

Socio-Cultural Theory in Education: A Context – 25-March-2006
Reflection by Bhuvinder S. Vaid: 29-March-06

Since Saturday after the seminar, I have been contemplating what exactly my reflection should look like. Would comments on how I think our group did be sufficient? Should I comment on our goals for the day and what I think was actually accomplished? Needless to say, this is difficult, for I can't really describe much in great detail as I am not really privy to the audience's thoughts – yet! But there is one thing I have direct access to, which might be useful to explore – my own personal journey through this particular seminar.

By my choice of words in the last sentence, one might assume that I am going to write about the seminar itself – but to me, the 3 to 4 hours on Saturday was a very small part of the experience this semester. So perhaps, by exploring the context from which the seminar emerged I might be able to offer a more valuable reflective experience.

So, let's begin back in September during the first meeting of EDUC 809. I'll admit, the topic, when presented to us as a group, intrigued me and was on the list of seminar topics I ranked. However, it was not at the top of my list, for I thought it might be valuable to try something outside my comfort area by way of one of the other topics. As well, now that I think about, I don't think I really wanted to present on this topic, as every time I had broached this topic in my previous classes, the response by instructors and peers had been lukewarm. But alas, it was not to be, for I was assigned to this particular topic along with Carl and Xin.

I was immediately struck by Carl and Xin's sense of immediacy in wanting to meet and start work on this seminar presentation. This took me as quite odd, for I had not planned to even think about this seminar and its content until sometime in mid- to late-February. I believe I was taking last year's seminar as the model for this year, and the perception that we really didn't need to put too much work into this kind of presentation – in essence, we could throw something together at the last minute. In fact, I found myself quite annoyed at one point in mid- to late- November by Carl and Xin's insistence that we set up a meeting time in December as it was a relatively *free* month. Needless to say, Carl and Xin's insistence won out, and we started communicating by e-mail and FirstClass in early January, and started meeting every Wednesday afternoon for about an hour.

There were a few differences between the organization for this seminar as opposed to my experience last year. First, I was not working full-time (or for that matter at all) and was therefore able to be flexible for meetings. At first, I thought this was simply a matter of having more time to meet, but I came to realize that it was actually having more time to think about what I was reading, saying and doing which was of greater importance. Second, I was taking a course in Qualitative Research Methods (<http://www.sfu.ca/educ867/index.htm>) which was making me think about some of the limitations of positivist epistemology when examining interactions and phenomena in a natural perspective. Third, I was taking a course with Andrew Feenberg in

Communications on the topic of *Alternative Modernity* (<http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/altmod.htm>), which, I will be honest, has been one of the biggest challenges of my academic life. Feenberg's course, beyond being quite demanding in the amount of reading, has been quite humbling as I approached it thinking that it would be a walk in the park. However, Feenberg has challenged my traditional understanding of technology, for I have been forced to reframe technology as simply another historical artifact, one with its own history which is deeply interdependent upon the context and society from which it emerged and in turn it has acted upon/within. Needless to say, I have only understood a small portion of the content I have been exposed to this semester.

It was with this contextual background, that I approached the organization of this seminar and the meetings. These initial face to face meetings proved quite difficult, for I sensed that no one in our group, least of all me, wanted to take the role of 'leader'. This proved the first challenge, as Carl at one point, asked me point blank "Beev, what exactly would you like to do as your contribution?" To which I responded "I'll do anything the two of you ask." From my own perspective, I felt as though I was being extremely helpful, for I was willing to accommodate wherever the need arose. But I wonder how Carl and Xin must have perceived my comments in these first few meetings?

Disinterested... 'aloof'...unwilling to share ideas or feedback? I have been rethinking these interactions, and re-reading some of the e-mails from Carl with ideas on how we should develop the seminar. I now wonder how much Carl and Xin were looking to me for guidance, and wonder still why they seemed to impart a sense of authority to my comments and feedback.

I've been thinking about this for quite some time, even before the seminar last Saturday, and have trouble believing it was just because I am in the second year cohort. So what else did I represent in these meetings, from the perspective of Carl and Xin, and where did this sense of authority come from exactly? I've been looking at the discursive elements of language usage lately, and wonder how my choice of speech and writing imparts an 'echo' or 'shadow' of authority on the topic of Socio-Cultural Theory? (My terminology is an extension of a paper presented by Dr. Charles Bingham *The Enigma of Teaching Authority* on Thursday 23 March).

