THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT AS A
STRATEGICALLY MEDIATED ENCOUNTER WITH ALTERITY

Implications for Teachers and Teacher Educators

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Abstract

This paper begins by examining the emergence of Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as a ‘working hypothesis’ that he used to deal with the problem of the relationship between instruction and development. The article then argues for the implicit connection of the ZPD with other Vygotskian notions such as ‘internalisation’ and ‘semiotic mediation’, and attempts to highlight the dialectical philosophy that underpins it. After surveying a range of interpretations of the ZPD that exist in the neo-Vygotskian literature, a way of thinking about the ZPD is presented that recasts it as a ‘strategically mediated encounter with alterity’ by teasing out a sociological reading of the zone. It is argued that thinking about the ZPD in this way allows us to speculate about possible outcomes of the encounter with alterity, and the important role of teachers and teacher educators in providing mediational tools to support a transformational, rather than transactional outcome from any encounter with difference.

Introduction

Despite the fact that Vygotsky only discusses the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) on a small number of occasions in his voluminous writings, it has become his enduring contribution to educational psychology. Recent scholarship by Gillen (2000) challenges the reduction of Vygotsky’s work to the singular notion of the ZPD, arguing that deficient translations and influential secondary sources have given a significance to the concept that it is doubtful its author would have done. Proposed quite late in Vygotsky’s work, the ZPD appears to have been
originally advocated as a ‘working hypothesis’ aimed at resolving the problem of the relationship between instruction and development (Vygotsky, 1934:1997, pp. 181 & 222). However, it has been argued that the ZPD is best conceptualised “as a ‘connecting’ concept in Vygotsky’s theory” (Moll, 1990, p. 15), and as “an instantiation of Vygotsky’s general genetic law of development” (Wertsch, 1984, p. 12). Whether we side with those who are critical of the emphasis placed on the ZPD in the exegetic literature, or whether we too interpret the ZPD as having the potential to act as an over-arching concept that encapsulates Vygotsky’s key ideas, there is no denying its importance in the ever-growing body of neo-Vygotskian literature. In this paper, I present a sociological interpretation of the ZPD that highlight’s its potential use as a framework to inform the constitution of teachers through teacher education. I begin by anchoring my argument in a brief examination of the ZPD as it emerges in Vygotsky’s translated works, and attempt to demonstrate its implicit connection with notions such as ‘internalisation’ and ‘semiotic mediation’, and its relationship with a philosophy that has its roots in the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic. I then survey a range of interpretations of the zone that exist in the neo-Vygotskian literature as a prelude to teasing out a sociological reading of the zone. Arguing for a broad definition of zone interlocutors, and posing a more critical view of development, I argue that the ZPD may be interpreted as a ‘strategically mediated encounter with alterity’. It is argued that thinking about the ZPD in this way allows us to speculate about possible outcomes of the encounter with alterity, and the important role of teachers and teacher educators in providing mediational tools to support a transformational, rather than transactional outcome from any encounter with the other, difference, or alterity.

The Zone of Proximal Development: Vygotsky’s ‘Working Hypothesis’

According to Vygotsky, the activities of instruction (Vygotsky, 1934:1997), and play (Vygotsky, 1978), are both capable of creating a ZPD. While he used the ZPD concept to explore the role of play in development, it was in the context of refuting three alternative positions on the relationship between teaching/learning and development that he first proposed the ZPD as “a new and exceptionally important concept without which the issue cannot be resolved” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). In the elaboration of his argument, Vygotsky (1934:1997) concluded that “Instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development”, effectively awakening “a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation”, but not yet fully matured (p. 212).
Practically, this meant instruction is most effective when pitched beyond what a student can currently do alone, but at a level determined by what they are capable of doing in collaboration with others. Vygotsky (1934:1997) suggests that “this difference between the child’s actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult, defines the zone of proximal development” (p. 209). This echoes his oft quoted definition from *Mind in Society*, which suggests that the ZPD is:

