Why Reflect? And Where the Heck is My Grade!

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Assessment is one of the primary responsibilities of English teachers. Developing effective strategies for assessing the quality of student work is one of the most problematic issues we face. Emotional and intellectual development occurs at different rates; one student’s best work might be of lesser “quality,” less perfect than another’s, but still the student’s best work at her functioning ability level. Is it fair, proper, or even pedagogically sound to assess students as if they are the same? As is true of many aspects of teaching, assessment is too often approached without a theoretical grounding. Consideration must be given to concerns about management, record keeping, “fairness,” and documentation. Driven by pragmatism and respect for the experiences of their mentors, early career teachers often simply adopt procedures used by their colleagues and find the task of wedding progressive educational theory and conventional practices difficult. Rea-Dickins & Gardner raise questions about how teachers use formative assessments to improve teaching and learning; the authors call for a “theory of praxis” (2000) through which specific criteria could complement the existing theoretical base with another that draws on actual teacher knowledge.

Vygotskian theory, especially an understanding of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), offers an optimistic perspective for a generative approach to classroom instruction and assessment. Black and Wiliam (1998) posit, “opportunities for pupils to express their understanding should be designed into any piece of teaching, for this will initiate the interaction whereby formative assessment aids learning” (The evolution of effective teaching section, par. 3). Through this reflection process, students are given an avenue to “initiate this interaction” and formative assessment in the English classroom (compositions) become learning aids, instead of means to punctuate and evaluate progress.
Reflection in AP Language & Composition

The center of my research was to shift the focus of learning from “delivering information to the student to building the student’s learning potential” (Kozulin, 1998, p. 154). Reflection is an effective aid in developing students’ learning potential in that it bridges the “gap” between formative assessments and human mediations based on the teacher’s assessment of effective remediation processes for each individual student. Through reflection, not only can we, as teachers, understand the metaphorical developmental zones of each student, but also the student gains a greater and greater capacity to self-regulate and experiencing one’s self as an agent who is contributing to the process of writing.

Grounding Theory in Practice and Practice in Theory

Through his experimental research and theoretical writing during the 1960s, Lev Vygotsky, Russian psychologist and school teacher, made significant contributions to establishing a valid psychological explanation of the process of children’s cognitive development. He observed and described the shift from a spontaneous to a scientific comprehension of the world, the shift that he describes as the movement from childlike to adult cognition. Kozulin (1998) expands Vygotsky’s explanation, contrasting empirical and theoretical concepts. An empirical understanding is built by direct observation; a theoretical understanding is formed by moving beyond the immediate sensory experience. A solid theory of any phenomena rests on a systematic exploration that results in the ability to make abstractions and to apply knowledge acquired through direct experience to situations not yet encountered.

Most of what teachers know about education comes from their direct experience, first as a student, then as an apprentice, and finally as a veteran. As I, the novice, became more
experienced, I established instructional and assessment practices that become the core of my individual teaching style and habits. The best pedagogy is always based on sound educational theory about how students learn best, and is directed toward assisting students to develop beyond their spontaneous, empirical experience to a scientific, conceptual understanding of curriculum content. If I, myself, have a solid conceptual mastery of teaching and learning, I will be better able to design appropriate instructional activities and engage in effectual assessment practices. In this way, theory can be applied to my practice, and practice can be grounded in theory that I have found sound and practically accessible within the boundaries of public classroom teaching.

*The ZPD as Instructional Space*

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as defined by Vygotsky, is the space between the child’s independent and mediated performance. To extend the metaphor, dynamic educational assessments (DA) aim to determine the size of that space and the student’s potential to move within the zone. If the measurements are accurate, instructional activities can be planned and implemented that are more likely to help students move forward. If instruction is *not* based on the learner’s ZPD, any resulting development will take place only on a “hit-or-miss” basis (Poehner, 2008). Teaching within the ZPD can provide a more systematic framework for
addressing each student’s capacity to improve his current level of achievement. Measures of independent performance, therefore, become an inadequate measure of future possibilities:

The potential for learning is an ever-shifting range of possibilities that are dependent on what the cultural novice already knows, the nature of the problem to be solved or the task to be learned, the activity structures in which learning takes place, and the quality of this person’s interaction with others. (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 2)

Of course, to teach in the ZPD, the teacher must have a great deal of information about her students. Unfortunately, classroom teachers rarely have the luxury of being given fully developed profiles of each student’s achievement and potential. Teachers often must begin with assumptions about a group of students based on aggregate data, or more frequently, on generalized benchmarks of expected achievement based on grade level. At the secondary school level, the practice of ability grouping or tracking (i.e., Advanced, College Prep, Vocational courses) also guides teachers’ expectations for their students’ learning potential. Only by careful observation can a teacher come to a more complete recognition or a more accurate determination of any individual student’s ZPD. The teacher must constantly monitor the child’s progress, providing the appropriate level of support at each step of the child’s growth. Evaluation becomes an integral element of instruction. Dixon-Krauss points out that “Vygotsky’s … definition of the zone entails an interdependent relationship between instruction and assessment.” (1996, p. 15, italics in original).

When an educator embraces Vygotsky’s principles, the natural consequence is a student-centered pedagogy. The teacher’s role becomes that of a facilitator or guide as teacher and student engage in collaborative activities designed to encourage the development of scientific
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concepts and independent performance. “Knowledge is not simply handed down from one to the other . . . . Meaning is … constructed through joint activity rather than being transmitted from teacher to learner.” (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 2). Daniels (2001) uses the way a child learns to read as an illustrative example. The teacher establishes the context and collaborates in the activity, but as the child’s ability develops, he moves toward reading independently.

