develop with assistance lies at the upper end. Thus, a learner’s independent performance does not demonstrate his or her true capacity for learning. It is through interaction with others that the learner’s potential is revealed. Fostering experiences within the learner’s ZPD are the most ideal conditions for supporting and facilitating learning (Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984). A teacher can best facilitate learning, in Vygotsky’s view, by discovering those capacities which are not completely developed, and working collaboratively with the learner to encourage his or her growth. Scaffolding the learner through his or her ZPD may involve such activities as questioning and discussing as the teacher and learner together engage in a problem solving activity.

Vygotsky (1962, 1978) also believed that language played a critical role in learning. Language is a psychological tool for creating meaning from experience. External experiences are transformed into internal mental processes through the use of language (Diaz & Berk, 1992). For example, as a teacher talks about what they are doing together a child hears the words. Next, as the child works on the activity he might say those words out loud to himself. As the child becomes more competent at the activity he may think the words. Through such a process or progression the experience is first labeled and then transformed to inner speech. As language heard from others becomes inner speech, understanding or meaning that is encoded in language is internalized. The child then learns the patterns of thinking encoded in language. In this way children learn to think in the ways of those in their social environment.

Comparing and Contrasting Vygotsky's and Rogers' Ideas on the Purpose and Facilitation of Learning

A full comparison, contrast, or integration of the ideas of two gargantuan, prolific thinkers is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we do hope to pose a few areas of potential overlap and difference. In this way, we invite our readers to read more and contemplate where their own thinking may lie in relation to these issues.

Vygotsky and Rogers both emphasized people's potential, especially the potential in relationship, rather than in their static or existent selves. They both saw that education happens through relationship, a relationship that is sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of skill and interest of the unique learner. Both discuss how teaching must be flexible and adaptive to rouse to life what is emerging. Despite these broad strokes of agreement, there are some areas where the agreement is not as obvious or where the views more clearly diverge. The authors invite the reader to consider two such areas.

The focus in Rogers' objective of fostering a democratic society through education, is to bring into being a society as a collection of individuals. His terminology in phrases such as "becoming more congruent," "fully functioning," or "person of tomorrow" highlights this emphasis on individualism. In contrast, Vygotsky believed the primary focus in educational psychology should be on how the individual emerges from and within the context of collective life rather than how the collective is constructed from individuals. The person learns to become through others, not just through their facilitation of the individual but through how they think, feel, and act. Both believed that relationships help people construct themselves and develop to become more self-regulating, but Vygotsky emphasized how the nature of that self is related to, not just the empathy, warmth and congruence of the facilitator, but to how facilitators think. By focusing on language, Vygotsky explains how this internalization of thought occurs. Consider your own experiences or Rogers' experiences over time to see where and when you may have thought of the primacy of the person as individual or as relationship.

In a related vein, both theorists viewed motivation similarly with some differences. For Rogers, the relationship brings out a person's own tendency to actualize. People will actualize with or without facilitative relationships, but a loving, supportive relationship encourages the actualization of an emerging self. In contrast, Vygotsky emphasized how motivation emerges from the relational context. It is the shared goal, the scaffolded experience between a facilitator and learner in meeting a challenge that motivates. The role is more collaborative than nondirective for Vygotsky. Rogers' educational view is similar to his psychotherapeutic view that nondirectivity remains a value, but looks quite different as one needs to be nondirective towards all students and one's self, that is, allowing one's self and one's (often superior) knowledge base to emerge in the search for a democratic process of learning. Consider what you view as the idealistic, practical, or possible role for the nondirective-collaborative continuum within your own educational and growth-producing group experiences.

Conclusion

In Summary, Rogers and Vygotsky offer similar views on the purpose of education and the facilitation of learning. Rogers believed that the purpose of education was to create better learners to support both self-actualization and democracy. Vygotsky believed that education was necessary to foster individual development as it emerged through interactions in a socio-cultural context. Rogers asserted that learning is best facilitated in a climate characterized by empathy, unconditionality, and authenticity. In educational contexts, facilitators need to be flexible to the demands of their schools and systems, revering the role that learners can play with each other to foster learning. Vygotsky maintained that learning occurs through interactions with more competent others, who scaffold the learner's experience. Learning is most successful when it occurs in a person's "zone of proximal development," the area between what a learner can understand independently and what is possible to understand in collaboration with more competent others.

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