



# VYGOTSKY AND CREATIVITY

A Cultural-Historical Approach  
to Play, Meaning Making,  
and the Arts

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# Dancing with the Muses:

## A Cultural-historical Approach to Play, Meaning Making and Creativity

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Strings sing at the touch of a violinist's bow. Light and shadow cast across a stage like rivers of silk, while bodies sway to the heartbeat of a wild drum. Sunflowers burst into bloom on canvas, as clay rises on the wheel into a cylindrical dome. We have long been fascinated with the ability of the arts to transform the material into the seemingly ethereal. As children and adults, we have all been inspired to play, act, and dream on paper, in poetry, or through performance within our personal and professional lives. Across time and space, politics and religion, we are united in our collective need to dance with the muses as both artists and audience members.

So why have the arts been neglected by so many scholars of human development? Is it a consequence of the rationalistic bias of our educational system? Is it because development in literacy and mathematics is more accessible and more open to measurement than growth in dramatic play, music, or drawing? In this book, we make the argument that thought, emotion, play, and creativity as well as the creation of relationships are an integrated whole. When some aspects of this totality are broken apart, learning and development are diminished.

We bring to this issue a background in Vygotskian scholarship as well as that of practicing artists and educators. The ideas of the ground-breaking Russian psychologist, L.S. Vygotsky, are becoming increasingly influential in their emphasis on the social sources of development and the central role of tools and artifacts, such as the computer, in learning. Vygotsky's theory con-

trasts sharply with the more dominant approaches of constructivists, (i.e., those of Piaget), who envisioned development as a universally shared process independent of the particular historic and cultural environment. Vygotsky's strong emphasis on culture and social interaction is particularly relevant to our contemporary multicultural society and has been effectively applied to studies of literacy, concept formation and bilingualism. Ironically, although his first publication was devoted to the arts, cultural historical scholars dedicated to his thinking have paid little attention to analyses of play, meaning making, and creativity.

As individual editors, each of us has drawn on Vygotsky's framework to investigate our own interests in play, meaning making, and creativity. Through these explorations, we encountered colleagues from a diverse array of disciplines who shared our fascination and curiosity. Using cultural-historical theory, an approach founded on Vygotsky's theories and developed further in the former Soviet Union, the United States, and other countries, we collectively sought to articulate a response to these essential processes in the life of the mind. Our informal, formal, political, and creative efforts led us to the development of this book.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is threefold. First, we seek to introduce the reader to Vygotsky as a teacher, researcher, scholar and fellow creative spirit. Second, we provide a background of his ideas by summarizing essential concepts from the collection of loosely associated theories that constitute cultural-historical theory. Third, we contextualize a discussion on play, meaning making, and creativity within this view to present an enriched understanding of the arts.

### **L. S. Vygotsky: A Life of Creative Activity**

L. S. Vygotsky was born in 1896 in Orsha, Russia, a small town, which is now part of Belarus. The young boy grew up in Gomel. He was a member of a large, highly educated, Jewish family. By the time he reached adolescence, Vygotsky developed strong intellectual interests in many disciplines including philosophy and history and shared his mother's love of poetry. He finished gymnasium with great distinction and subsequently attended Moscow University where he studied law. He supplemented this course of study with classes at the Shanjavsky People's University, continuing his interest in history and philosophy. As an adolescent he composed several drafts of an analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which later became the basis of his doctoral dissertation. During these years he also broadened his knowledge of linguistics and psy-

chology. Vygotsky was influenced by William James and Sigmund Freud and, throughout his life, he conducted a thorough study of European and American psychological theories.

After completing his university studies, Vygotsky returned to Gomel, where he taught in state schools. He also participated in the town's cultural life. During these years, he mostly published literary reviews and became interested in educational psychology. Vygotsky's interest in literature and drama established his reputation as a brilliant lecturer. Unfortunately, Gomel suffered the hardships of civil war and attacks made by different armies and local bandits. Nevertheless, Vygotsky began his first psychological investigations while teaching at Gomel's Teacher's College. During this time, Vygotsky's family was first struck by tuberculosis and his younger brother died of the illness. While taking care of his brother, Vygotsky himself also became ill with TB. After his marriage in 1924 to Roza Smekhova, he left Gomel for Moscow at the invitation of a senior faculty member and psychologist, Alexander Luria. Vygotsky's collaboration with Luria and Leont'ev would prove to be a highly creative endeavor.