It becomes clear that a teacher’s practice is insufficient when her objective is only to engage students in instruction that assumes a straightforward conveyance of information. Concept formation requires what Kozulin (1998) describes as a “prospective” education. His assertion is that “students should be capable of approaching problems that do not yet exist. To gain this ability, students should be oriented toward productive rather than reproductive knowledge.” (p. 154). Activities that assist the child to learn to use language well are by their very nature productive. Vygotsky placed a special emphasis on language as the key to human cognition. He “made explicit acknowledgement of the centrality of language as a semiotic tool through which individuals across developmental stages make sense of phenomena and solve problems. [Vygotsky’s] conception of the ZPD includes the use of language between novice and more expert others as a tool for mediating misconceptions and consolidating understandings” (Lee and Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 5). The use of language is a precondition for an increase in conceptual knowledge.

This issue is of special concern for literacy educators (i.e., English teachers). The task set before secondary English teachers is to help students develop and expand their use of language. The content base of English education can be described in terms of three major categories: language, writing, and literature. The first focus is on the control of the structures of written and spoken language. The second involves practice in the skillful production of original texts on the
part of the student. The third is the more traditional reading and studying canonical texts that define the culture. As students progress through formal schooling, the expectation is that they will comprehend grammatical structures, expand vocabulary, read with comprehension, and analyze literary texts at ever increasing levels of complexity. These goals can be achieved only if students develop a *conceptual* understanding of language in use. The superficial production and consumption of words will not prepare students to function at the sophisticated levels of abstraction and discrimination required to function to their fullest ability as they enter into adult life. For those who go on to further academic study, the need to internalize academic forms of writing and reading is imperative.

The comprehension and internalization of scientific concepts occurs through the use of psychological tools, “symbolic artifacts – signs, symbols, texts, formulae, graphic-symbolic devices – that help individuals master their own ‘natural’ psychological functions of perception, memory, attention, and so forth” (Kozulin, 1998, p. 1). Vygotsky (1981) described the use of psychological tools as the foundation of mature adult cognition. “By being included in the process of behavior, the psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions” (p. 137, cited in lecture notes, Poehner 1/22/09). Language is one of the major symbol systems through which children begin to function independently in the world; it is one of the most important of the psychological and cultural tools. In the context of formal schooling, the attainment of each student’s learning potential relies on his ability to utilize standard forms of language.

Vygotskian theory offers a very helpful perspective to educators for attaining this goal. Movement through the ZPD and the resulting increase in learning takes place during the interactions between the adult (teacher) and the child (student). This is an idiosyncratic process,
most effective in one-on-one interactions. In discussing optimal conditions in which cognitive modifiability (i.e., learning and development) takes place, Feuerstein and colleagues (1981) emphasize the centrality of the individual teacher’s role. The authors call for the return of educational decisions to the educator – at the same time, they recognize that this is an enormously labor-intensive process. They place the burden of deciding whether or not to make the necessary investment in any specific student on the teacher. Although teachers may embrace the theory, they are left to their own devices as they attempt to apply these concepts. The contexts in which teachers operate rarely afford them the professional autonomy or provide the administrative support for this depth of intervention. Despite these realities, dedicated teachers do try to serve their students well and invest a great deal time and energy to do so.

All good teaching is a form of mediation, though much of even the best classroom practice tends to be teacher- or subject-centered. A development-centered pedagogy demands close attention to learning potential, not just current achievement—and there exists an important distinction between the two. The ultimate goal is to sift the locus of control in the learning process from the teacher to the student. The teacher must provide the appropriate degree of support and feedback to help the student become more independent through increasing levels of self-regulation.

The level of support [provided by the adult] is thus contingent on the learner’s progress within the interaction between the tutor and the tutee. The tutor’s task is to seek to ensure progress whilst at the same time reducing the level of control. Ideally the learner actually decreases the level of dependence upon the support structure as the learning sequence progresses. (Daniels 2001, p. 109, italics added)
Although this reduction of dependence should ideally be the responsibility of the learner, the mediator also has a responsibility to gauge whether the learner is depending too much on him or her.

As Poehner (2008) explains, self-regulating human beings exhibit agency over their lives, and therefore decide whether or not to take action. In instructional settings, this is evident in the specific choices students make as to how much or how fully to participate in the offered mediation (instruction and/or evaluation). For example, they may ignore the teacher’s written feedback and decide not to make suggested revisions. They may refuse the invitation for individual conference sessions. The assumption that students are always willing participants in the instructional situation, that they welcome their teachers’ guidance, and that they will take on the challenge and guidance offered to improve their work is unfortunately not always valid. When this assumption does hold true and students are actively engaged in the process (which is also a form of student agency), the potential exists for the student to benefit from the mediation provided, to begin to self-regulate, and ultimately to internalize the concepts under study.

A traditional pedagogy in which the teacher is the most active member of the classroom does not generally result in the student taking responsibility for his own learning.

… internalization and appropriation models can be viewed in terms of active or passive roles for the individual . . . . This debate is played out in pedagogic theory in terms of an acquisition-transmission dimension. Transmission based pedagogies assume passivity where acquisition based pedagogies assume activity on the part of the learner. (Daniels 2001, p. 42)
To move from a transmission based toward an acquisition based pedagogy is more likely if the teacher makes instructional decisions within a solidly grounded theory of human cognitive development.

Evaluation for Development

In practical terms, teachers’ evaluations of students generally occur at that end of a learning cycle, a unit of study, or a set of activities. The application of Vygotskian theory to classroom practices suggests that assessments that take place during instruction can provide better opportunities for powerful mediation.