The result of my personal language use and sentence construction, and in turn the imparted sense of authority over a particular discourse, a recent reflective understanding, did come to out in some of our group's meetings. After a particularly difficult meeting, where I discussed some ideas pertaining to Derrida and how all language has a history of meaning, Xin discussing Vygotsky's theory of ZPD, and Carl's attempt to tie the two together in some type of practical exercise that might be transferable to the rest of the group, I found myself quite frustrated at the lack of forward momentum our group was having as we struggled to build some type of consensus for the presentation. This frustration lingered with me for the next 7 days, as I made my way to classes, meetings, etc. I even voiced my frustrations to a group of peers and asked for advice on how to overcome these problems. What I received can best be described as a paradigm shift in my own approach, for a friend, who will remain anonymous, indicated that I must be one

of the most self-centred people she knew to believe that others would necessarily share my understanding and perspective of these ideas. These comments stopped me in my tracks, for I was found questioning why Carl, Xin and others should come to see my perspective from my point of view, especially since they did not share my particular *history of understanding*.

So, I arrived at the next meeting thinking that I would share with Carl and Xin a more thorough contextual understanding of where my ideas came from. I started with my cultural history, then my academic history, and quickly found that this method was not going to work as they could never really share that same perspective. Alas, I found myself becoming frustrated once again and turned away from Carl and Xin. Looking away in frustration was probably the most important action I had personally taken in all my interactions with Carl and Xin. For at that moment I remember Carl asking something along the lines as to why it was important to understand the history of people and objects. As he said this, my eyes fell upon the *Dasani* water bottle I had brought with me to the meeting and that was sitting in the middle of the table between us, and it struck me that the bottle represented many different histories, not just one objective – fact based perspective. I began speaking aloud, *deconstructing* the bottle along the lines of the history of *design, technology of the materials* used to produce bottles, *market* – the fact that water could be a commodity, and *class & culture* – buying water as a sign of affluence.

I could say that I saw light bulbs go off above Carl and Xin's heads, but that might be too much of a stretch. Instead, I heard a sudden tone of understanding in Carl's response, as he announced that as I was describing the bottle, he had flashes of the Coke Bottle from *The God's Must be Crazy*. I thought about his observation for a moment, and it struck me that he had just described that practical example we had been searching for! But what exactly was this example? What did it represent for the purpose of our presentation? I'll be honest that I didn't really think about this in much detail until Cheryl approached me during lunch on Saturday. Cheryl was a little concerned that based upon the morning presentations our group might be losing the majority of the seminar's audience, because we (namely me) were making little or no effort to bridge the gap between our theory and the audience's current level of understanding and/or perspective. I'll admit that part of this was done on purpose as my entire presentation was based upon the use of metaphor, as was the movie presentation. But Cheryl noted that not everyone might understand that I was playing with metaphors, and that by the time it became evident, most people might have tuned out!

As Xin commenced her presentation on Vygotsky, I found myself mulling over Cheryl's comments, wondering why they bothered me so. It struck me during Xin's introduction to the *Zone of Proximal Development* that in order for audience participants to move from their current level of understanding to the intended goal of our group, we would need to offer some type of instructional scaffold. For this, I was drawn back to that pivotal conversation Xin, Carl and I had regarding the water bottle, and just what it had represented to us. For our group, the metaphor of the bottle helped construct a common source for the vocabulary which finally allowed us to understand each other's

perspectives. This was notably absent from our morning presentation, for I had not even contemplated the need for an explicit common vocabulary, other than the movie. But how could I construct this vocabulary in a quick, straightforward manner? As I approached the podium after Xin's presentation, I was not really sure how I would do this, until I looked at Cheryl and one of her comments during lunch of sharing how we came up with our idea, flashed through my head – hence, the story-like narrative I shared in an attempt to make our group's perspective and journey clearer.

Needless to say, I was wiped by the end of the day - but I was left with a feeling of real accomplishment. This accomplishment however, had very little to do with the effectiveness of the presentation on the audience, but rather was directed toward my fellow group members. Carl and Xin had carried themselves during their individual presentations, with a confidence I had not seen up to that very moment, absent even during our countless meetings. Not only that, their explanations of the content and answers to questions from the group, made me think back to our meetings from the beginning of the semester, and note the changes and growth they were projecting as they presented.

I recently read an article by Allan MacKinnon, in which he described the need for a shift in pedagogy to *teaching at the elbow*, helping learners on their journey without being in the way. I don't want to be condescending in anyway to Carl or Xin, for I have never felt I was teaching them anything, but as I reflect upon it now, I do feel as though I was able to accompany them, at their side, on a journey as they moved forward with their own growth and understanding on the very difficult topic that is socio-cultural theory.

I am left wondering if the euphoric sense of accomplishment I feel, not for something I did but rather what Xin and Carl accomplished in their presentations, is the same as teachers feel? ☺