Once in the capital, Vygotsky joined the Institute of Experimental Psychology where "from very early in his professional life he had seen the development of the science of man as his cause, a cause he took extremely seriously and to which he dedicated all of his energy" (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). His first publication was *The Psychology of Art* (Vygotsky, 1925/1971) described by Cathrene Connery in this text. Vygotsky went on to publish 15 articles a year including lectures, reviews, and forewords to works of foreign authors. His second book was published in English as *Educational Psychology* (1992). In the late 1920s, his interests expanded to children with atypical development including blind, deaf, and retarded children. Publications on this topic were assembled in Volume 2 of his collected works. Vygotsky's theoretical analyses were first summarized in "The Historical Meaning of Crisis in Psychology" (1927) which first appeared in English in Volume 3 of his collected works.

Increasingly, Vygotsky became interested in how human activity is mediated by artifacts, a topic that he first developed in "Tool and Symbol in Child Development." This manuscript forms the first section of the volume *Mind in Society* (1978) co-edited by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman. Throughout his life, Vygotsky relied on a dialectical Marxist approach to the development and investigation of the human sciences. His most widely read work is *Thought and Language*, first published in English in 1962. In this book, he brings together his cultural-historical ideas with a focus on the interrelationship of thinking and speaking. The impact of

this volume has grown substantially over the years and has been published and re-edited several times. Vygotsky's ideas were shaped by his extraordinary scholarship, his deeply original mind, and his ability to work interdependently with colleagues and friends. His legacy might have been lost were it not for Luria's determined efforts to bring Vygotsky's work to a world audience after his untimely death from tuberculosis at the age of 38.

### **Essential Concepts of Cultural-historical Theory**

Vygotsky's conceptual framework provides a rich, unique, and pragmatic contribution to theories of human psychology. His notions regarding the social sources of development, mediation, *perezhivanie*, the zone of proximal development, and methodology collectively describe the transformative development of individuals and societies. The following discussion highlights the significance of these concepts in order to nurture a cultural-historical understanding of play, meaning making, and creativity.

#### **Social Sources of Development**

The common theme that runs across Vygotsky's diverse writings is that of the social origins of psychological processes. Human beings are irrevocably interdependent. As infants, we are dependent on caregivers for survival and learning. In the course of development, young learners rely on the vast pool of transmitted experience shared by family members, teachers and peers. In his oft-quoted "genetic law", Vygotsky emphasized the primacy of social interaction by proposing that any process in the child's cultural development appears twice: Functions appear first on the social, then on the psychological plane or first between people, and then within the child as an intrapsychological process.

Imagination, as a psychological function that is located in the core of learning and development, also originates within social interaction and the cultural-historical moment of a child's development. Vygotsky wrote that "imagination operates not freely, but directed by someone else's experience, as if according to someone else's instructions" (Vygotsky, 1930/2004, p. 17). In this manner, imagination "becomes the means by which a person's experience is broadened, because he can imagine what he has not seen, can conceptualize something from another person's narration and description of what he himself has never directly experienced" (Vygotsky, 1930/2004, p. 17).

Vygotsky's genetic law of development is also observable in the development of speech. He proposed that language functions as a means of communi-

cation and cognition. Young children appropriate and make their own the speech that surrounds them. The internalization of dialogic interaction results in the development of language and thought. The semiotic means a child uses during internalization becomes the basis of her inner speech and verbal thinking.

The condensed nature of inner speech was described by Vygotsky in his well-known metaphor stating “a thought may be compared to a cloud shedding a shower of words....Precisely because a thought does not have its automatic counterpart in words, the transition to thought from word leads through meaning” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 251). Contemporary students of language acquisition emphasize the interactional sources of language learning and language use (Tomasello, 2008). The communicative or interactional use of language, in fact, depends on the imagination of others. In this manner, learning from another can and should become an “experience based on imagination” (Vygotsky, 1930/2004, p. 17) in order for authentic learning to take place. Toward this end, Carrie Lobman illustrates the importance of teachers’ imagination in the chapter she has contributed to this book.

## Mediation

The critical role of mediation in Vygotsky’s theory is most fully analyzed by James Wertsch who noted:

In his view, a hallmark of human consciousness is that it is associated with the use of tools, especially ‘psychological tools’ or ‘signs’. Instead of acting in a direct, unmediated way in the social and physical world, our contact with the world is indirect or mediated by signs....It is because humans internalize forms of mediation provided by particular cultural, historical, and institutional forces that their mental functioning is sociohistorically situated (Wertsch, 2007, p. 178).

In this quote, Wertsch highlights another important aspect of Vygotsky’s thinking: psychological tools develop within the diverse cultural and historical settings of humankind. One needs only to evoke the computer to realize how profoundly our memory, planning, writing and editing processes have changed in our reliance on this relatively new technological and cognitive tool.