Classroom assessments are often discussed in terms of the contrast between summative and formative evaluations. Summative assessments are used to make a final determination of what students have learned, while formative assessments are considered part of the instructional process. Leung and Mohan (2004) make a distinction between “for-learning” and “of-learning” assessments and explain, “the formative and for-learning perspective is quite different from the summative and of-learning perspective in terms of theoretical and educational orientation” (p. 337).

Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000) add a third classification, evaluative assessment. They describe their use of these three designations based on data collected in a case study of assessment practices in EAL classrooms in inner-city elementary schools in Great Britain. They found that the teachers in the study used formative assessments as pedagogical tools for planning purposes. Summative assessments were used to determine whether individual students attained a level of competence, based on externally defined standards, indicative of their ability to function
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independently within the National Curriculum. The purposes of evaluative assessments were relevant more to school-wide concerns than to classroom-based issues.

The same assessment instrument, according to Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000), can be used for different purposes.

Thus, to identify the [evaluation] procedures solely with formative or summative assessment is an over simplification, with the characterization of an assessment as either formative or summative a reflection of the use to which the assessment data are put rather than intrinsic to the assessment activity per se. (p. 223, italics added)

The fact that the same evaluation instruments are used for multiple purposes creates the tension felt by many teachers. Their dilemma stems from dual responsibilities: supporting development while at the same time judging achievement. In the course of this investigation, we set aside the issues that arise from externally imposed uses of assessment, and focus on formative assessments used in classroom contexts to inform instructional decisions and mediate student learning.

Harlen’s (2007) definition provides a useful framework.

‘Formative’ means that the assessment is carried out in order to help learning. It is detailed and relates to specific learning goals. It is essentially part of an approach to teaching and learning in which information about what students have achieved is used to inform decisions as to how to make progress. (p. 15)

Specific components of formative assessments engage the student directly in the evaluative process, providing information about progress and suggestions for improvement that can be used by the student to lead to greater self-regulation and internalization of conceptual in addition to
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procedural knowledge. Leung and Mohan (2004) observed teachers evaluating student work in a manner that went beyond simply indicating whether an answer produced by the student was correct or not. “[These teachers] went much further, evaluating and guiding the process by which students decided about an answer, and scaffolding the discourse of decision-making and reasoning” (p. 355).

Current educational practice relies heavily on standardized tests that measure and quantify student achievement in an attempt to raise educational standards. But standardized tests used as summative evaluations are not designed to support individual student’s cognitive development. Black and Williams (1998) completed a comprehensive review of the research literature on formative assessment in an attempt to determine whether and how classroom-based assessments might raise standards of achievement. Their conclusions are promising, and their assertions are worth quoting at length. They outline five ways to improve formative assessment and to integrate it more fully into instruction:

- Feedback to any pupil should be about the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve, and should avoid comparisons with other pupils.
- If formative assessment is to be productive, pupils should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve.
- Opportunities for pupils to express their understanding should be designed into any piece of teaching, for this will initiate the interaction through which formative assessment aids learning.
• The dialogue between pupils and a teacher should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas.

• The feedback on tests, seatwork, and homework should give each pupil guidance on how to improve, and each pupil must be given help and an opportunity to work at the improvement. (p. 143 – 144)

Aside from this final point, which does hint at the possibility of bringing teaching and assessment together, it is striking how they remain separated. In other words, the assessment should provide a basis for how learners can improve but they stop short of actually helping learners as part of the assessment.

The following questions framed the inquiry:

• How can a rich understanding of Vygotsky’s theoretical construct of the Zone of Proximal Development paired with a careful consideration of various types of evaluations provide a foundation for the development of effective formative assessments?

• How can written teacher feedback as assessment of students’ compositions prove to be an effective means of encouraging student reflection and self-evaluation throughout the writing process?

Summary of Beliefs

In the English classroom, learning active and strategic reading skills is never complete. However, I believe that formative and summative assessments mark the end of the learning process for many students. Unfortunately, at first glance, classroom culture seems to foster a “learn-test-forget” environment—an environment that suppresses the meaningfulness and
relevance of students’ learning. Because of this disconnect between learning material and practical application, the teaching/learning structure suffers. For example, in my first year I witnessed students handing in papers plagued with similar problems. They would consistently fall short in one or more aspects of the writing process. Lindsay for example, began her Junior year with a very concrete concept of how to construct solid claims, but her warrants were inconsistently developed. In her first in-class essay, which served the purpose of being the class’s first Writing on Demand and the teachers’ first look into the students’ individual writing abilities, she wrote:

Plato contents that Sophistical rhetoric, which is not based on knowing the absolute truth, is fundamentally immoral. In his commentary on sophistical rhetoric Plato outlines a simple analogy relating sophistical rhetorical to false medicines. Because sophistical rhetoric could be abused and used without knowledge of the absolute truth Plato believes it is ‘a base [thing]…for all that is bad [he calls] base’ (Plato 19). Plato believes that sophistical rhetoric should be eliminated because he believes the worst possible evil is an uneducated opinion not founded in absolute truth. Plato failed to purify rhetoric to become solely noble rhetoric based on absolute truth. Sophistical thinkers would perceive the survival of belief0based rhetoric as a failure by Plato as he was unable to eliminate a concept which he believed was immoral and evil. Opposing viewpoints may state that Plato did not fail, as rhetoric based on absolute truth survived alongside sophistical rhetoric. However, the definition of rhetoric has shifted away from the Platonists’ concept of using speech to spread knowledge of the absolute truth toward a more sophistical concept of using speech to persuade
and [sic.] audience to a particular belief, or common truth. Edwin Black demonstrates this modern sophistical view of rhetoric stating, ‘Rhetoric…is associated with the view that belief itself is the primary element in the shaping of character and of society’ (Black 540).

