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## Building a Foundation: Lessons from Vygotsky Applied in Appalachia

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## Building a Foundation: Lessons from Vygotsky Applied in Appalachia

Before I knew anything about learning theories, I was a constructivist. I am not completely sure why my methods so perfectly followed this learning theory, but one sure reason, comes directly from my discipline. In my own study of musical theatre, I experienced constructivist instruction. I can hear voices in my head even now, “I cannot tell you how to interpret this, Elise, for it to be authentic, you must find your own meaning,” or “I don’t want you to do it the way I do it, I want you to find your own way.” My earliest memories of voice lessons and production rehearsals are full of phrases like that, urging me to critically interpret stimuli and source material and, from it, build something new. Here follows an autoethnographic reflection of constructivism at work in and through me as I taught in a small community in the Appalachian region of Kentucky.

### **Vygotsky’s Constructivism**

Lev Vygotsky was a Soviet psychologist during the first half of the twentieth century (Duveen, 1997). His conceptualizations of the Zone of Proximal Development (including the concept of more capable peers) and intersubjectivity form the foundation for my interpretation of this experience in Appalachian Kentucky.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - ZPD is the designation given for the space between any student’s actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of their potential development under adult guidance or with the assistance of a more capable peer (Vygotsky, 1978).

Intersubjectivity – When two participants begin a task with different understandings and arrive at a shared understanding, intersubjectivity is accomplished. For this to occur, both participants

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must be working toward the same goal, to achieve collaboration and effective communication. (Pardjono, 2002).

### **Setting the Stage**

In 2010, a small town, self-described as *The Best Kept Secret in Kentucky*, at the foothills of the Appalachian region, celebrated its bicentennial. As part of a massive community-wide festival weekend, they hoped to revive the *Riverboat Revue*. This classic local production incorporated stories about the town's history with standard Appalachian folk music and ended with a patriotic tribute to America. In decades past, this production featured colorful costumes, bright lights, singing, and most importantly, starred the youth of the county.

I moved to this community in 2008, and quickly learned I was, and most likely always would be, an outsider. My family and I slowly processed this revelation, trying to figure out how to navigate the challenging social barriers we saw laid out in front and all around us. Imagine my surprise when I received a phone call inviting me to be on the committee for the *Bicentennial Riverboat Revue*. They had heard about me and knew I had experience in theatre and welcomed my involvement. I admit that I went in with a hopeful, but pessimistic expectation of what they really wanted from me.

At the meeting, after about ten minutes of conversation I asked if there was a director, explaining a director really should be the one to make some of these decisions. Everyone grew silent and looked down, then slowly, five pairs of eyes looked at me.

"I guess we were hoping you would," one finally spoke. Thinking I might already know the answer, I asked a follow-up question,

"And who is writing the script?"

"Umm...we thought you could do that also," the same woman answered.

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Once rehearsals started, I began to think that maybe I hadn't been respectfully chosen or recruited. Maybe I had been ambushed. The first whispers that my appointment to director had been an ambush, rather than a compliment, came when I walked into the room for our first rehearsal. I had an audience... a huge, community audience. Maybe they were curious. Maybe they wanted to make sure I had things in hand before they left me alone with a room full of children. Perhaps they came to watch me crash and burn. I suspect they came mostly out of curiosity, but whatever the motivation, the exterior wall of the agriculture building was lined with chairs, each playing host to a local resident who watched my every move, and listened to my every word.

### **Scenes From Rehearsal**

#### **Zone of Proximal Development: Auditions**

My cast was a group of twenty-four students ranging from 11 to 17 years of age. I knew there were no current performing arts opportunities for these children, but at auditions realized that there had never been a performing arts opportunity for the children in this room. As far as they were concerned, I was speaking another language. It is not possible for an instructor to be effective without first considering the child's interests, knowledge and perspective (Pardjono, 2002). I needed to define my casts' ZPD. It would be different for each of them, just as Vygotsky predicted. Once I defined the ZPD, challenging tasks could then promote cognitive development and growth. I could only hope that the obstacles I set before them would serve as stimuli for supplemental development, (Vygotsky, 1967/2004). Vygotsky rejected individual development in favor of social, collective, corporate development (Pardjono, 2002). This proved pivotal for me as I assumed the role of more capable peer for those twenty-four children. There was no social memory of musical theatre as I attempted to teach, the foundation laid by the former

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*Revue* insufficient for building a contemporary understanding of performance incorporating music, and theatre, and dance.

