



Login



Dashboard



Calendar



Inbox



History



Help

new  
Greig White

Home

# Thinking about a social and cultural approach to learning

**Dr Ryan Thomas Williams**

Culture plays a significant role in how individuals' minds are shaped, contributing to an individual's thinking, talking, and acting. The accumulated set of cultural values are picked up when individuals are younger, and this helps them to work, play and solve problems. These beliefs and 'ways of knowing' are picked up by previous generations, or further experienced social contacts (Wells and Claxton 2006). When new problems arise, it is the individual who must make the most of their values, skills, and knowledge to explore a solution. It is not just the solitary actors to the communities that serve individuals, but likewise 'social tools', such as digital technologies that shape thinking and acting. Social culturalists argue that both culture and the inherited resources of artefacts/tools develop the individual (Wells and Claxton 2006; Trowler 2008) Moreover, this approach to learning provides an alternative to cognitive theories, such as Piaget's (1936) Theory of Cognitive Development, and has played an important part in contemporary educational research, especially in the area of TEL.

Social cultural theorists (Wells and Claxton 2006; Vygotsky 1978; Gergan 1991) argue that there are three discourses within which learning, and development can be framed. In other words, these perspectives to learning are crucial in understanding learning in the social, cultural, and historical contexts. The first discourse is 'individual-development', which views individuals as knowledge structures (see Vygotsky's 1990 Cultural-historical activity theory [CHAT]). People are referred to as either good or bad at learning and knowing. As an example, teachers may label a student 'intelligent' or having a 'short term memory' (Wells and Claxton 2006).

The second discourse is a 'social-historical' one, which views individuals in terms of changing social structures. In this discourse, individuals discover themselves within a social structure as opposed to a 'reality'. A student, for example, may be described in the abstract in 'subcultural' ways as opposed to a defining psychological characteristic, for example as a 'millennial'. The third discourse is the 'irreducible situated moment', which does not view the psychological attributes of an individual as predictors to their actions. In the moment, each unprecedented material is unique to the situation and has new demands of the individual. For example, a student's capability would extend in a different way depending on the resources they have, such as in an IT room.

Social cultural theorists present widely recognised strengths of this way of thinking. Firstly, the discourse's evidence that social culturalism acknowledges the dissimilarities in individuals within cultures. Miller (2011) argues that the different historical circumstances may encourage different development routes depending on the tools available to the individual. Secondly, by broadening the social, cultural, and historical contexts, individuals are not isolated and a richer perspective on learning can be provided. Finally, this theory contributes to the theoretical understanding of learning and development. In exemplifying this point, we can consider the idea that the learning driving development is of fundamental importance in understanding the learning process and its educational implications. However, there are limitations to the ideas developed from Lev Vygotsky's work, most prominently due to the premature death of Vygotsky which meant that most of his theories were left incomplete. Due to political tensions between the Soviet Union and the West, most of Vygotsky's work was not translated and largely unknown until recently. Another limitation is associated with the vagueness of the ZPD, for example, individuals have narrow zones which can be both desirable and undesirable depending on the circumstances. Furthermore, individually knowing the width of the zone fails to provide an accurate perspective of one's learning style and ability compared with the development of other children. Cognitive development theorists, such as Rogoff (1990) argue that scaffolding is heavily dependent on verbal instruction and is thus not necessarily equally effective in all cultures and in all learning situations. Finally, it is still unknown whether a child's ZPD can be compared to different learning domains, such as 'remembering' and 'applying'.

Within the UK, there appears to be a shift away from mastering bodies of knowledge into the cultivation of transferable capabilities for real-life learning (Claxton and Lucas 2009). This is why the social cultural perspective becomes increasingly important- 'as these skills cannot be taught to trained directly through instruction' (Wells and Claxton 2006). Numerous skills that most adults want their children to acquire are learned primarily from being around people who demonstrate them (Claxton and Lucas 2009). The tools and attitudes learned allow children to express their development. This is not achieved by creating new programmes or adopting pedagogical styles, however by attention to the values and assumptions of culture. The current set up of classrooms may in fact deprive students from opportunities to develop their own resourcefulness.

## References

- Claxton, G., Lucas, B. (2009). *School as a foundation for lifelong learning: The implications of a lifelong learning perspective for the re-imagining of school-age education*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Gergan, K. J., Gergan, M. M. (1991). *Toward reflexive methodologies*.
- Miller, R. (2011). *Vygotsky in perspective*. Cambridge university press.
- Piaget, J. (1936). *Origins of intelligence in the child*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. Oxford university press.
- Trowler, P. (2008). *Cultures and change in higher education: Theories and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wells, G., Claxton, G. (Eds.). (2006). *Learning for Life in the 21st Century: Sociocultural Perspectives on the Future of Education*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.