Lindsay incorporates a large amount of interesting data to support a mature claim: “Plato contents that Sophistical rhetoric, which is not based on knowing the absolute truth, is fundamentally immoral.” This statement holds a confident tone, precise prose, and most importantly, is arguable; all three aspects qualify this statement to be a strong and mature claim.

She also provides her reader with acceptable data: she defines “sophistical” and “noble” rhetoric, defines Platonistic and sophistical value and beliefs, and also provides the reader with a contemporary rhetor’s philosophies regarding rhetoric’s relationship to culture. Lindsay, however, provides virtually no warrant, leaving the reader to interpret the argument. A strong warrant would then explain how and why her claim and supporting data are essential and necessary parts of her larger argument. In essence, her warrant answers the “So What?” question a reader might ask himself after being introduced to her claim.

My response to Lindsay was “explain/warrant data.” In another portion of her paper, Lindsay was given comments of “Strong Warrant!” Over our time together in the classroom, Lindsay’s warrants were inconsistent—at some times very solid, and at others very weak if not non-existent. I believe that her struggles could have been dealt with better earlier in the school year, however, I had not yet realized at that time as a novice teacher that my intervention could have alleviated some of her misunderstandings. Still need to show strong warrant for Lindsay.

Although “individualized” education is an impractical means of public education, teachers do have the ability to restructure the ways in which grades affect a student’s learning. If
the receipt of the “grade” signifies the culminating point of learning for the student, the purpose of the assessment, I believe, suffers. No longer will the assessment become an accurate diagnosis of which areas the student excels, and those areas wherein he needs improvement. If students, however, are working to gain more feedback, they are able to internalize the feedback without the stigma or distraction of the “grade” received, helping them to become the evaluators and agents of their own learning. In other words, a grade, and the accompanying perception that it is high-stakes, actually undermines the assessment itself. It would be like patients somehow controlling their blood pressure at the time the doctor is measuring it; this would give them a ‘good score’ but it would lose its diagnostic value.

I believe that a theoretical foundation for application of Vygotskian theory to classroom practice will aid in repairing this necessary self-regulatory learning in students: reflection can become a means of continuing the learning happening in formative assessments (compositions). This process will also aid in their knowledge and understanding of their own ZPDs, again giving them the ability to evaluate their learning, enter into “conversation,” and apply their own thirst for knowledge.

Importance of Dynamic Assessment in Student Writing Evaluations

When addressed in the classroom, one function of studying literature, whether fictional or argumentative, is to imitate the inter- and intrapersonal communication necessary for human interaction and the transfer of ideas. Kenneth Burke, excepted from Walter Fishers’s “Narration as a Paradigm of Human Communication,” describes learning the boundaries of social communication as “entering the conversation.” If teachers are to imitate the structure of communication outside the English classroom, our writing assessments should help serve this
purpose and offer our students every educational advantage to enter into a larger public forum following their graduation.

*Planning, Execution, and Evaluation*

According to Poener (2008), Gal’perin suggests that there are three stages of understanding internalized by the student before he is able to perform a task without any kind of assistance from an expert teacher: *planning, execution,* and *evaluation*. When teaching the strategies of composition and allowing students to practice these strategies in their writing, teachers can only assume (if at all) what stages students have been able to master and in what concepts or strategies problems exist.

Within the 11 AP Language & Composition community, students seemed proficient in their planning stages and most in their execution stages as well. For example, they had clear knowledge of what constituted an effective introduction and conclusion and how to form an arguable and exciting thesis. However, many students were receiving similar comments on their final compositions from their teacher—many of which dealt with their inability to warrant their claims and data effectively. If the teacher was highlighting places in their writing where performance was unsatisfactory, why were these students unable to remediate their own writing? There was something missing from the learning process—an active and complete communication between teacher and student. Comments on a final composition were acting like a one-sided conversation; the conception of a “final” composition acted as a marker ending the learning process at that specific stage in the writing process. The students needed to be able to continue that learning process, and we teachers needed to invite them to do so. Only through
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some type of intercommunication between student and teacher can the learning difficulty be
defined and remediated. Black and Wiliams posit,

Dialogue with the teacher provides the opportunity for the teacher to
respond to and re-orient the pupil’s thinking …. The dialogue between
pupils and a teacher should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and
explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an
opportunity to think and to express their ideas. (2008, The evolution of
effective teaching section, par. 7)

