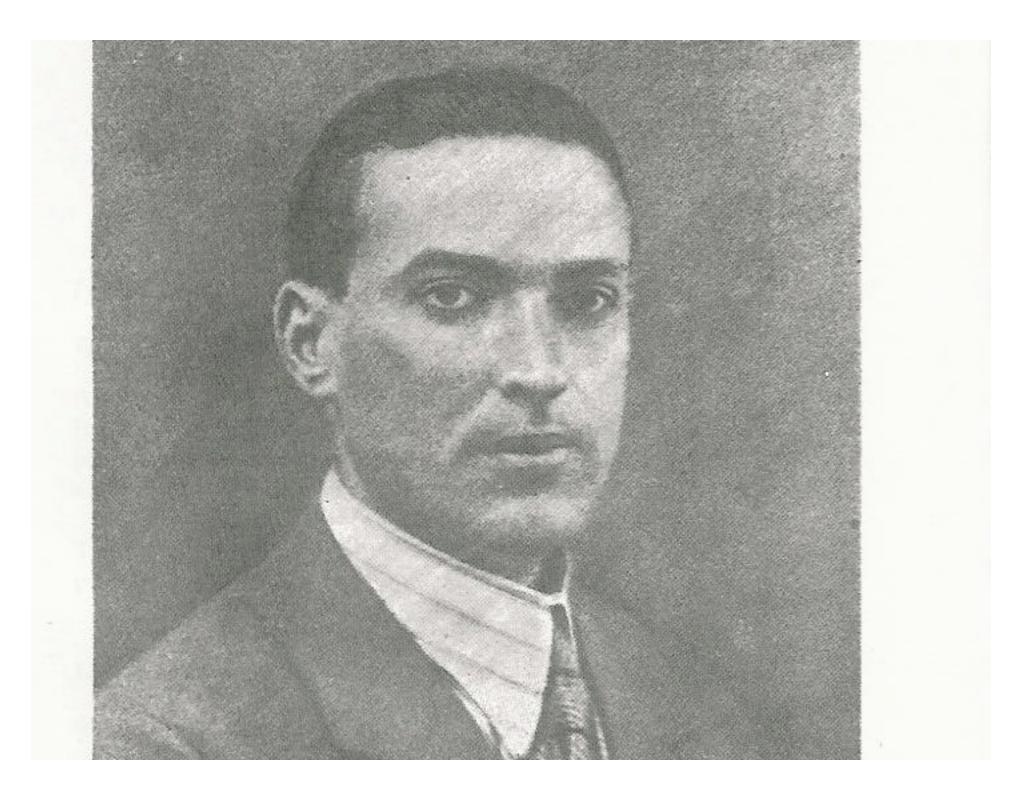# Introduction To Learning

Sociocultural/Situative Perspective

Ed 232C

April 10, 2002

Lecture 1

* Please Note: Much of the text that appears in the up-coming slides have been borrowed from course readings and other supplemental texts.