Most scholars within the cultural historical tradition emphasize language as central to thought and pay limited attention to symbolic systems and other semiotic means. While we recognize the critical role of language, we prefer a pluralistic theory that John-Steiner (1995) named “cognitive pluralism.” Some examples of these diverse semiotic means include mathematical symbol systems, maps, artistic sketches, sign language, imagery, and musical notes. These systems of representation are imbedded in social practice in that, “ecology,

history, culture and family organization play roles in patterning experience and events in the creation of knowledge” (John-Steiner, 1995, p. 5).

In the chapters that follow, the authors describe a variety of meditating tools. Patricia St. John documents children’s reliance on musical instruments in her chapter. Peter Smagorinsky writes of students’ construction of masks and their impact on writing activities. Cathrene Connery highlights the appropriation of physical and psychological tools in painting. Reliance on meditating tools is a developmental process which Vygotsky emphasized “*is neither simply invented nor passed down from adults*; rather it arises from something which is not originally a sign operation and becomes one only after a series of *qualitative transformations*” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 46, italics in the original).

### Perezhivanie

While Vygotsky’s work is strongly cognitively oriented, he also included affective considerations in his theory of human development and consciousness. One of these is *perezhivanie*, which some have translated as “lived emotional experience.” Social interaction among children and adults is perceived through the lens of previous experience; meditational means are appropriated and represented by individuals in their own characteristic ways. Michelle Zoss highlights how teaching and learning are enriched when classrooms provide opportunities for students to express ways of perceiving their experience. Ana Marjanovic-Shane illustrates how interaction and instruction is enhanced when built on trusting relationships in play, including vivid and metaphoric descriptions of experience that produce emotional engagement.

The term *perezhivanie* is an important one in theatre director Stanislavsky’s teaching of actors. He asked them to re-live previously relevant or profound experiences when preparing to engage with a new role. Vygotsky was influenced by this work and appropriated the concept for his own thinking about emotional experience. It is only recently that his essay, “The Problem of the Environment” in which he developed his understanding of lived experience, was published in English. Diverse authors in the cultural-historical theoretical community, now familiar with this concept, increasingly refer to *perezhivanie* as they recognize its significant role in parenting, teaching and communicating among partners. Beth Ferholt presents a novel means of studying *perezhivanie* through the unique use of film.

Emotional aspects of experience are also crucial for imagination. Vygotsky agreed that “all forms of creative imagination include affective elements” (Vygotsky, 1930/2004, p. 19). In his exploration of children’s imagination and creativity, Vygotsky often spoke of the circular path of imagination from lived

experiences, through the imagination that combines and recombines elements of these experiences, to the embodiments of imagination in the material form of an artistic product (image, music, dance, story, etc). According to Vygotsky, for such a circle to be completed, both intellectual and emotional factors are essential (Vygotsky, 1930/2004, p. 21). Barry Oreck and Jessica Nicoll describe how young dancers engage on this path as they develop a personal vocabulary of movement.

### **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**

The most widely discussed concept in Vygotsky's writings is that of the ZPD. Vygotsky wrote "We propose that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). The appeal of this notion of assisted performance that precedes a learner's ability to independently solve tasks has widespread educational implications. Learners differ in how efficiently they use assistance and this difference was of significance to Vygotsky's argument. To understand the full meaning of the ZPD is to recognize that it is not a recipe for teaching skills. As Lois Holzman emphasizes, the ZPD is a relational process that embraces the full unity of the social and personal aspects of development in which new functions are realized that are not yet mature.

Currently, researchers have broadened this concept to include peer-based reciprocal assistance including "all aspect[s] of the learner-acting, thinking and feeling" (Wells, 1999, p. 331) and mutual zones of proximal development for collaborative partners (John-Steiner, 2000). In this broader view of the ZPD, scholars have come to identify that the co-construction of new ideas includes the sharing of risks, constructive criticism, and the creation of a safety zone. Partners can live, however temporarily, in each other's heads. They draw on their mutuality as well as on their differences and background knowledge, working style and temperament. As Mahn & John-Steiner (2002) reflect: "Innovative works of literature, drama and science are nourished by sustained support—as are teaching and learning across the lifespan" (p. 52). The complex relationship between writers and the literary establishment is the focus of Sena Moran's chapter in this book.



### Vygotsky's Method

A central theme in Vygotsky's writings is that of movement. He argued that the nature of phenomena is revealed during the process of change. In following this principle, he wrote:

To study something historically means to study it in the process of change; that is the dialectical method's basic demand. To encompass in research the process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes—from birth to death—fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, for 'it is only in movement that a body shows what it is' (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 64–65).