During this study, I constructed a classroom framework to simulate a “complete
conversation” between students and myself during the evaluation/assessment phase of final
writing assignments. Students were asked to prepare a written reflection on the comments made
on their “final” group writing projects and compositions. The reflection process allowed students
to become reflective without the bias of a final grade, which, in turn, allowed for the students to
command themselves to become evaluative—a skill not only missing from the structure of the
previous writing assignments, but from the learning process as well. The process of this
“reflection” entailed: 1) I graded the students’ final compositions, 2) My grading process
included posing questions or comments to students’ either at points or sections that were written
successfully by the student and at places in their composition where syntax was awkward, claims
were weak, data was insufficient, and most prominently, their explanatory warrants and/or
conclusions were underdeveloped. 3) Once the students had received their graded papers (the
grades were not written on their rubrics nor were the rubrics filled out by me, but were
“penciled” into my gradebook) they were asked to take a period of 48 hours to read over the
comments and questions posed on their papers and to reflect in a free-write format about their
reactions to both my responses as well as their own to mine. They were also asked to write about how they might be able to correct their mistakes or make areas of their composition more clear, stronger, etc. If they felt they were did not understand how to correct their errors, they were asked to do so as well. 4) Through this process, my goal and purpose of their reflection process was to hopefully allow the students time to make sense of both the importance of understanding and contemplating how to better their work by using my comments as a sort of “scaffolding” to develop better understanding of how to write a better argumentative essay and through this process hopefully begin to internalize, as Vygotsky would argue, a more complex concept of argumentative writing. I wanted students to use this process to begin to internalize the comments and hopefully in the future be their own assessors of their writing, able to pin-point and evaluate problem areas without an instructor’s assistance. 5) I then used their feedback to assess each student’s individual ZPD—to better understand what remediation would best suit their level of development and subsequent areas in which he or she needed to improve or develop. For example, some students were able to improve or develop their weaker aspects of writing only using my comments posed to them on their papers. Others, I assessed, required more direct assistance, usually in form of a one-on-one conference. Poener would argue that this skill, this internalization of the evaluative process (whether through a reflection of my writing comments or through direct human mediation in a writing conference between teacher and student), gives students the opportunity to learn to self-regulate their evaluative processes in writing—a necessary facet of learning (Poener, 2008). To further this point, Kozulin (1998) would also add that a progressive and important evolution of the purpose of the connection between assessment and instruction is to allow students the opportunity through this relationship to come to understand how to solve problems “before they exist.”
A theoretical foundation for this application of Vygotskian theory, most specifically, dynamic assessment in classroom practice (in this instance, the reflection process developed for my specific research regarding writing development) will aid in repairing this necessary self-regulatory learning in students. This process will also aid in their knowledge and understanding of their own ZPDs, again giving them the ability to self-regulate, enter into “conversation,” and directly engage in and take ownership in their own learning.

*Are These Students Developmentally Similar?*

The writing process is an individual learning experience. Unfortunately, teachers are without enough resources (time, number of students, forced curricula, etc.) to provide their students with enough individualized assistance to diagnose students’ individual writing problems, and then be able to provide the most effective remediation. Through reflection, however, teachers can use their time more effectively to deduce students’ individual writing ZPDs while allowing the students time to reflect and possibly internalize those very important evaluative skills.

I constructed a framework of instruction and assessment based in Vygotskian sociocultural principles of the ZPD where students were asked to reflect on the comments made to them by the teacher on three argumentative final writing projects and papers. This written feedback on student writing assessments was used as mediation for continued learning potential. *Kozulin (1998) referred to learning potential in reference to …*

*Pedagogical Steps*
Students were first asked to complete a group-writing project wherein they evaluated their own writing performance after reading the teacher’s comments on their work. The main objective of this writing assignment was for students to focus largely upon explaining how Frederick Douglass’s use of rhetorical devices in his autobiography lends power and credibility to his character and message. The students’ ability to warrant effectively was essential to their explanation and obtaining a decent grade. Unfortunately, many groups did not deliver the explanation necessary to fully develop the mature claims they were able to construct. For example, one student-group’s analysis of Frederick Douglass’s rhetorical writing strategies follows:

Fredrick Douglass's slave narrative relies heavily on the rhetorical strategy pathos. It is his intent to make the reader feel and understand slavery from his perspective. He tells his stories of slavery that are sometimes painful, shocking, sad or uplifting to give the reader a sense of what the institution of slavery can do to people. His narrative begins with the story of how he came to be separated from his mother at a young age. Nearly all people feel horror at the idea of being separated from a person with whom one would feel such natural feelings of love, tenderness and connection. The majority of people see it as a horribly insensitive and downright cruel thing to do to families. The narrative is filled with similar stories of the hardships Douglass and his fellow salves faced. Hunger, physical abuse and separation from loved ones are a few of the obstacles slaves would face and are covered in the narrative. Douglass uses the stories to move his reader and bring them to recognize slavery as the evil that it is. The
feelings that the stories produce are more important than the stories themselves.

The group constructed a solid claim: “Fredrick Douglass's slave narrative relies heavily on the rhetorical strategy pathos.” For similar reasons Rachel’s claim was solid, this group’s was also. Most importantly, the claim is concise and arguable. The underscored writing serves as the group’s warrant. Unfortunately, the group’s primary concentration lies more in retelling the events in Douglass’s autobiography and describing the rhetorical strategies themselves. The purpose of the assignment was to evaluate how these strategies are effective; my comment to the group was: “How did these strategies move the reader to understand how slavery is, in fact, ‘evil.’ How are these ‘feelings’ that the reader feels effect the reader? Please push yourself to examine these appeals further.” Their warrant was weak because the students failed to push their explanations further. In other words, they neglected to explain how Frederick Douglass’s use of appeals to pathos affects his readers. Without supplying the reader with these explanations, they are, in effect, leaving their claim without arguing for its validity.

The group unfortunately did not address this comment. However, I was not specific in preliminary reflection assignment to ask them to address each comment individually. Instead, I had asked the students to reflect on the overall reaction to the comments posted on their assignments. Although I had not received the feedback and type of reflection I was hoping for from the students (I was hoping that the students would take time to seriously take into account how to correct their lacking warrants), I was able to realize that the students needed more direction in how to properly reflect on comments given to them on their compositions. In a sense, proper and worthwhile reflection was not a concept that they fully understood. Through this first task, I was, however, able to explicitly mediate the structure of their reflection and how I should
restructure the direction for their next reflection assignment. It seemed as though this first activity was more of a learning experience for me than it was for the students! I believe the students were unsure *why* I had been asking them to reflect. Consequently, I wrote a kind of philosophical statement regarding why they were reflecting, while providing new and more detailed directions regarding how to approach the reflection process. (Please see Appendix A for student handout.)