[T]he distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

The ZPD hypothesis allowed Vygotsky (1978) to claim that “when we determine a child’s mental age by using tests, we are almost always dealing with the actual developmental level” (p. 85), that is, with *completed* rather than *potential* development; and that good instruction is predicated on working within a child’s ZPD, the field of potential ‘awakened’ through their interaction with others. Wertsch (1984) would seem to be correct then, when he argues that the ZPD instantiates Vygotsky’s more general ‘genetic law of development’ which states:

Every function in the cultural development of the child comes on stage twice… first in the social, later in the psychological, first in relations between people as an interpsychological category, afterwards within the child as an intrapsychological category. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 163)

Vygotsky underscores the close connection between his genetic law and the ZPD hypothesis, when he argues during a discussion of the zone that “what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1934:1997, p. 211). We can gloss this by saying that what is in the zone of proximal development today, will be an aspect of completed development tomorrow.

Vygotsky uses the term “internalisation” to describe the exact mechanism for this developmental shift. Although debates have raged over what Vygotsky actually meant by the term, many
contemporary scholars are happy to interpret it as a synonym for “appropriation” (for a detailed discussion of the debate see Daniels, 2001). As Shotter (1993) notes, Vygotsky never explicitly stated whether he meant internalization to be understood as:

[A] merely cognitive process, in which what was at first inside only the adult’s head is transferred into the child’s head, or… a process in which things which at first a child only does spontaneously and unselfconsciously, under the control of an adult, come under the control of the child’s own personal agency. (Shotter, 1993, p. 112)

Certainly it would seem that Leont’ev (cited in Wertsch & Stone, 1985) makes a significant contribution to this debate when he states that “the process of internalization is not the transferral of an external activity to a pre-existing internal ‘plane of consciousness’; it is the process in which this plane is formed”. A generous reading of Vygotsky suggests that internalisation refers to the appropriation of social/public practices as personal/private practices. However, we should not understand ‘appropriation’ as simply ‘adoption’. Vygotsky goes to great lengths to describe the complexity of the process by which children come to regulate their own behaviour through the development of inner speech. He makes the claim in a paper co-authored with his close colleague, Alexander Luria that:

[T]he greatest change in child development occurs when this socialized speech, previously addressed to the adult, is turned to himself, when instead of appealing to the experimentalist with a plan for the solution of the problem, the child appeals to himself. (Vygotsky & Luria, 1930:1994, p. 119)

This re-direction of the speech function is not direct imitation, but the appropriation of the regulatory and problem-solving functions of language as they have occurred in the social context, as a form of creative self-regulation. Levina (1981) clearly articulates a similar view when she asserts that “Vygotsky said that speech does not include within itself the magical power to create intellectual functioning. It acquires this capacity only through being used in its instrumental capacity” (my emphasis) (p. 296). It should not be surprising then, to find Vygotsky arguing that "we become ourselves through others" (Vygotsky, 1966, p. 43). As Wood (1989) notes, the
development of our higher order cognitive processes is predicated on our appropriation of "practices of self-regulation that are… derivatives of the instructional [read ‘social’] process itself" (p. 61). The internalization process is not therefore, about a shift of some epistemological substance from the outside to the inside, but about an increasing participation of an individual in the social practices and regulatory discourses of their community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The ‘internalization’ or ‘appropriation’ of speech as a self-regulatory instrument leads to the second important concept instantiated in the notion of the ZPD, ‘semiotic mediation’. According to Vygotsky (1978), “the essence of sign use consists in man’s affecting behaviour through signs” (p. 54). In their investigations of the development of higher psychological processes in children, Vygotsky & Luria (1930:1994) remarked that “the child mastered the external situation by first mastering itself and organizing its own behaviour” (p. 122). This organization of behaviour involves the self-regulatory use of cultural tools and signs, or in other words, the direction of one’s behaviour through inner speech. It should be noted that semiotic mediation goes beyond the use of words and symbols, to include diagrams, maps, mnemonic devices, and other instruments that have the potential to re-shape or reorganize activity (Vygostky, 1981).

