

The following is a selection modified for length from a talk given by Luis Moll:

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An opening anecdote:

I would like to start with an anecdote from a not-so-distant past: I was a soldier in Vietnam about, but not quite, 30 years ago. I was sent there courtesy of the US Army, along with thousands of other Latinos, including some of my childhood friends. I was assigned to a medical evacuation unit, a field hospital, that formed part of the 5th Infantry Division stationed near the town of Quang Tri. Quang Tri, in turn, was located in the I Corps, which is how the Army designated that part of the country, about an hour's drive south of Dong Ha, a town that was a grenade's throw away from the demilitarized zone, no-man's-land, the DMZ, a border area imposed between South and North Vietnam for purposes of war. The shock of finding myself, almost overnight, in such a remote location in the middle of a terrible war, made me reflect on my life's trajectory and the colonial relationships that sent me, a young man born and raised in Puerto Rico, to a distant foreign country to defend the interests of the rich and powerful in Washington, D. C. This is a topic, colonialism, that I will allude to later on in this talk.

When I arrived at my unit I was assigned to a hootch, a long rectangular structure that housed about a dozen enlisted men, which was to be my home for several months. One of the men living in the hootch was David, a pale and slim man from California, who always wore a dark green towel around his neck, along with a string of prayer beads. The prayer beads were like a catholic rosary, except for the crucifix, and served the same mnemonic function, to keep track of the sequence and number of prayers. David, I soon learned, was a devout Buddhist, belonging to a sect, if that is the right term, of Japanese Buddhism called Nichiren Shoshu. Along with three or four other men, David used to chant prayers twice a day: in the morning and in the evening. They usually picked a place away from the rest of the soldiers, where they could chant in private, and avoid the verbal harassment and insults so typical of Army life. One could spot them, however, because they chanted aloud and in unison, sounding like a swarm of bees.

Out of curiosity, or perhaps out of some unspecified need, I started asking David questions about his chanting. He explained that what they chanted repeatedly, all day long it seemed to me, was the phrase "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo," a powerful prayer, he assured me,

that would grant me anything I wanted. David was good at telling anecdotes about how people were able to achieve things through their chanting that they would have otherwise deemed unobtainable, and that it was perfectly fine to chant for material objects, like a new car or even money. But his favorite anecdote was about an infantry company that had been ambushed and overrun by Charlie (the Viet Cong), and as Charlie was finishing off the wounded soldiers, they noticed the prayer beads one of them was wearing and, as fellow Buddhists, decided to spare his life.

In our strange context, with all the crazy things happening in that war, that anecdote rang true. I decided not to take chances, and before long I was chanting along with David. He started initiating me into the rituals of the religion, the liturgy, and obtained a prayer book for me to follow. It was a small (3"x5"), thin booklet of about 50 pages. On the inside cover he wrote the sequence of prayers and chants that I needed to observe during the morning and evening sessions. Each page had a line of Japanese characters, or ideograms, with a phonetic version underneath. David would lead and the rest would follow by "reading" aloud the text. I got pretty good at it, enunciating carefully each word, trying to imitate David's pronunciation, and he would, of course, correct our pronunciation as needed.

I remember that I used to get together frequently with other Puerto Rican soldiers to follow a ritual of our own, namely, to chat in Spanish, listen to salsa music, eat the canned Puerto Rican food (Goya brand) our families would send us, and drink plenty of rum. I got pretty good at that ritual too. One of my "panitas," or buddies, noticed that I was joining David to chant and asked me about it. I explained to him what we were doing, showed him the prayer book, and chanted a few lines. He was impressed, I sounded fluent, "Vaya, broder, estas aprendiendo a leer chino (Alright, brother, you are learning how to read Chinese)," he said. Hell, I was impressed myself.

Before long, I was able recite much of the liturgy without relying completely on the text, and I could even, or so I believed, associate many of the ideograms with their phonetic rendition. To me, I was reading the liturgy. Now, to be sure, I didn't understand a word of what I was saying (or reading), but that did not matter, what mattered, as a novice in this religion, was for me to reproduce faithfully the sounds of the words that made up the prayers. David, our teacher, did not seem to concern himself with our understanding of the text, so it did not matter to us either. All of our efforts went into learning how to pronounce the text in

the prescribed form, and we got good at that.