In addition, this first task provided insight for me in understanding how comments function for students (reciprocity and the construction of a consensual frame for learning), as well as how students respond and potentially use comments to further their development as writers (Poener, 2008). I found through this first reflection process that the majority of the students reflected on the positive aspects of their work, but did not delve deeper into the aspects of their writing on which they could improve. Perhaps this is because they hadn’t yet developed enough, with regard to these problem areas, to be able to comment on them, to recognize and evaluate them as problems and discuss how to overcome them.

During the teacher’s second research phase, the students were asked to complete a final argumentative synthesis essay. They were asked to reflect on their work after reading the teacher’s comments once again. This time, however, students were asked specifically to answer the questions posed to them by the teacher on their compositions (Poener, 2008).

For the sake of an in-depth look at how reflection can be used to both qualify students’ ZPDs and assist students in better internalizing their own evaluative skills, I will examine two students in particular, Lindsay and Rachel, both incredibly gifted students, both who had trouble warranting their essays effectively.
Lindsay had constructed a complex and arguable thesis, clear and strong claims, and had provided rich data to support them. However, through all of the positive work she had completed she had only provided her reader with a single sentence to stand as a warrant, or the actual explanation for her argument. The teacher’s written response to her was this: “Again, make sure not to limit your warrant to a single sentence. Explain!”

Through her reflection, Lindsay was able to provide the teacher with a better explanation of her ideas indicating that she might be lacking the evaluation or self-regulatory process to know how much explanation was needed to create a strong argument. In other words, she needed my mediation and possibly my evaluation of her work as a teacher/expert to validate or correct her composition. Her response in her reflection (in a sense, a revision of the paragraph) is as follows:

On a small scale, identity manipulation has relatively small consequences. A broken heart or a lost friendship can be trivial compared to some consequences. A politician who uses language to manipulate his or her identity has the potential to persuade the populace to elect him or her. A corrupt official could jeopardize the strength and safety of a nation of
people, especially in a country without the political checks and balances of the United States, simply by using language to portray an inaccurate impression of his or her identity.

My response to her reflection and revision of her work was: “Excellent warrant! I am so impressed with your ability to reconstruct and push your ideas further than you had before. Great work!” Her warrant explained for the reader the importance of her claim.

Excerpt of Rachel’s Identity Essay

Rachel had also constructed an effective thesis, and had, just like Lindsay, offered solid claims and evidence. She, much like Lindsay, had only provided a single sentence of explanation as well as shown in the figure above. In her composition titled, “I Speak, Therefore I Am: The Affects of Language on the Formation of Identity,” she writes in one of her final paragraphs (above):

One’s posture can show the amount of attention he or she is giving and his or her involvement in the conversation. Gestures demonstrate the
expressive aspects of the conversation. Through hands, arms, eyes, and the face, the expressions show another form of communication. From rolling one’s eyes to waving hello gestures symbolizes emotion or act in place of words. Ekman suggests that gestures can act in five ways: with a direct verbal translation, as in a wave goodbye; depicting what the speaker is saying with small movements; conveying emotion, i.e. smiling; controlling the interaction; or affecting the body’s tension in certain areas, placement of the body. Douglass among other slaves, used gestures as a sense of showing respect: “The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her,” (ch. VI par. 1). Slaves did not look their masters in the eyes, because they were not equal. In that way, gestures and posture can also depict social status.

My written response to her was this: “Warrant? You are using a lot of data, but I want to see your explanation—why do you think this information is important when discussing your thesis?” By asking the student, “Why?” I am attempting to aid the student in better qualification and warranting practices.

Rachel, unlike Lindsay, was unable to utilize the teacher’s comments as a meditational tool and provide her with a warrant. Her ZPD did not include a level of understanding warranting skills to perform without assistance. In fact, she explained her inability to warrant quite directly. In response to the teacher’s comment, she replied:

I think that this last one sums up my entire essay. I think that I needed more warrant throughout. I’m not sure if I know what warrant is, or rather
Why Reflect?

_how to apply it in my writing._ That will definitely be something that I hope
to address during the final marking period. (italics added)

I’m not certain if Rachel’s emotional and cognitive development (as a growing teenager) is
hindering her ability to warrant this particular argument. In other words, she is still immature in
many ways—she is still developing as an adult, and the argument is she attempting to warrant
might be more difficult for her because of her age. In extension, however, warranting, or
providing sufficient explanation and purpose for claims, is an arduous task for many individuals,
no matter their age. I truly believe that it is through practice with the mediations of an expert (in
this case, myself as a teacher) that allows individuals to begin to internalize the concepts
involved in creating just and effective warrants.

In any respect, through both mediations from myself and following students’ reflections,
the purpose of these questions is to help both move toward not only more mature warranting
skills, but also to push her to develop emotionally and cognitively. She is trying to piece together
her larger thesis: why cultural differences in language affect people’s ability to understand each
other’s cultural identities. She is attempting to warrant an idea she, herself, may not be able to
completely understand, herself, yet. Through writing, (and this was one of the purposes of this
assignment) she might come closer to understanding this very mature and problematic
relationship. Ultimately, her attempt to understand this relationship, but inability to do so,
hinders her ability to warrant. The problem is compounded when she still misunderstands how to
construct a written warrant in the first place. Rachel’s responses provided the teacher with two
important understandings: her ZPD at this time did not include a complete and effective
understanding of warranting to complete this part of the writing process without assistance, but
also, and more importantly, she is expressing a desire to learn this skill—an extremely important
component to creating and maintaining an environment conducive for learning. When a student takes on the desire to learn, she takes on a role of learner autonomy or agency, an essential aspect of self-regulation (Poener, 2008). My response to her regarding her inability to understand warranting is this: “Amazing reflection—thank you for your honesty. How about we meet for a writing conference. I think that together we can answer a lot of your questions together.”