At this point, it is enough to say that the generation of a ZPD requires semiotic mediation. When we collaborate with others, our interaction is mediated by non-verbal symbols such as pointing, as well as more abstract sign systems such as speaking and writing. The link between semiotic mediation and the ZPD is made clear when we consider that the mediating artefact itself, and not just the ‘more capable’ other, is involved in the ‘awakening’ of a person’s ZPD. For example, learning to ‘count on’ when performing addition may initially be impossible for a student at a certain stage of their mathematical understanding. However, using a ruler they can start at the first number in the algorithm and ‘count on’ to the value of the second number. The point that they arrive at on the ruler is the answer to the addition problem that they were unable to solve without the mediation of the ruler. The process of using the ruler as a mediating artefact may only need to be modelled once. The predictable effect of using the ruler as a mediator, is that the student will gain awareness of the concept of ‘counting on’, and will come to be able to do this for themselves, without the use of the mediating artefact. Having assisted in the appropriation of the desired concept, the tool ceases to be useful, as a developmental leap will have taken place making the tool, at least in this case, redundant.
I think it is now possible to argue that although it appears that Vygotsky never explicitly stated that there was a link between the ZPD, internalisation, and semiotic mediation – at least in existent English translations of his work – these concepts are critical to any thorough explication of the ZPD. Vygotsky’s strategic references to Hegel, Engels and Marx throughout his discussion of the relationship between instruction and development, evident in the most recent translation of his critical work, *Thinking and Speech*, remind the reader that his approach to solving this problematic was also heavily influenced by dialectical philosophy. Read with Vygotsky’s dialecticism in mind, the ZPD may be argued to describe how tension between the thesis (the current developmental level) and the antithesis (the potential developmental level) are resolved through synthesis (bridged in the ZPD through appropriative activity or the self-regulatory use of semiotic tools). Read in this way, the ZPD has explanatory power beyond resolving the relationship between instruction and development, and clearly has the potential to operate as a ‘connecting’ concept for Vygotsky’s ideas as Moll (1990) has suggested. Reading the ZPD as a dialectic links it much more strongly with Vygotsky’s discussion of mediation, in which he argues that the relationship between the subject (self) and object (other/world) is mediated through the use of tools and signs (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, the difference between the self (representing the current developmental level) and the other (signifying the potential or desired developmental level) is bridged through the supportive deployment of cultural tools and signs. This leads us to the assertion that mediating artefacts are critical to the generation of a ZPD, not just the interaction with more capable others. However, before I explore this further, I want to highlight what has been said about the ZPD in the neo-Vygotskian literature.

**Neo-Vygotskian Interpretations of the ZPD**

According to Del Rio & Alvarez (1995) two distinct interpretations of the ZPD can be located in the exegetic literature. Psychologists, they argue, usually envisage the ZPD “as a frontier area of the potential for psychological functional development, individual and internal” (Del Rio & Alvarez, 1995, p. 392); while sociologists, anthropologists and other cultural workers frequently conceptualize the zone “as a physical and spatial area, as well as a social and instrumental one, in which... development is produced externally in the ambit of mediations accessible to the subject” (emphasis in the original, Del Rio & Alvarez, 1995, p. 393). This distinction is instructive. Where the ZPD is depicted as an attribute of an individual – a personal developmental
potential – the pedagogical role of social factors is downplayed. This view takes seriously Vygotsky’s (1934:1997) allusion to ‘sensitive periods’ in development, constructs the zone as a diagnosable developmental potential or ‘readiness’, and downplays the dialectical philosophy that underpins the ZPD concept. At its extreme, this view of the ZPD suggests that we are all walking around with quantifiable zones of potential, ready to take advantage of instruction pitched at the periphery of our ability. Such a view constructs the ZPD as a cognitive artefact of an individual entity, abstracted from the socio-historical context. It remains a dominant interpretation of the ZPD in much of the literature that seeks to appropriate Vygotsky within the cognitivist paradigm.