Vygotsky created situations in which a new solution process was provoked by the way in which the experimenter and the participant interacted. For example, in *Thought and Language* he described how children, when getting ready to draw, lacked a color they needed. This arrangement was planned by the experimenter to study the children's response to task difficulties. The young artists met the challenge by talking to themselves, articulating, "Where is the pencil? I need a blue pencil. Never mind, I'll draw with the red one and wet it with water; it will become dark and look like blue" (1986, p. 30).

While this example is given in Vygotsky's discussion of the role of private or egocentric speech, it also illustrates his "experimental-developmental" method in that the approach "artificially evokes or creates a process of psychological development" (ibid., p. 61). Additional examples of this experimental method occur when the researcher, teacher or parent provides the learner with a psychological tool such as a number line when dealing with mathematical operations or the introduction of signs such as words or task cards to assist in concept formation. The developmental aspects of this method focus on the study of a process from its beginning through its various changes until competence is reached. As Vygotsky wrote:

We believe that child development is a complex dialectical process characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation of one form into another, intertwining of internal and external factors, and an adaptive processes which overcomes impediments that the child encounters (1978, p. 73).

### A Cultural-historical Perspective on Play, Meaning Making, and Creativity

Within this framework, we emphasize that play, meaning making, and creativity constitute distinct and interdependent processes in individual and collective experience.

## Play

Play is a dynamic and complex activity, which, according to Vygotsky (1933/1976), represents an interactive social form of embodied imagination. Play simultaneously requires and leads to complex symbolic constructions, behavioral mastery, collaborative protocols, emotional arousal and control, and the production of group cultural lore. Vygotsky noted “play is.....the leading source of development in pre-school years” (1933/1976, p. 537). In early childhood, play appears as the motives of the growing child shift towards the realization of personal desires. Because these desires are unattainable in reality, the child seeks to realize them through the imagination. For Vygotsky, play represents the first appearance of imagination in development—as imagination in action.

Vygotsky distinguishes play from other activities based on two essential characteristics: first, children create imaginary situations in play. Second, play is always based on rules. In fact, for Vygotsky, the imaginary situation already contains rules of behavior so that “there is no such thing as play without rules” (ibid., p. 541). As they explore the rules of social behavior and relationships, children develop through the meaning making of imaginary situations created in pretend play. Vygotsky discovered that children are able to follow the rules in play before they can adhere to those of everyday, real-life situations. Development calls for the capacity to be able to act in a situation “which is only conceived on an imagined level” and is independent of immediate reality for two reasons: first, in order for learning to occur, children must be able to interpret the meaning and sense of a situation (or objects) irrespective of their perceptual appearance. In other words, learners need to be able to evaluate events and things based on their relevant values, rules and expectations. Second, the use of imagined meanings and rules leads to the development of will and voluntary *actions* independent of immediate *reactions* to physical stimuli (ibid., pp. 545–550). Based on these insights, Vygotsky claimed that play represents a specialized form of the zone of proximal development asserting, “Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of pre-school development” (ibid., p. 552). Vygotsky’s work on play and its developmental significance have influenced many researchers and educators around the world, leading to innovations in an assortment of programs highlighted in our concluding chapter.

### Meaning Making

Play is just one expression of meaning making or semiosis that occurs across the life span. Meaning making is the construction of knowledge into understanding with others within and across a variety of contexts and codes (Vygotsky, 1986). Commonly referred to as learning, comprehending, or understanding, meaning making developed from our need to organize life experience as individuals, communities, and members of the human species.

Vygotsky did not consider meaning to be a private collage of concepts residing within a person's head. His thoughts on meaning making are refreshing in that he brings together traditionally held opposites. For example, instead of isolating forms of thinking into separate, discrete skills, Vygotsky viewed meaning making as a complex synthesis of interdependent processes. He also paired emotion and thought together as equitable processes that occur simultaneously. While meaning making occurs inside the social relationship of the ZPD, meaning is processed through the individual prism of *perezhivanie*. Similarly, the early meaning making efforts of children and novices often intertwine internal and external states. Ironically, the developmental task of today's learners involves the discovery and recreation of concrete and conceptual tools inherited from past generations. Through the appropriation and application of these cultural tools, learners become a medium for and makers of meaning and history (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Meaning making derives both content and significance from communications in the ZPD. The ZPD acts as a bridge to provide access between meaning makers and learning resources in a variety of forms and manners. Young children and novices are socialized into thought communities because in appropriating thought and signs together, meaning making is born. From the womb to the tomb, cultural knowledge and social practices from ever-widening circles are internalized through interactional exchanges, joint activities, and scaffolded experiences. In this manner, we gradually nurture a larger depth and greater breadth of understandings.