Social Aspects of Learning

In varying degrees, the early work of Plato, Locke, the behaviorists, the Gestalt theorists, Piaget, and others all harbor one defect: *The learner was depicted as a lone investigator*. Learner could be actively interacting with the environment (as in the depictions of Piaget, Kohler, and the behaviorists), or could be passive recipients of stimulation or experience (according to Locke and Plato)—but what was missing from all these accounts was *the explicit recognition that learners always belong to social groups*.
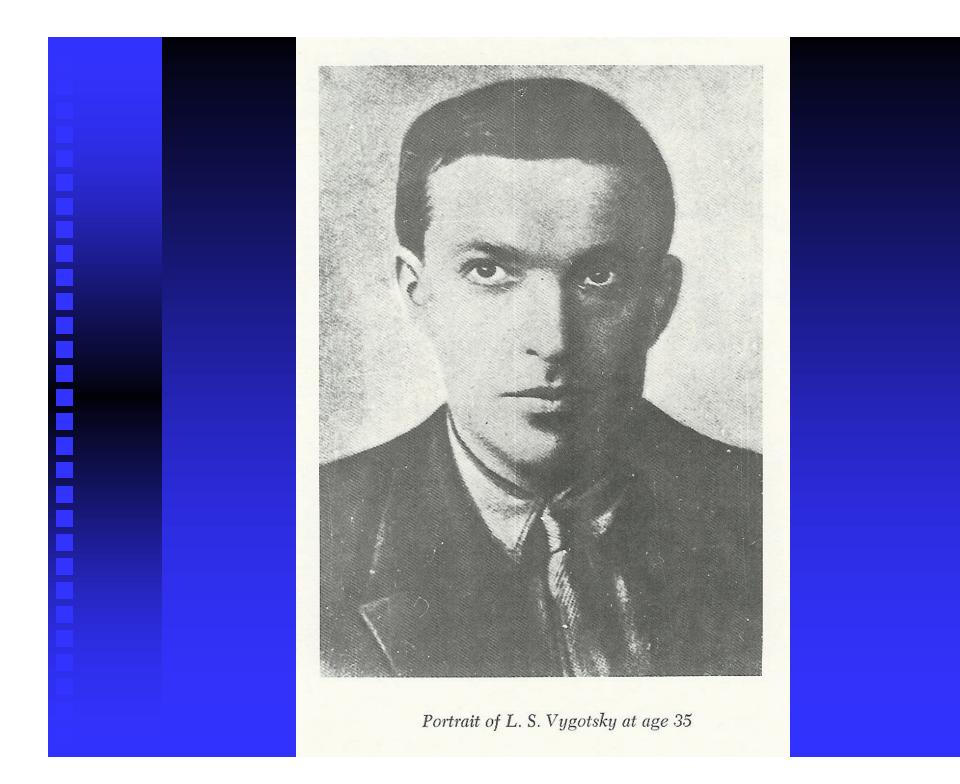
Introduction to Learning

- On the one hand, the Cartesian assumption that the only true domain of psychological study was internal mental activity has led investigators to focus on issues such as innate competencies and individual mental processes alone

- On the other hand, various behavioristic approaches have focused solely on external behavior

- According to James Wertsch, however, "One of psychology's most persistent problems is how to conceptualize the relationship between external and internal activity

- Leont'ev, a sociocultural theorist, argued that one of Soviet psychology's major accomplishment has been to recognize the integral relationship between external and internal activity

- As an educational linguist, I am particularly intrigued with two of their contributions: one, the topic of internalization--the transformation of external activity into internal activity--and, two, the role of oral and written language as a tool for semiotic mediation in this process

Sociocultural/Situative Perspective Provides

A theoretical framework that views cognition as a complex social phenomena

A theoretical framework that accounts for the specifically situated structuring of cognitive activity

A view of cognition, observed in everyday practice, as distributed--stretched over, not divided among,the mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings

Lev Vygotsky

- Born in 1896, he was student of literature, philosophy, and esthetics. Vygotsky plunged into psychology at the age of twenty-eight, and died of tuberculosis ten years later.

- Born to a middle-class Jewish family, Vygotsky presented his dissertation thesis, <u>The Psychology of Art</u>, at the the Moscow Institute of Psychology in 1925

- Psychological scholarship in the 1920s fell into a number of schools--behaviorism, reflexology, psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, and so on--which challenged each other on theoretical and methodological grounds

- Vygotsky sought an alternative to Cartesian dualism which, by splitting the human into body and mind, established the conflict between materialistic, scientific psychology and idealistic, philosophical psychology.

Portrait of L. S. Vygotsky at age 35

- Vygotsky sought the development of a "general psychology" that would provide a methodological guide for all of the psychological disciplines

- For the rest of his life, Vygotsky desperately sought this new methodology that would make psychology scientific, but not at the cost of the naturalization of cultural phenomena, and that would make use of Marxist method without degenerating into "Marxist psychology"

- In its initial stages, he felt that his research: had to be developmental; had to resolve the problem of the interrelation between higher mental functions (logical memory, selective, decision making, language comprehension) and the lower, elementary psychological functions (elementary perception, memory, attention and will); and had to take socially meaningful activity as an explanatory principle

- They felt that in uncovering the problem of thought and speech as the focal issue of human psychology, they could make an essential contribution; they were most interested in the problem of the internalization of symbolic psychological tools and social relations