In contrast to this reductive, individualistic interpretation of the zone, one can also find it described metaphorically in the literature as “a social space, a space for interrelationship” (Lima, 1995, p. 448); “a construction zone” in which knowledge is co-constructed by participants (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989); and as a crucible in which “culture and cognition create each other” (Cole, 1985). In these interpretations, the ZPD is better understood as a sociocultural artefact of a collective, rather than a psychological artefact of an individual (Hedegaard, 1990). Going even further, Engestrom (1987) asserts that the ZPD is the “distance between the everyday actions of individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity” (p. 174), highlighting not only the transformativity of zone activity, but its cultural/historical significance. If we adopt this view of the ZPD, then the interlocutors or community formed by the zone participants, semiotic tools, and socio-historical context, are conceptualised as forming a unitary functional system in which meaning is negotiated, and undergoing historical change. Consequently, any attempt to ascribe development retrospectively to a single element of the system attempts to reduce that which cannot be reduced, the dialectical unity of development, the ZPD (Newman & Holzman, 1993).

It is probable that the conceptualisation of the zone as a cultural artefact, or social relationship, owes more to a wide reading of Vygotsky - particularly his discussions of the relationship between the self and the other, and the recognition of his underlying dialectical philosophy - rather than his explicit references to the ZPD. It is clear that Vygotsky saw the process of development as resulting from a dialectical or formative encounter between the self and other/s. In *The genesis of higher mental functions*, Vygotsky (1981) insists that “it is through others that we develop into ourselves” (p. 161). Valsiner and Van Der Veer (1988, 2000) have thoroughly
documented Vygotsky’s indebtedness to thinkers such as Baldwin, who Vygotsky (cited in Valsiner & Van Der Veer, 1988) says “was right to note that the child’s concept of ‘I’ develops out of the concept of others”. Further, Wertsch’s (1991, 1998) important work linking Vygotsky with his contemporary, Bakhtin, has gone a long way to showing the importance of the social in the emergence of ‘mind’. Clearly, the relationship between self and other forms an important aspect of Vygotsky’s conceptualization of learning and development.

Shepel (1995) supports the view that the relationship between the self and the other underpins Vygotsky’s work when he depicts the ZPD as a tension between the real (a person’s actual developmental level) and the ideal (their desired developmental level). Litowitz (1997, p. 482) echoes such sentiments, arguing that “the motivation cannot be mastery of the other’s skill but to be the other by means of mastery of the skill” (my emphasis). In each of these cases, the ZPD is generated within a relationship constituted by the real and the ideal, by an individual’s desire to be a ‘head taller’ than they are now (Vygotsky, 1934:1997). However, it is also possible that simply treating people as if they are other than what they are now awakens a ZPD from the outside. This seems to be the case that Holzman (1995) is concerned with, when she asserts that the paradigmatic ZPD is one in which a parent (significant other) responds to a baby’s babbles as being meaningful, thus constructing them as a speaking subject.

In this section I have attempted to sketch two broad approaches to understanding the ZPD locatable in conversations within the contemporary international educational community. I have argued that the ZPD may be interpreted as an individual’s diagnosable developmental potential; or alternatively, as a social relationship or cultural space, in which appropriation of social practice drives development. It has been argued that a thorough understanding of the zone is only possible when Vygotsky is read widely, his discussion of development is placed in the context of his dialectical philosophy, and the ZPD is linked with the concepts of internalisation and semiotic mediation. Having surveyed the field, and established the most notable conceptualizations of the zone, I will now move to highlight an often overlooked dimension of the ZPD, with a view to assessing its usefulness as a concept to guide the practice of teacher education.
Encountering Alterity