### Creativity

Within Vygotsky's developmental framework, creativity as a process includes children's play, imagination, and fantasy. It is a transformative activity where emotion, meaning, and cognitive symbols are synthesized. He focuses on everyday or mundane creative activities as well as the construction of creative artifacts or products which can have a lasting impact across generations emphasizing, "No accurate cognition of reality is possible without a certain

element of imagination, a certain flight from the immediate, concrete, solitary impressions in which this reality is presented..." (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 349).

While early play provides the beginnings of the 'construction of the new' so basic to creative processes, Vygotsky also emphasized the importance of desire-driven fantasy, which emerges more powerfully during adolescence. That is also a period when young people become more reflective and critical, thereby combining fantasy and cognition. Such a connection is basic to sustained exploration including the pursuit of diverse styles in the arts and modes of inquiry in the sciences. During adolescence the tension between social and individual processes is resolved in new ways, giving rise to works that, while frequently imitative, also provide the sources for future, more original, directions. Emotional support from family, teachers, and friends is crucial when young creative individuals are making difficult choices; they are engaged in transforming artistic knowledge acquired through apprenticeships into their first independent endeavors.

In *Notebooks of the Mind*, John-Steiner (1997;1985) wrote about this passage as recalled by composers. Igor Stravinsky, as a young man, was taught by the Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov: "Once a week I took my work to him and he criticized and corrected it, giving me all the necessary explanations, and at the same time he made me analyze the form and structure of classical works. A year and a half later I began the composition of a symphony. As soon as I finished one part of a movement I used to show it to him, so that my whole work, including the instrumentation, was under his control" (1985, p. 147). In this passage, Stravinsky exemplifies how becoming a composer involves a deep engagement with a mentor and the practice of the ZPD. While Stravinsky uses the term "control," the passage shows the power of scaffolding in the achievement of mastery and then the move into innovation.

Early in his career, Vygotsky wrote in *The Psychology of Art* that art "introduces the effects of passion, violates inner equilibrium, changes will in a new sense, and stirs feelings, emotions, passions and vices without which society would remain in an inert and emotionless state" (1925/1971, p. 249). Traditionally, creativity has been studied as an individual process, a result of predisposition, talent, apprenticeship, and recognition of prevalent trends. In contrast, Vygotsky saw a dialectical relationship between the individual and her/his world. In one of his essays on *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*, he wrote, "every inventor, even a genius, is always the outgrowth of his time and environment. His creativity stems from those needs that were created before him, and rests upon those possibilities that, again, exist outside of him" (Vygotsky quoted in van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p. xi). This theme pervades the three sections of this book. The first section, entitled "Theoretical

Foundations” will further elaborate a sociocultural approach to play, meaning making, and creativity. The second section, “Domains of Artistic Expression” will describe how Vygotsky’s legacy has been implemented in studies of literature, dance and the visual arts. The final section and conclusion, “Connections between Creative Expression, Learning, and Development” will elaborate how educational practices might embody the principles of play, imagination, and art to foster greater human growth and understanding.

The view of creativity as part of social life is presented in a variety of ways in the subsequent chapters. Some authors focus on improvisation as a joint activity between dancers and choreographers. Other scholars see it as collaboration between teachers, researchers and students. In performances based on such joint activities, the traditional dichotomy between everyday or “mundane” creativity and transformative creativity, which profoundly changes a human domain of knowledge in the arts or sciences, is attenuated. In the creativity literature, a distinction is frequently made between “c” or the novel solutions or approaches we invent in daily life and “C” attributed to the deep engagement of creative individuals in their lifelong pursuit in expanding our human legacy. In Vygotsky’s view, “creativity exists not only where it creates great historical works, but also everywhere human imagination combines, changes, and creates anything new” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 90). The activity of improvisation becomes ephemeral if it is not linked to the enduring discipline of building on past work while also being governed by a broad vision and a passion for one’s task. In focusing on children and adolescents, Vygotsky highlighted the developmental processes that lead to the construction of the new. Play, fantasy, conceptual understanding, and creative imagination are all imbedded in the cultural and social processes that make human life possible. In *The Psychology of Art*, he first formulated his important principle that creative work is profoundly social:

Art is the social within us, and even if its action is performed by a single individual it does not mean that its essence is individual...art is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life...it would be more correct to say that emotion becomes personal when every one of us experiences a work of art: it becomes personal without ceasing to be social... (Vygotsky, 1925/1971, p. 249).

In this book, the contributors expand this cultural historical framework and show how creativity, in all its manifestations, is woven together with learning, teaching, discovery, and transformational change.