- The major objection Vygotsky had with mentalist psychology was that it was caught in a vicious cycle in which states of consciousness were explained by the concept of consciousness. Vygotsky argued that if one is to take consciousness as a subject of study, then the explanatory principle must be sought in some other layer of reality. He suggested that socially meaningful activity might play this role and serve as a generator of consciousness

- His first step in concretization of this principal was the suggestion that individual consciousness is built from outside through relations with others… that the constructive principle of the higher function lies outside the individual--through psychological tools (ie, language) and through interpersonal relations

- "Each function of the child's (or adult's) cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child o adult (intrapsychological)"

Activity Theory

- Following Vygotsky's death, a group of his students, the Kharkovites, which included Leont'ev, conducted studies in developmental psychology centering on comparing the external sensory-motor activity of a child with her mental actions; relations between consciousness, activity, and reality; Vygotsky's thesis "from action to thought." From this circle of studies came some later notions that became accepted as the basic premises of Soviet developmental psychology, among them Zaporozhets' concept of "perception as action"

- Leontiev further elaborated on the concept of activity and suggested the following breakdown of activity-- activity corresponding to a motive, action corresponding to a goal, and operation dependent upon conditions: "The main thing which distinguishes one activity from another, however, is the difference of their objects. It is the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction… the object of an activity is its true motive."

- I investigate the transitioning discourse practices that characterize the oral and written language of teachers who are considering teaching literacy in urban schools. My goal here is to provide a model for considering how the evolving language practices of teachers who are involved in teacher education programs reflect their internal movement beyond a mere procedural display or regurgitation of theory to become reflective, thoughtful, committed action agents with a personal voice to direct their generative development as urban teachers.

- Vgotsky exploits the concept of a tool in a fashion that finds its direct antecedents in Engels: "The specialization of the hand--this implies the *tool*, and the tool implies specific human activity, the transforming reaction of man on nature"

- the animal merely *uses* external nature, and brings about changes in it simply by his presence, man, by his changes, makes it serve his ends, *masters it.*

- Vygotsky brilliantly extended this concept of mediation in human-environment interaction to the use of signs as well as tools.

- Like tool systems, sign systems (language, writing, number systems) are created by societies over the course of human history and change with the form of society and the level of its cultural development Vygotsky believed that the internalization of culturally produced sign systems brings about behavioral transformations and forms the bridge between early and later forms of individual development.

- Thus for Vygotsky, in the tradition of Marx and Engels, the mechanism of individual developmental change is rooted in society and culture.

The Problem of Activity Theory

- Leont'ev's main point was that our knowledge of the world is mediated by our interaction with it

- Neither the external world nor the human organism is solely responsible for developing our knowledge of the world. Key to the process of of developing knowledge about the world is the activity in which the human agent engages

- Activity theory attempts to explain the formation of ideas from material practice; as the structure of social interaction changes over history, the structure of human thinking changes as well

- Consciousness is determined by people's social being, which is their actual process of living; the process of living is the system of activities that succeed one another

- Activity is the unit of life that is mediated by mental reflection. It is a system with its own structure, its own internal transformation, and its own development

Mediated Action

- mediation or mediated action is what enables people to accomplish both the goals of the practice & the *interactions* among all these elements.

- According to Wertsch (1988), "mediation is best thought of as a process involving the potential of cultural tools to shape action, on the one hand, and the unique use of these tools, on the other"

- It is "this idea that runs as the unifying and connecting lifeline throughout the works of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, Luria, and the other important representatives of the Soviet cultural-historical school"

Lave: Cognitive Apprenticeship

- It's possible to learn math by doing what mathematicians do

- By engaging in the structure-finding activities and mathematical argumentation typical of good mathematical practice

- They emphasize the situated character of problem-solving activity while focusing on learning by doing

Rogoff's three planes of analysis

- Apprenticeship focuses on the routines, concepts, and artifacts that one inherits from the history of the practice into which one is entering.

- Guided practice focuses on the nature of the interaction and supports that individuals or groups of people experience from other people and artifacts that are part of the activity.

- Participatory appropriation refers to the efforts of the individual to make sense of and use the resources available to him or her in the activity.