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**Vygotsky on the Margins: A Global Search for Method
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The Vygotsky that's been spreading around the world outside the university is primarily a developmentalist and not an educational psychologist. The key features of this Vygotsky were first articulated by Fred Newman and myself in our 1993 book *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* and my 2009 *Vygotsky at Work and Play*. While these and other writings of ours are known by scholars, the main impact of our work has been on community organizers, youth workers, educators and counselors working outside the academy—many of them at the grass roots with poor and otherwise marginalized groups children in the favelas of Brazil, men in South African prisons, mentally ill people in India, and families in violence-ridden Juarez Mexico, to name a few.

These people have come to know Vygotsky and been supported to make use of his method and discoveries through the constant outreach of my colleagues and I at the East Side Institute, a non-profit research, education and training center located in NYC that reaches out the US and around the globe to bring the most innovative and cutting-edge approaches from academia to the field and vice versa. If there is to be a way out of the human development crisis we all face, it's ordinary people who are going to make it happen.

The Institute has over twenty years experience in collaborating with hundreds of NGOs and individual scholars and community educators and activists in nearly 40 countries through its study and training programs, international conferences and institutional partnerships.



Approximately 75 relationships have been sustained for five years or more and are ongoing. A subset of the 75 are connected to each other and to the Institute as a means of support and ongoing development their work. Together, they form a community education project that is unusual in being global, cross-disciplinary and non-university based. Perhaps its most unique feature is that it is an ever-expanding development community. By that I mean a community that supports the development of people and communities through its own continuous development. It is designed for people to self-organize in whatever ways make sense to them in their environments, to create new forms of life by activistically transforming the existing forms of life that stifle their development and learning.

Before I introduce some of these activists for development to you, let me summarize the key features of the Vygotsky they are inspired by and make use of. First is Vygotsky's method. As he was trying to create a new psychology in the early years of the Soviet Union, Vygotsky broke with the accepted scientific paradigm in which method is something to be applied in order to yield results—in other words, a tool for result. He put forth a different conception of method—not a tool to be applied, but an activity that generates both tool and result at the same time and as continuous process. In this case, tool and result are elements of a dialectical unity/totality/whole in which method is to be practiced, not applied—what Newman and I call tool-and-result methodology. Here is how he put it: “The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study.” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65).

Tool-and-result is also a way to understand human life. Individual, cultural and species development is created by human activity, which is qualitative and transformative (unlike behavior change, which is particularistic and cumulative). People do not merely respond

to stimuli, acquire societally determined and useful skills, and adapt to the determining environment. The uniqueness of human social life is that we ourselves transform the determining circumstances. Human development is not an individual accomplishment but a *socio-cultural activity*. In my work, “tool-and-result” has helped me to see that people experience the social nature of their existence and the power of collective creative activity in the process of making new tools for growth (Holzman, 2009). Studying this activity and experience is likewise a transformation of existing circumstances.

Among the discoveries of Vygotsky’s search for method that this global group of activists for development put into practice are: 1) his understanding of learning, or education, and development as a dialectical unity rather than as in linear or causal relation; 2) his concept of the zone of proximal development, or ZPD, as something that is created through people’s activity rather than as a spatio-temporal entity; and 3) his understanding of what makes play developmental.

These key features form the methodology of social therapeutics, the name given to the Institute’s approach. As a cultural approach to human life, it relates to human beings as the creators of our culture and ensemble performers of our lives; and to human and community learning and development as the social-cultural activity of creating “development zones/stages” where people can “become” through performing, as Vygotsky says, “a head taller” (Vygotsky, 1978).

I’d like to introduce you to a few of our partners in this development project.



Ishita Sanyal is one of the few psychologists in India. She lives in Kolkata. When her brother had a schizophrenic break she was faced with the stark reality that there were

precious few services for people with severe mental illness, and none that gave them any dignity. So she founded her own organization, Turning Point. At the beginning Ishita focused on involving people in educational activities, like computer training. This in itself was a big step, as what was available in other places was so-called occupational therapy such as bookbinding and pickle making. But being introduced to Vygotsky's method through the Institute, and meeting hundreds of people who were utilizing creative and performance activities in their work around the world, Ishita began to involve her staff and clients in developmental activities. She recognized that in order to reinstate development and growth in people suffering from mental illness, you had to relate to them, in Vygotsky's sense, as a head taller through play. Over the years, since 2007, she has introduced readings on human development to them, helped them create skits from these readings and their life experiences, and taught them improv games. They even put on a show in the village square. The experience of being related to doing what they don't know how to do and what no one expects of them, of working collectively to create their growth, of succeeding, being appreciated and being seen as a human being has been transformative.