Through this classroom structure of simulating a written conversation between teacher and student, the teacher was able to diagnose individual student understandings of the writing process, or their ZPDs, and gain insight into how to provide the most effective remediation for the individual student. In Lindsay’s case, written mediation, a mediation that takes on a comparable likeness to actual conversation between teacher and student, was all she required as opposed to Rachel who required direct human mediation from the teacher—a conversation that can become more explicit or more extensive as she needed it. This relationship is reciprocal—the teacher understanding the needs of the learner and attempts to provide the exact assistance necessary to remediate learning, while it is also important that the learner understands and begins to minimize her dependence on the teacher’s scaffolding (Poener, 2008).

In Rachel’s individual writing conference, the teacher attempted an interactionist approach to mediation.

24. M: So how could we go back? If you were to explain this paragraph to a friend of yours,
25. and you were just going to tell them why it fits? What ideas do Amy Tan, Pooley, and
26. Frederick Douglass all have in common?
27. R: The idea of…how…it like what is expected out of language?
28. M: So functions of language? Or what others expect from language? Because I think that
29. they are two different things.
30. R: I would say both, I agree that they are different but I would think that um…but the
31. functions of the language are something that the others expect for the person to achieve
32. and use the functions of the language.
33. M: So…(pointing to her essay) you say down here, you are bringing it back here and then
34. with what you just told me about the language or rather how this data allows us to see the
35. functions and intensions of language?
36. R: Yea
37. M: So you’re bringing this all back to the reader. This is the beginning of your warrant
38. (pointing to a sentence), but you still need a few sentences about why this happens and I
39. think you’ll find this flows really well into your next paragraph.
40. R: So the warrant really follows the how the idea comes together and why they work!
41. M: W warranting is hard—it’s intangible, a funky explanation where you use your own
42. voice and you don’t know how far to go with it…but with more practice you’ll get it!

Through a series of questions, Rachel was not just beginning to grasp the concept of warranting,
but she was able to explain her reasoning out loud and then realize that her explanations were the
essence of an argumentative warrant. This is especially apparent in line 40. This realization
would seem to be a prerequisite for engaging in this sort of writing, and yet it is only occurring to
her now. Rachel is internalizing the concept of warranting.

*Effective Instruction and Assessment*

In the realm of assessment, complications arise when teachers are expected to properly
and effectively instruct and assess their students—students who are not developmentally similar
in both cognitive and emotional maturity as well as intellectual understandings of the concepts
posed in the classroom. In this case, Lindsay and Rachel differed in their understandings of the different processes involved in constructing an argumentative essay.

In the third research phase, the teacher asked students to review the “conversation” between themselves and the teacher regarding their last two writing assignments, and reflect once again, this time free-writing about what they had learned, what they were still unsure of, and their plans for how they were going to approach the up-coming in-class essay. Lindsay’s response included her plans to “allow myself to write the how I relate the data to claim—sometimes I think that this information is not necessary and I should allow the reader to make these connections, but I think a good compromise would work well here.” Rachel had reminded herself that her warranting needed to be complete “as if I were describing my ideas to someone who was listening”—an idea she had taken away from her individual writing conference with the teacher. For Gal’perin, actually verbally talking aloud to mediate oneself through an activity is a stage toward internalization.

The outcomes of both students’ in-class essays were interesting. Lindsay had written too much (still trying to find that “compromise”), and although Rachel hadn’t really internalized any conceptual understanding of a warrant at the beginning of this research, her performance was outstanding. Her explanation was complete and concise. Once she had been able to grasp the conceptual understanding of warranting as she did in her transcription above, she was able to perform the task expertly and without assistance.

In his research Vygotsky discovered that learners develop at different stages even after a mediator has diagnosed their ZPDs. Lindsay and Rachel’s performances are interesting reflections of his theory. While Lindsay at the beginning already had a relatively firm grasp on how to warrant effectively, her performance on her final in-class essay reflected that she was still
unsure of how to perform. Rachel, however, was unsure how to perform but developed her warranting skills much faster and with more precision that her counterpart. Lindsay and Rachel stood as admirable evidence to Vygotsky’s theories regarding learner development within ZPDs. Students do develop on different emotional and intellectual planes and under different public and private circumstances. Juan-Miguel Fernandez-Balboa (2007) states,

> Given that all students are different with regard to their point of departure in the learning process, their potential and social circumstances, their experiences and relationships, etc., to treat them equally turns out to be unjust—yet this is precisely what standardized content and grades do. (p. 109)

The results both were fascinating and enlightening, especially for a first-year teacher constructing her own ideas of the value and effectiveness of writing assessments and the grades that more often than not, define them.