Portrayals of the ZPD in the pedagogical literature frequently centre on the role of the ‘more capable other’ in scaffolding the learning of the tutee. This depiction of the process of development owes a lot to the individualistic interpretation of the ZPD discussed earlier. Such a portrayal constructs ‘the other’ around a literal reading of Vygotsky, and while largely superseded by depictions of the zone that describe more egalitarian processes of ‘co-construction’, is still the most common reading of the ZPD in educational textbooks. In this section I want to problematize this prevalent reading of the zone by arguing for a much broader notion of ‘the other’ in conceptualisations of the ZPD. I do this with full awareness that my own reading of the ZPD is also limited, due to the problem of reading Vygotsky’s works exclusively in translation; and with an awareness that the unrealised possibility of the zone that I wish to highlight, will by virtue of its emphasis, downplay other important aspects and readings of the ZPD. However, despite the inevitable partiality of the interpretation I present, it is I think, justified by its usefulness as a tool for rethinking certain aspects of the pedagogy of teacher education.

Although many interpretations of the ZPD restrict themselves to discussions of parent-child, teacher-student, or peer-peer interactions, I am interested in the effects of broadening the definition of participants in the zone. Just as the child can appropriate the more sophisticated strategies of an adult as a result of their interaction, so too can their encounter with literature, film or art have consequences for their behaviour, subjectivity or identity that could be considered developmental. Although in some passages Vygotsky may have seemed to have limited ‘the other’ to more capable peers or adults, this surely must be read as a consequence of his attempting to deal with the very specific problematic of the relationship between instruction (involving a teacher) and development. On the other hand, if we interpret this “other” in the ZPD rather broadly, as not only a physical other, but as a textual or conceptual other, as well as a non-physical ideal other, implicit in Vygotsky’s discussions of the role of play in creating a ZPD, then the range of developmental opportunities increases. This is clear if we use the term ‘difference’ or ‘alterity’ as a synonym for ‘the other’. While the meaning of ‘difference’ may appear transparent, its everyday and specific sociological connotations are both implied. Likewise, derived from the same root as ‘alternative’, the word alterity not only implies ‘the other’, but also ‘alternatives’. Thus, any encounter with difference or alterity offers at least the opportunity for developmental
change, particularly where ‘development’ is conceptualised as a rhizoid process (after Deleuze & Guattari, 1980); as having the potential to veer off in a multitude of directions. In order to assist the reader, for the most part the term alterity will be used herein, however with the understanding that it can be interchanged with ‘the other’ or ‘difference’ with similar effects.

In claiming that the encounter with alterity is potentially developmental, I certainly don’t want to suggest that it always results in what we might term ‘development’. It is clear that when encountered, the other as alterity is often resisted, rejected and even subject to oppression in a variety of forms (Young, 1990). However, by adopting a broad definition of the other, we can extend our construction of the ZPD in such a way that it provides us with a ‘handle’ on the pedagogical relation itself. Not only is the ZPD generated when a child interacts with ‘an adult or more capable peer’ (Vygotsky, 1978), but whenever there is an encounter with alterity, that offers the opportunity for becoming something other than who you are now, as a consequence of challenging your existing way of being. Vygotsky’s attempt to uncover the process of development thus reveals the moment of pedagogical transformation, in which an encounter with alterity drives development.

