

Bruner vs. Vygotsky: An Analysis of Divergent Theories

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to list the similarities and differences, in addition to analyzing the divergent theoretical perspectives of Jerome Bruner and Lev Vygotsky. The paper will introduce the context of each theorist's writings; discuss their major influences on cognitive psychology; and compare and contrast their main points of agreement and disagreement. In conclusion, I will use my current online course entitled *GIS101 – The Foundation*, developed with Bruner theories as a foundation, as a mechanism to compare the divergent and convergent strategies of each theorist.

Cognitive Learning Theorists

Bruner

Jerome Bruner believed that learning is an active process that it requires learners to develop their own ideas or knowledge, using their current or prior knowledge as a catalyst (Greg, 1994-2003). The major influence on his research was the cognitive theorist Jean Piaget. Much of Piaget's research was linked to child development theory and Bruner followed much in the same vein.

Bruner stated that an instructional theory should address four (4) major aspects. His first point was that instruction must be concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the student willing and able to learn (Bruner, 1966). A student must have a predisposition to learn, otherwise, instruction is cannot be maximized in a cognitive manner. Learning must come from within and a lack of self motivation would doom a student to failure without modification to the instruction.

In the second aspect, Bruner talks about instruction that must be designed so that it can be easily grasped by the student (Bruner, 1966). If instruction cannot be synthesized by the student, then the instruction is essentially worthless. Bruner called this aspect a “spiral organization”. Bruner's "spiral" curriculum was designed to teach students the ideal structure of the "content" organized by tasks that return to previously learned topics (Ross, 2003). Thereby learning continually building on itself.

Bruner goes on to explain that instruction should be designed to facilitate extrapolation and or fill in the gaps (Bruner, 1966). It is extremely important that the instruction require students to think “outside of the box”. Students need to go beyond the information that they have been given to extrapolate meaning and a thorough understanding of the concepts.

Finally, good methods for structuring knowledge should result in simplification, a generation of new propositions, and increasing the manipulation of information (Bruner, 1966). This would require students to get to the greatest “common denominator”, create new ideas and manipulate the information to satisfy and support their position within the context of an assignment. As a result the student develops a true understanding and reasoning skills are enhanced.

Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky's theories linked closely with Piaget and Bruner. Vygotsky theorized that cognitive development is limited to a certain range at any given age. That is, every function within a child's cultural development takes place on two planes. First the child socializes to gain the knowledge then he/she internalize the results (Vygotsky, 1978 p. 57). Children observe actions in a social environment; determine, based on prior knowledge, whether these actions are appropriate and then internalize the knowledge for future use.

Vygotsky's also theorized that full cognitive development required social interaction. His theory stated that learning is limited to a time span which he called "zone of proximal development" or ZPD. He stated that full development during the ZPD had to be done in a social setting. Therefore, children's knowledge, and acquisition of knowledge, is tied to exposure to social settings.

Similarities

The research of Jerome Bruner, while being in direct continuity with Piaget, is only linked to Vygotsky through their insistence that there is no separation between the mental and the social aspects of growth.

The similarity, while obscure, appears in Bruner's belief that learning is an active process that it requires learners to develop their own ideas or knowledge, using their current or prior knowledge as a catalyst (Greg, 1994-2003). Therefore, if you take Vygotsky's position that full cognitive development required social interaction, it can be said that socialization will lead to an increased level of knowledge because students will formulate their own reactions to the social interaction.

Differences

There is one significant difference between Bruner and Vygotsky. Bruner believes that students learn better if they acquire the information themselves using active participation, with "scaffolded" interaction and the teacher giving support at the right time. Vygotsky on the other hand, falling short of saying that students should never acquire information independently, believed that problems occurred when teachers left too much for the student to do independently. He felt that students learned better through assisted learning, or guide participation through conversations and interactions with people (Reis, n.d.)

Critical Analysis of Divergent Theoretical Perspectives

When I started developing my Web Classroom, I concentrated on designing the classes with Bruner's philosophy of student directed learning in mind (Dastous, 2004). I have found that students have a fear of thinking for themselves. This is a result of Vygotskian philosophy.

Vygotsky indicated that students working in small or large groups, using the assisted learning technique were much better served. Many students, in my 10 years of teaching experience, far too often have been "spoon-fed" the curriculum and not made to think for themselves because of this philosophy.

While guidance is most assuredly necessary, students must learn to create an understanding of the concepts, subsequently internalizing the processes that are necessary to solve the problems at hand.

If I had created my Web Classroom from the Vygotskian perspective, I would have spent very much time going over materials with students that already understand the materials; a waste of time. Now it is possible for me to interject instruction for those who actually need it, while allowing those that understand the material to press on.

Conclusion

While Bruner and Vygotsky followed in Piaget's cognitive footsteps, it is apparent that they have varying view points. Most specifically, Bruner believes that students who are exposed to self-directed learning, while making available the opportunity for "at the right time" support, provides a very positive learning environment.

Conversely, Vygotsky believed that allowing the student too much free time to work was not a good idea. He believed that "assisted learning" or what essentially equates to direct instruction, with a great deal of social interaction (Q & A sessions, etc.) is a better form of instruction.

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