Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work

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Review

Littleton, K. and Mercer, N. (2013). *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work*. Abingdon: Routledge.

    Many researchers and educators writing about sociocultural theory have thought about Vygotsky's deservedly famous idea about the development of children's thinking and learning:

> Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition….(Vygotsky, 1981: 163)

    Latterly, researchers such as Mercer (2000) have preferred to make use of intermental (for interpsychological) and intramental (for intrapsychological). This is more than an issue of translation; if the 1981 terms are persisted with, we would have the paradox that psychology is implicitly restricted to the individual, at the very point where Vygotsky wanted to stress the foundational role of social interaction.

    Yet, as Littleton and Mercer point out in their new book, the traditional stress on the individual, whether in psychology, or education, where both are put together in educational psychology, lastingly persists. Even where interest does lie in processes of collaborative learning, this is usually deployed in the service of investigating the subsequent achievements and understandings of the individual. This book takes a different tack, investigating collaborative talk in the pursuit of collective intellectual endeavour, a process they call "interthinking." It is convincingly demonstrated that however surprising it may be, this topic has received little treatment in sociocultural research.

This elegantly written book draws attention to some historical reasons underlying the relative neglect of this concept. For example, in discussing theories of evolutionary psychology Littleton and Mercer point out that it is generally agreed that one very important capacity underlying the development of humankind is that of understanding a situation from another person's point of view (whether or not this idea takes the form of "theory of mind").   However, this sensible hypothesis is far more frequently recruited into explanations of competition and individualised pursuit of specific goals rather than investigations into people working together for common goals.

This is just one of the ways in which psychology's traditional interest in the individual mind has operated, steering psychologists, linguists, educationalists and others away from a focus on collective thinking. Yet the need to examine how people can use language to work together effectively in groups can never have been more vital. Littleton and Mercer draw on many years' practical work with teachers, encouraging them to understand different forms of collective talk. Based itself on extensive research and convincing analyses, they identify cumulative, disputational and exploratory types of talk, showing carefully how effective discourses can be fostered. Again building on much previous work the authors explain the usefulness of agreeing ground rules to underpin productive group discussion.

Language then is at the heart of their endeavour, and in my view it is helpful, although not perhaps vital, that Littleton and Mercer describe their approach to analysing discourse as sociocultural discourse analysis (SCDA). Very likely "discourse analysis" as a term has perhaps become too broad an umbrella term to remain useful. Littleton and Mercer propose that the characteristics of SCDA are interests in:

- how common knowledge is constructed over time;
- how language is deployed in the pursuit of a shared goal;
- the cultural and historical knowledge that participants draw upon.

They combine quantitative and qualitative techniques including fascinating transcripts of data from diverse domains. Apart from the central and expected focus on classroom talk there are insights from other domains of activity such as jazz musicians rehearsing together. Data is carefully situated so that we understand enough of participants' cultural understandings, institutional framings and goals to benefit fully from the analyses. A strength of the book is that communication among people is not

presented as if occurring in overly simplified environments; on the contrary technologies are often shown to be involved as mediational.

The book is written in an accessible style. The authors have pulled off the wonderful trick of presenting a genuinely innovative framework of understanding in a lucid, elegant manner. This is a cleverly interwoven contribution to theory and practice.

References

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Vygotsky, L.S. (1981). The genesis of higher mental functions. In J.V. Wertsch (Ed.), *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology* (pp. 134-143). Armonk, NY: Sharpe.

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