I chanted earnestly for an early rotation from Viet Nam, that I be granted permission to return to civilian life three months before my tour was over in order to resume my schooling, and I got it. Of course, that I was able to write a persuasive rationale for the request also seemed to help. When I left the Army, I settled in Los Angeles, where my mother was living. About a month after my return, I visited a Nichiren Shoshu center in town, I had spotted a sign as I had driven by the building. But it wasn't the same. The people there, with whom I had nothing in common, were into chanting endlessly and roaming Hollywood Boulevard at night trying to persuade others to join them at the center. I lost interest, I could not build any motivation to join them, the prayers lacked meaning in this new social context, and of course, I could not appeal to the text to make meaning, for I could "read" but I never learned how to understand.

My talk today is about culture and education...The approach I take will emphasize our "sociological life," a term I borrow from Charles Lemert (1997), that as human beings we live in a world of social things, not only small and specific artifacts, tools and symbol systems, or the social contexts created by others with whom we interact, but big, national and global social things, ideological and economic systems that shape, often in mysterious ways, our circumstances of life, with school and schooling being an important one of these systems.

Part 1: The cultural mediation of thinking

The idea of the cultural mediation of thinking is a central concept in Vygotsky's (1978) theorizing, as has been explained by various authors. I like the way Scribner (1990) captures this Vygotskian emphasis:

Vygotsky's special genius was in grasping the significance of the social in things as well as people. The world in which we live in is humanized, full of material and symbolic objects (signs, knowledge systems) that are culturally constructed, historical in origin and social in content. Since all human actions, including acts of thought, involve the mediation of such objects ("tools and signs") they are, on this score alone, social in essence. This is the case, whether acts are initiated by single agents or a collective and whether

they are performed individually or with others (p. 92).

As Scribner underscores, the concept of the mediation of human actions (including “acts of thought”) is central to Vygotsky's formulation, perhaps its defining characteristic. To put it succinctly: people interact with their worlds, which are “humanized, full of material and symbolic objects,” through these mediational means; and this mediation of actions through cultural artifacts, especially language in both its oral and written forms, plays a crucial role in the formation and development of human intellectual capacities. Notice that the central point is not simply about the importance of tool and symbol use by human beings, it is a stronger claim than that, it refers to the essential role of cultural mediation in the constitution of human psychological processes (Bakhurst, 1995).

Let me elaborate on the above just a bit to drive the point home. Imagine the following scenario, that with some cultural variations and idiosyncrasies, forms part of everyone's life in this room. As I describe it, make some mental field notes on the multiple mediational means, as if you were an anthropologist studying this scene, and notice how we have come to internalize them for living:

You are asleep in your room. Your spouse (partner, lover, etc.) is sleeping next to you, as is your custom. Before you went to sleep, close to midnight, as usual, you noticed that the weather forecaster on television predicted an unusually cold night, so you adjusted the thermostat in your home accordingly, so that even if gets is cold outside, it will be comfortable in your room. However, just in case it gets colder than predicted, you have placed an electric blanket at the feet of the bed.

The radio alarm goes off, which you have tuned to National Public Radio, and on this particular day you are awakened by a detailed report on how El Niño may be causing a rare hormonal disease in cows. You lean over to your night-table, turn off the radio, and glance at the time on the clock, but you cannot see it, the numbers are too blurry. You are near-sighted, a problem that has nothing to do with your age, of course, but it might be inherited from your parents, so you put on your glasses, modify your vision, and glance again at the clock: it is 5:00 A.M.

As is your habit, you turn on a small lamp next to your bed, bringing light into the dark room, and pick up your appointment calendar sitting on your night-table and glance at what

your day might be like. You notice that it will be a busy day at work, you have again packed more into a day than you can possibly do. You then reach into the drawer of the night-table and retrieve a small card with a prayer; it was a gift from your grandmother, she taught you how to read it every morning, and you still do so, sensing her loving presence next to you.

As you are about to rise from bed, you notice the three articles that you were reading the night before: one, in English, is about the social stratification of the curriculum in US schools; the second one, in Spanish, is a translation of an article by Vygotsky, on art and imagination in childhood, written originally in Russian; and the third one, in Portuguese, a language you cannot speak but can read for meaning fairly well, is about counter-hegemonic pedagogical practices. With the articles is a yellow pad of paper, your favorite pencil, and the notes you took, including key words, abbreviations, incomplete sentences, quotes, references to other articles, and a sketchily drawn diagram, as you attempted to relate and integrate what you learned from reading these articles for a talk you need to give in a few days, coincidentally, at a conference in Scottsdale, Arizona.