*Agency in Learning*

Teachers should offer the most implicit form of support to which learners respond and should only become more explicit when necessary, thereby ensuring learners remain as agentive as possible. Poener (2008) asserts that

> successful collaboration in the ZPD is dependent upon both the quality of mediation and learner reciprocity. In effect, these are inseparable features of DA: for mediation to be appropriate (i.e., promote learner development) learners’ reciprocating acts must be correctly interpreted (p. 11).
Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) further elaborate that mediation must be contingent on learners’ needs and removed when they show signs of independent behavior, even if such behavior is not fully appropriate. This idea is especially important because it describes not the learners responsibility in this partnership, but the teacher’s and the necessity of dynamic interactions between them. Unlike formative and summative assessments that assume learners’ abilities to be static, dynamic assessment realizes that learner’s needs and abilities are in a state of constant change, much like the drafting process of writing. Realizations and understandings can happen at any moment in the learning process and it is the responsibility of the teacher to be able to provide those mediations to best support learners’ development. We must then be in tune to the learners’ reciprocating acts (p.11). Again, Poener offers, “Learner reciprocity includes not only how learners respond to mediation that has been offered, but also their requests for additional support or specific kinds of support as well as their refusal to accept mediation (Poener, 2008, p. 11).”

**Constructing a Consensual Frame in the Classroom**

During the second phase of the research, I learned much about the importance of constructing a consensual frame (Poener, 2008), a process through which teaching habits (in this case, comments and individual writing conferences) play a distinct role in creating effective learning environments. Rachel, in her reflection, commented on the teacher’s first comment to her:

> Having the first comment that I read…be positive is definitely something I enjoy. *If the first comment is more negative, I’m less likely to take the remaining comments into as much consideration.* I know, I know, it’s not a good habit to get into, I’m trying to break it. (italics added)
Why Reflect?

This was an interesting insight into one student’s reaction to teacher comments. I had commented: “What a cool introduction—yup, you’ve got my attention!” In this particular case, a small comment such as this set up a very important relationship between the student and the teacher—an environment in which the student was ready and willing to become a reciprocating member of this “conversation.”

This was such an important finding for a first-year teacher! Reciprocity, creating a consensual space in the classroom, is an immensely important factor in creating a classroom environment conducive for students creating their own agency as writers.

Conclusion

Mediation in the form of written comments on the student’s work teamed with student reflection assisted the students in improving their independent performance – in demonstrating development in warranting skills. But because I was attuned to the concepts of the ZPD, internalization, and self-regulation, my efforts were focused not only on guiding student performance on the task at hand, but rather on developing the student’s conceptual understanding of the use of language in a formal academic essay. It seems that the students’ gains were significant, and transfer to future tasks is likely because…

There is no doubt that for me, Vygotskian theories provided a framework that provided greater insight into their students’ performance. Attending to the ZPD illuminated the differences between students whose performance appeared to be similar and provided insight into specific misunderstandings, the ability of each student to learn and develop, and the varying degrees of support required to facilitate this growth.
The students became active participants in the evaluation of their own work. Having the students actively reflect on the teacher’s written feedback by writing their own reflections made that common form of formative assessment more valuable. Through a process of reciprocity, the students in this case study was able to take an agentive role in their own learning.

Both one-on-one mediation and written teacher feedback can prove to be effective means of encouraging student reflection and self-evaluation throughout the writing process and in helping a student reach her zone of proximal development within a given writing task. However, the pragmatics continue to present obstacles. The theory is sound, and the practice holds potential. Vygotskian theory is sufficiently valuable for both developing students’ understanding of the concepts dedicated to warranting arguments within the structure of formative assessments and developing effective classroom assessment practices to continue to find ways to apply the concepts within given institutional structures.
Appendix

1. This handout was given to the students before they completed their second reflection on their final argumentative synthesis compositions:

AP Language & Composition
Wager / McKenna

Why Reflect? And Where the Heck is My Grade!

Learning how to write, how to construct a solid argument, is a life-long process and probably one the hardest tasks of which to achieve mastery. The process involves risk taking, sometimes failure, hard work, and resolve—and all of these experiences can be uncomfortable and frustrating. You have chosen to take this class not so you can be told your composition abilities are “fine,” but rather so you can vastly improve and win over your college professors with elegant prose, sophisticated argument construction, and mature intellectual reasoning abilities. Each one of you is intelligent, each one of you has incredible composition strengths, and each one of you has weaknesses. When you become frustrated with anything, that’s good!—you’re about to make a breakthrough.

In learning, and especially in the realm of writing and the construction of solid arguments, there are three basic steps that everyone takes: Planning, Execution, and Evaluation. Unfortunately with the implementation of our grading system, many leave the evaluation process for someone else. We plan our attack, execute by writing our best composition, and evaluate to some degree through individual or peer editing processes. But after completing our execution, many of us exclaim, “Whew. I’m so glad I’m done. I hope it’s okay.” I know I do.

The comments we make on your papers are important—pointing out places in which your writing excelled, and other places that require elaboration, better organization, clearer sentence structure, more mature syntax, etc. The reason for these comments is to help you better internalize your own evaluation processes so that you may grow as writers and so during your next writing task you can better evaluate your own performance or execution.

I want you to be able to look at your comments without the bias of a grade. Look at the questions or comments posed in an objective manner. And hopefully, knowing that your reflections could have a substantial impact on the final mark in the gradebook will allow you to really work through those suggestions or questions posed to you.

Ideally I wish that the suggestion above did not motivate you to execute and evaluate your reflections to better your final grade, but rather to motivate you to want to learn how to become a better writer. Most importantly, I hope that you come away from this experience with more confidence in that you will now possess a greater sense of power in your abilities as a writer, an arguer, and a thinker!

That said, I hope this clears the water regarding why I am asking you to reflect.
Please type a reflection that includes answers to the questions posed on your composition. Please do this by Wednesday, April 1\textsuperscript{st}. When you hand in your reflection, please pair it with your final composition. If you would like to make an appointment for post-writing conferences I will have a calendar posted on Tuesday with my availability.
Why Reflect?

References


