

Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development

A Guide to Vygotsky's Theory of Learning

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What is the Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development?

The sociocultural theory of cognitive development explores the influence the world has on individual development. It asserts that learning is a mostly social process whereby development occurs through interactions with people who possess more knowledge or skill than the learner¹.



Psychologist Lev Vygotsky established this theory of learning, believing that parents, teachers, peers, caregivers, and society at large influences an individual's cognitive development. Learning at its root involves interacting with others around you. Vygotsky asserted that learning was a cultural phenomenon, with children from different cultures embracing different styles of learning¹.

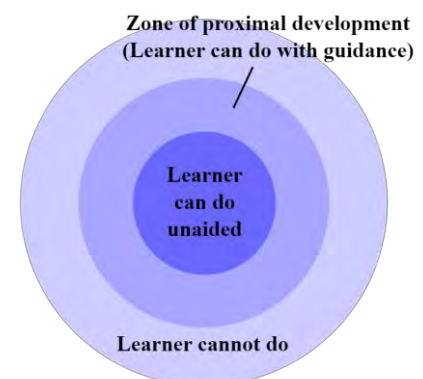
According to Vygotsky, learning is a process of acquiring knowledge, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through interactions with what he termed "more knowledgeable others"².

It is through our interactions with others that we make sense of the information we encounter. It is an inherently social process, one in which we depend on others to help us understand the world. Social learning thus precedes individual development and is unique to the individual.

What is the Zone of Proximal Development?

The Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD, explains the ability of a learner to extend beyond their own innate ability through interaction with others in their environment. It is the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can learn with the guidance and support of what Vygotsky referred to as "more knowledgeable others"². Over time, the ZPD expands and grows with the individual learner¹.

More knowledgeable others, or MKOs, are central to the ZPD learning process. Simply put, a MKO is someone with higher level knowledge or skill than the learner. As such, they serve as a source of sociocultural learning. MKOs are often thought of as older individuals, but they can be peers or younger persons provided they have a body of knowledge and experience that the learner doesn't yet possess.



How Does This Effect Medical Education?



Vygotsky asserts that learning is culturally dependent, with individuals from different cultures learning differently². The role of culture is central this theory, requiring educators to consider its effects on the learning environment.

Immersion in a professional subculture influences what and how learners think. From the language used to the social acceptance of others, subcultures shape the learners' ability to make meaning of their experiences. As such, educators must attend to social interactions and messages to shape the learning process.

Educators in this model serve as MKOs and provide a guide for sociocultural learning. In this model, the learner seeks to understand the thoughts and actions of the MKO and then internalizes them into their memory². Learning and development occur through these social interactions, increasing in complexity over time.

What Does It Mean for My Teaching?

The sociocultural theory of learning emphasizes the need for scaffolding of information². That is, teaching is done to build knowledge and skill in incremental stages. For example, a teacher may demonstrate a technique, have the learner practice it under supervision, and provide guidance for skill improvement. Cycles of this may occur until the learner is able to practice the skill in its entirety independently.

Cooperative learning opportunities are also important in this model². In this approach, MKOs are more knowledgeable or skilled peers that are allowed to interact with the learner within the ZPD. Through these interactions, the learner grows and develops without direct intervention from the teacher. Composing groups with a mixture of high and lower-performing students helps foster collaborative development¹.



Reciprocal teaching is also a methodology under this model. With reciprocal teaching, teachers and learners use summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting to improve the student's ability to learn from text². As with other sociocultural methodologies, the teacher's involvement is reduced over time until the learner is functioning independently.

References

1. Cherry, K. (February 2022) What is Sociocultural Theory? VeryWell Mind. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-sociocultural-theory-2795088>
2. McLeod, S. (2020) Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development. Simply Psychology. Retrieved from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html>