Something we must consider in conceptualising the ZPD in this way, is the fact that “we cannot encounter the other without interpreting or judging it in some way” (Falzon, 1998, p. 74). This is extremely important for teachers and teacher educators to consider. It is not enough to expect that simply facilitating an ‘encounter with alterity’ will result in a developmental transformation of our students (or student teachers). In other words, it is not enough to provide students with a feminist or indigenous perspective on a set of well-known historical events, and expect them to simply accept the new version of the past. When they ‘encounter’ this new history, there are just as likely to reject it as accept it. This can be demonstrated via a number of examples that highlight four possible results of the encounter with alterity, for students, student teachers, and even whole societies. However, it must be noted that these are speculative results of an inquiry that has been philosophical, rather than empirical in nature. They also pose the question to what extent are these just outcomes of the encounter with alterity, and to what extent are they actual approaches to dealing with alterity? This remains to be answered. The four possible encounters with alterity in our thought experiment are as follows:
A student (or student teacher) may, when faced with alterity, choose to act in the way predicted by Vygostkian theory, appropriating the new, and becoming something other than who they are now. This manifests when, having had essay writing modelled for them, students are able to appropriate the techniques and strategies of expository writing, and produce their own well-formed essay. In teacher education, it is evident in the teaching practice of a pre-service teacher who is able to scaffold the literacy development of their own students during a professional experience opportunity, because they have witnessed good practice in their course at the academy (either from their lecturers, supervisors or peers). On a societal level, this is evident in the encounter between cultures through which technologies that change social practices are exchanged, thus transforming one or both societies.

Certainly, alterity can be actively resisted, leading to the possibility of a rejection of the other. This can be seen in the behaviour of the student who chooses to hurl abuse at the teacher rather than participate in a group activity. It can also be identified as the reaction of the student teacher who simply refuses to acknowledge the significance of learning sociology, since it appears to them to have little to do with pedagogy. At the societal level, it can sometimes involve a violent rejection of the other, such as might be witnessed in the ethnic cleansing that has occurred recently in the Balkans and Iraq, or in Nazi Germany during WWII; or it may manifest in subtle forms of homophobia for example.

During the encounter with alterity, it is also possible that ‘the other’ may be romanticised, making alterity a fetish. In this case, addiction, commodification, or obsession, rather than development is likely to be the consequence. This is evident in the behaviour of the student who becomes obsessed with one area or topic of the curriculum, and ignores all else to their detriment. In teacher education, it describes the reaction of the pre-service teacher on practicum, for example, who believes girls are always well behaved, and boys always disruptive, or who expects that Asian students are always smarter than everyone else in maths, and treats individuals from each grouping accordingly. At the societal level, this may be seen in the ‘orientalist’ attitude of Europe during the age of colonialism, well documented by Edward Said, where the East was rarely discussed without its ‘mystic’ or ‘exotic’ epithet.
• Finally, the other may be denied its alterity, and simply rendered the same. This is evident in the behaviour of the student for whom all novels or maths problems have become the same old hat, things we already know. In teacher education, it is evident when the pre-service teacher ignores subtle differences in strategic knowledge offered to them in curriculum subjects because they believe they did something similar with another lecturer. At a societal level, the rendering of the other as the same means that it is the other who must change and not oneself. Rather than resulting in an opportunity for development, this experience of alterity assimilates it, often in an apparent democratic desire to see all people as the same. Needless to say, this result of the encounter with alterity is evident in many of the pre-war (and post-war) social policies that encouraged the assimilation of immigrants and Australia’s indigenes into ‘white society’, which was perceived as the way to offer them the same opportunities.

