

Opinion Article

The educational implications of sociocultural theory

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DESCRIPTION

Given the overarching nature of sociocultural theory, its educational implications for assessment, curriculum, and instruction are wide-ranging, and only a brief overview can be provided in this entry. For example, sociocultural theory, in particular the concept of zones of proximal development, suggests that the goals of educational assessment should be: (a) to identify abilities that are in the process of development, and (b) try to predict what the learner will do independently in the future. A line of research that meets these evaluation goals is dynamic evaluation.

Dynamic assessment is a term used to describe a number of different approaches that involve guided learning in order to determine a learner's potential for change. Unlike traditional and static procedures that focus on assessment products, dynamic assessment is concerned with the different ways in which people who received the same score achieved that score. In addition, while traditional measures detect only those abilities that are fully developed, dynamic measures are concerned with how well a learner works with assistance. Initial research on the development and use of dynamic assessment used domain-common types of problem-solving tasks (Campioni JC, 1984). These studies have shown that dynamic assessment measures do show a different picture of competence than static measures, which tend to underestimate children's ability to learn in the domain in which they initially performed poorly.

Recent research suggests that the principles of dynamic assessment can also be applied in academic contexts. They developed a context in which students could test their concepts and revise their thinking based on the results of their research. In this context, the researchers determined that the students were indeed able to understand electrical behaviour more than was determined based on the static measures used in previous studies.

Instructional implications

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is believed to occur through interaction, negotiation, and collaboration. While these features are characteristic of "cooperative learning," what distinguishes learning based on sociocultural theory is that it also pays attention to the discourse, norms, and practices associated with specific discourse and communities of practice. The goal of instruction is to help students engage in activities, conversation, and tool use in ways that are consistent with the practices of the community to which students are being introduced (e.g., scientists, mathematicians, historians).

These principles are consistent with an inquiry-based approach in which teachers and students are separate entities, but teachers mediate between students' personal meanings, meanings that emerge from students' collective thinking and conversation, and culturally established (scientific, mathematical, historical, literary) meanings of the wider society. Examples of this kind of research can be found in mathematics (Ball, 1993), (Engle & Conant, 2002) and literary studies (Lee, 2007).

Sociocultural theory is also intended to develop learning practices that could eliminate disparities in the current education system. Forty-two percent of school-age children in the United States are struggling beyond basic reading comprehension. Minority students and children living in poverty are disproportionately in the lowest quartile on standardized reading ability scores. Given these statistics, the increasing diversity of classrooms in the US, and the proliferation of literacy technologies (eg, multimedia and information and communication technologies), teachers need to rethink the canonical approach to literacy. Viewing literacy through the lens of sociocultural theory helps educators understand the 6 situational specificity of literacy practices. From this perspective, educators will see literacy as a tool to be used in specific contexts; thus, children will be taught how to negotiate multiple literacy skills for use in different contexts.

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Some researchers propose that educators work to create a third space in which students' primary discourses (those used at home, in the community, and informal social interactions) and students' secondary discourses (those endorsed in school and other formal institutions) intersect to form this third space where primary and secondary discourses merge. If educators were more attentive to creating these third spaces in the school, more attention would be paid to incorporating students' prior knowledge and experiences as well as contemporary literacy practices into the school curriculum.

A study by Varellas and Pappas (Varellas and Pappas, 2006) illustrates the productive instructional use of discourse in third spaces to promote science learning. Working in an urban elementary school, teachers encouraged their students to draw on: (a) their own investigations of scientific phenomena (such as the water cycle) in the classroom, at home, and in community settings; (b) previous conversations and (c) other books read in and out of school during read-aloud sessions. Varellas and Pappas documented many examples of young children bringing their own means of knowledge into the classroom, but they also documented how teachers readily used these funds and

facilitated children's acquisition of scientific language and concepts.

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