In the context of a theatrical production, casting is rather like ability-based-grouping often employed in a formal classroom setting. The most proficient performers are granted the biggest, most challenging roles and less experienced or proficient performers compose the ensemble.

### **Intersubjectivity: Understanding Social Norms**

The first two rehearsals focused on music only, and the children were very cooperative and eager to sing along with me as I taught them new songs and new versions of old songs. This portion of the lesson reviewed previously mastered skills. After all, most of them participated in congregational singing almost every week at church. Singing, they could understand. My request did not alarm or stretch any of them. However, my mandate was to revive this production and part of my vision to revive the script was to modernize it, as well. Rather than standing or swaying to the music, I planned to incorporate a full show of choreography and staging. I knew I faced a group of skeptics at the very first dance rehearsal.

The seven boys included in my cast stood in the back row, eyeing me warily. I understood that I asked much from them. Not only had they never received dance training, but also, the act of dancing in public stretched the local concept of male gender norms. I walked a very tight rope. My choreography had to be simple enough that beginners could learn and feel confident performing it in front of hundreds of people, but it also had to be locally perceived of as gender appropriate. The girls needed to be perceived of as feminine and the boys as masculine, or my time as director would be very short. I further faced the challenge that these were adolescent children, uncomfortable with even the hint of interaction with the opposite

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gender. Trying to be cognizant of and accommodating to all of these sensibilities, I often paired the boys together and the girls together. On one occasion, I botched this without even realizing it.

Three boys wanted to quit the show because the dances were too “girly.” I encouraged them to remain in the show and asked “Please tell me what I asked of you that made you uncomfortable. I’m sure we can work it out.”

One boy spoke up, “You made us put our hand on each other’s shoulder.” That was it. For eight counts of music they walked to their right with one hand on the shoulder of the person next to them. These boys were standing next to one another for that song and had to touch one another’s shoulders. To avoid this one action they were desirous to quit the whole show. Vygotsky’s ZPD focused on the mental growth that occurs as a consequence of social intervention and described the development of self through the mechanism of internalizing social norms (Pardjono, 2002). I spent much time concerned with the performing arts aspects of their ZPD and I had not considered the social implications of their development. Now I faced a unique opportunity. I could encourage these young men to move substantially out of the previous learning into public performance, but I had to do so in a way that kept them engaged and active. I could challenge their skills but not their society. Children grow and advance to higher developmental stages by being aided at the outer limits of their skills and ability, but even this must be done in a context that is socially comfortable for them (Pardjono, 2002).

By repositioning the boys to partner with female cast members, I completely changed their experiences. This event, when those three boys approached me with their concerns and left feeling comforted, validated and heard, changed their interactions with me for the duration of the production process. Where they had previously laughed at some of my requests or uncomfortably complied, they were now active participants, readily trying to execute anything I demonstrated.

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### Conclusion

In a small town, the local doctor knows everyone. After the final performance of the *2010 Bicentennial Riverboat Revue* the community physician approached me as I stood by the stage.

“I know these children,” he said. “I know all of them, and they cannot do what you got them to do. This was simply amazing.” I didn’t realize it at the time, but now I understand. It was all within their Zone of Proximal Development. Those children just needed a more capable peer to help them construct their knowledge and skills. Together, we laid a foundation and built the scaffolding that serves as the structure on which years of successful community performances have been built. I am honored that they ambushed me to play that part and proud of the sharing and growth that occurred within the students, within me, and between us as we worked together.

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