I have explored these four possible encounters with alterity to underscore the necessity of recognizing that it is not enough to simply let the ZPD operate as an unmediated encounter with alterity. Not all encounters, as we have seen, lead to development. What is missing from this definition is the notion that the ZPD must be a ‘mediated encounter with alterity’. However, the seeming contradiction here is that each of the four results of the encounter with alterity identified above, are already in some sense the effect of a ‘mediation’ by commitments to developmental, exclusionary, romantic or egalitarian ideals. However, as a teacher or teacher educator, we do not want our students simply applying their own existing ‘mediational means’ to every encounter with alterity, since there is no essential reason for it to result in transformation (of perspective or practice). Thus, we need to pedagogize the ZPD by conceptualising it as ‘a strategically mediated encounter with alterity’. That is to say, as teachers and teacher educators, we need to support the development of our students by strategically providing them with the ‘cognitive’, ‘disciplinary’ or ‘cultural tools’ they need in the encounter with alterity, so that the results of their interaction are more likely to be developmental or transformational. Thinking about the ZPD in this way reminds us of the important role played by the mediating artefacts we provide for our students in order to ensure a developmental outcome from their interaction with ‘the other’, whether the other is conceptualised as person, text or ideal. Without the strategic use of an appropriate mediating tool, the encounter with alterity may not result in development. In fact, it is my argument that it is the mediating tool that is critical in determining if the encounter with alterity will result in rejection,
assimilation, romanticization, or developmental appropriation of ‘the other’. It is the strategically applied mediating tool, which transforms an encounter with alterity into a ZPD. Without the strategic deployment of the mediating artefact by the teacher, there is no guarantee that the encounter with alterity will be a pedagogical one. In fact, the interaction with alterity may simply be transactional rather than transformational; or worse, the interlocutors may already have in place highly problematic forms of mediation, so that alterity is (and alternatives are) rejected outright, objectified, or rendered insignificant by being perceived as the known.

I conclude by suggesting that reading the ZPD as a strategically mediated encounter with alterity has important implications for teacher education. If we perceive our role as teacher educators as one of producing teachers who are committed to intellectual quality and social justice, then the mediating artefacts we provide for students become highly significant. It is not enough, if this speculative reading of the outcomes of the encounter with alterity is correct, to simply offer students a film to watch or text to read (whether factual or fictional), and expect that they will get the message of the text. Further still, we cannot assume that having understood the message of the text, that it will transform their social practice (including their way of thinking) in any way. The only ‘handle’ we have on increasing the odds that the encounter will be transformational, is to provide the students with some kind of tool, device, framework, or set of skills through which to examine the text. Of course, there is no guarantee that your mediational tools will not also be treated as an ‘other’, and thus subjected to the same possible reactions to alterity already discussed. However, not providing the tool ensures that existing mediational means will be deployed.

Another implication that is probably less evident from our thought experiment, is that the greater the alterity, the greater the need for new mediating tools as ‘scaffolds’ for bridging the gap between the student and that which is radically other for them. What this suggests, is that the mediating artefact itself either generates, or does not generate a ZPD, a zone of potential that extends to connect with the other. Thus, it is probably a logical conclusion from the discussion in this paper, that what we have as a result of the mediating effects of a cultural tool is not just zones of potential, but also zones of abjection/rejection, zones of idealization/romanticisation, and zones of neutralization/assimilation. Different types of mediational means then, are likely to produce
different types of ‘zones’. This is an argument in teaching and teacher education for a strategic use of mediational tools, in whatever form they take (rules, conditions, roles, tools).

Although I have not suggested in this paper what mediating tools might be employed to ensure developmental outcomes from the encounter with alterity, the speculative theory presented, offers the suggestion that it is at the level of the mediational artefact or tool that the teacher or teacher educator will have the greatest success in effecting the outcome of any encounter their students have with alterity. This would seem to be particularly true where an aspect of the outcome is some transformation of attitude or social practice. I have also not addressed the literature on hermeneutics, though there is certainly a hermeneutic dimension to the ZPD and the encounter with alterity as conceptualised here. The potential for reading the ZPD hermeneutically is an area of interest that I intend pursuing in another context. Where the particular conception and necessarily partial interpretation of the ZPD might lead us is uncertain. However it arguably describes the pedagogical moment itself, in which a strategically mediated encounter with the other transforms the student or student-teacher. It may well be that this particular interpretation of the ZPD, and the four responses to alterity that are suggested in this paper, could form a heuristic device that might guide a more empirical investigation of the ZPD. Certainly the possibility is there for it to inform a sociologically sensitive Vygotskian pedagogy, that sees the other not as simply a more capable mind in society, but recognizes the other, difference and alterity as providing an opportunity for development.

References


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