

# Summarizing Sociocultural Theory

(Smith, Teemant, & Pinnegar, 2004)

Sociocultural theory provides foundational views of knowing, learning, teaching, and performing (see Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1981; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984; Wertsch, 1985, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1989; Rogoff, 1990).

These views can be summarized as follows:

1. Knowledge is cultural understanding and competent participation.
2. Learning is social.
3. Teaching is assisting.
4. Performance is situative.

*Knowledge is cultural understanding and competent participation.* Knowing is understanding the language, symbols, tools, patterns of reasoning, shared meanings, and customary practices needed for competent participation and problem solving in a particular social group, community, or culture.

*Learning is social.* Learning occurs through internalization and automatization of social activities. Individuals actively construct personal understandings and abilities by way of cooperative interaction and negotiation of shared meanings in social contexts. Language and other social tools mediate learning, and structured experiences can produce expected patterns of development. Generalized, formal understandings develop by making connections among multiple situated experiences. These situated experiences serve as paradigms for participation in similar contexts.

*Teaching is assisting.* Teaching consists of structuring goal-directed learning activities and assisting performance of learners during meaningful and productive social interactions. Teachers, as more capable others, provide assistance within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the range between unassisted and assisted successful performance. Effective learning activities provide opportunities for guided reinvention of knowledge that is valued by society in situations that are motivating for learners. Teachers assist students in making connections among situated experiences, and they guide the generalization of formal knowledge from these connections. Teachers also judge the quality of students' performances and explanations of thinking by comparing them to suitable standards, and teachers provide feedback that assists students' learning.

*Performance is situative.* Automatization occurs in learners when performance of a particular task in a familiar situation becomes automatic, subconscious, and integrated and thus no longer requires self-regulation or assistance from others. De-automatization occurs when performance of a new task or performance in an unfamiliar situation is beyond the learner's present development and the learner returns to requiring self-regulating activities or assistance from others for success.

The sociocultural perspective also emphasizes the interrelatedness of the individual and the sociocultural environment in the teaching and learning process, and descriptions of this process include such metaphors for contextualized learning as *apprenticeship*, *guided participation*, and *participatory appropriation*. For purposes of analyzing these educational processes, the most useful unit is the activity or event, because it preserves the dynamic contributions from the three inseparable players in every sociocultural activity: individuals; their social partners; and the histories, meanings, practices, and materials of communities. While it may be helpful to temporarily bring one of these three planes (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community) into the forefront for focused study, the influences of the other two planes remain and must be accounted for as part of the sociocultural context of the activity (Rogoff, 1995).

## References

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