Recently, Ishita wrote to us about a talent show Turning Point organized for people with mental illness. She said: At the initial screening we saw people complaining of headaches and becoming restless. But when the performance started they became increasingly enthusiastic and often performed more than once, not for the sake of competition, but for the pleasure of performing and discovery. They were able to create a completely different and more positive environment together where instead of only thinking about their problems and difficulties they were immersed in creatively praising each other. I think this helped them to grow and develop because they went from I can't to I can."



Miguel Cortes from Ciudad Juarez in Mexico is a community educator and non-diagnostic therapist.

“Four years ago I was struggling to adjust myself to working at the University. I dreamt of doing community work but had no idea of how to do it, my friend was trying to find people he could work creatively with, and now, through totally different paths we come to be involved in doing community work with youth. And so we know cannot only play drums together, we can now record albums created by youth, we can create workshop about comics that reflect life in Juarez, and so many other things. In just 4 years we have created conditions where we can do things unimaginable before. And it wasn't by reading the “7 steps for successful community building” or “Community building for dummies.” It was our growing and playing and creating community, it was participating in creating with our groups which is not a “let's all hold hands” kind of thing, but a huge struggle, of us at times having no idea what we where doing, of people leaving our community, of finding ways of continuing our work even when the conditions don't exist for it. You cannot appreciate Vygotsky deeply if you are not building with him, if you are not creating environments for growth.”



Peter Nsubuga is a community worker in Kampala, Uganda. While in the UK studying accounting, Peter saw a TV show on the plight of children in Africa. He returned home to respond to the need for help in communities suffering from disease, extreme poverty, and lack of clean water. He himself grew up poor and had lost three brothers and one sister to AIDS. In 2008, Peter founded Hope for Youth, an organization that provides food, clothing, education and social-emotional development experiences to children and families in a remote area of Kampungu village in the Mukono District. Hope for Youth started with seven children under a tree, and today cares for over 250 children between 4-14 years in their school program, and over 50 youth and women in play and performance-based out-of-school programs.

Commenting on what he learned and now practices, Peter says, “It’s an eye opener to me on how we can continuously create development in our communities by becoming creators of changes instead of just passively watching life passing by. This is unique especially to those of us who were used to the system that was only encouraging us to be who we are, to develop our identities, rather than to continue performing as who we were becoming.”



Yuji Moro is a prominent developmental psychologist in Japan who had been following cultural historical research since the early 1980s when his colleagues visited Mike Cole’s lab in San Diego. Coming in contact with the Institute and Vygotsky as developmentalist, he has come to recognize that human development can only come about through community development, and he’s become a community activist. Among the projects he has implemented in the past five years are radical changes in university education that brings creativity and performance into the classrooms and collaborations with community organizations in Tokyo’s poorest neighborhoods to re-initiate development in the most marginalized of teens and young adults.

Yuji recently commented on the impact of the revolutionary Vygotsky in Japan: “In the past few years, he’s been an omnipresent figure, provoking academics into discussion on the unity of learning and development in conference rooms, on working as a community builder in various cities and countries, and on making stages for young people beginning their future.”



Fernanda Liberali uses her location at the applied linguistics department at a university in Sao Paulo Brazil to build community. She and her colleagues have built what they call the Creative Chain, an action research network across Brazil of teacher educators, students, teachers and administrators who practice a Vygotskian pedagogy. Over the past ten years, they've been transitioning from being primarily educators to community organizers focused on supporting children and families in the favelas to create and participate in self-organizing developmental experiences that ring them into the wider world of what their country has to offer.

As Fernanda puts it, “We have lived as a very poor country for a very long time, and now we are experiencing a new situation in the country. Since Lulu’s election in 2002 we felt that things are different and we could move beyond. People thought that they could develop, they could change, they could go ahead. After awhile people thought that this was enough. But the enough was not enough. Because what people thought was enough was what they knew. But as Spinoza says, ‘You can only want what you know.’ But many people, poor people mainly don’t know a lot of things that there are in the world and because they don’t know them, then they don’t want them and they don’t dream about them and they don’t fight for them and they don’t try to transform the world in order to get them.”

I’ll close with a comment from another activist for development, educational psychologist Paul Carlin from Oslo. “My Vygotsky was an aloof, distant scientist, when I first met him at the university of Oslo. He was mostly used in theoretical dueling with the ghost of Piaget in student papers over casting development as blank slate or the preplanned blooming of biology. And the zones of proximal development were represented by technical drawings and equations on the blackboard. The drawings traced the predicted path/bridge within a ZPD of the transformation of a skill from novice to expert. My Vygotsky never questioned the tool for result methodology. Never imagined another ontology. What I really appreciate and in turn struggle with in implementing this

revolutionary Vygotsky is that it opened my imagination to what is alive, transformable, buildable. A new psychology of becoming. That the human world is alive in a myriad ways, not dead, commodified, closed off. Celebrate what has been built for us to build with further.”