You reach down, with some difficulty, no doubt the arthritis for which to need to take some pills, pick up the articles and notes and place them on your bed, and then reach for your slippers that will protect your feet from the cold floor. As you get up, you also slip on an ugly robe that your spouse gave you to commemorate some anniversary, and which you have pretended to like to preserve your cordial and caring relationship. Once the robe is on, you march to the bathroom, where you will proceed to cleanse your body and mouth, and groom yourself using routines that you probably learned in childhood from your mother and father. After the cleansing and grooming is done, you slip on the robe again and quietly leave the bedroom, glancing at the clock as you leave, it is now 5:25 in the morning.

Now, if you are male and Latino, like me, you are probably going to go fix breakfast for your spouse (I like to challenge cultural models), who is still sound asleep, so that when she rises, her nourishment is ready to be consumed. Before you reach the kitchen, however, you go to the front door and pick up the newspaper, which brings a summary of events of interest from the day before, among other information. You glance lightly at the headlines, including an article reporting the idiotic comments by a law professor at the University of Texas claiming the cultural inferiority of Latinos and African-Americans. You curse aloud, probably in two languages, and sigh as you discard the front page and fold your beloved sports

page under your arm. You then reach into the refrigerator, where you placed several perishable items purchased a few days ago, and retrieve four extra-large eggs, no doubt produced by incubating machines. You crack them open carefully and place them into a pan as you turn on the gas range, and then add and mix condiments and spices following an exotic recipe you learned from a Panamanian friend. You thus turn the natural (the eggs) into the cultural (the special recipe), and get ready to awaken your spouse. “Breakfast is ready, mi amor,” you call out, in an affectionate code switch.

Let me deconstruct parts of this mundane scene for you in terms of cultural mediations, although they may be self evident:

1. You are obeying the biological imperative of sleep, but under specially created cultural circumstances. You are on a bed, for comfort, as your income and social position permits, but sharing it with your spouse, as is the practice among almost everyone you know, a monogamous relationship seems natural, but you realize it is a cultural arrangement. You have believed a weather prediction made by scientists using their specialized although imprecise instruments, and communicated to you via images and sounds over a powerful invention, the television. You have exercised further control over your environment, by regulating the heat in your room, with the potential to vary that heat as you deem necessary.

2. Sleep is ended artificially, even prematurely, by an alarm that specifies when to awaken, and the voice of a stranger intrudes into your consciousness via an electric artifact, the radio. As you modified artificially the temperature in your room, so you can modify the darkness, through the use of a lamp.

3. You have planned your day according to set cultural routines and to the demands of labor, your occupation, and you project what will happen by glancing at your calendar, which controls artificially your memory. Your spiritual habits, taught to you deliberately in childhood by your ancestors, also serve to create affective connections with significant people who have passed away, but who live in your heart and in your mind, you have internalized them. And you regulate your thinking through the use of semiotic systems, including texts in several languages, which preserve in retrievable forms for your reflection and analysis what has been thought by others elsewhere and at another time. You use the same semiotic systems to create idiosyncratic and abbreviated messages to yourself, a private speech, which can result

in new forms and associations, and even an occasional novel idea, which is sometimes a necessary part of your work.

4. The objects that you use to decorate and pamper your body can also serve the function of mediating your affective relationships with others. Your cleansing routines were learned from significant others in your past and have been followed rigorously for many years, to the extent that when circumstances prohibit it, you feel uneasy and self-conscious.

5. Other general cultural routines and models are also followed, but with modifications to adapt them to your unique individual history. Information as commodity arrives at your front door, and even though you pay for this information, others decide what to include or exclude. The prevalent ideology of the dominant group in society is usually represented faithfully in the selection of articles. But the information can also be pleasant and entertaining, and can distract you, even if only temporarily, from problems of living.

6. Using yet another cultural artifact, you protect the food you will consume by regulating its temperature, and using knowledge obtained from others, you prepare the food you and your spouse are about to eat, which is yet another mediating event in your relationship.

Notice the systemic, dialectical relationships, if you will, between the natural and the artificial, the biological and the cultural, the social and the intellectual. And notice how our actions, including acts of thought, as Scribner observed, are mediated by social things, both proximally and concretely, as well as distally and abstractly. John-Steiner (1995) has coined the term cognitive pluralism to refer to this multiplicity of mediational (semiotic) means based on cultural practices. Notice that language, in all its forms, is critical but not the only manifestation of mediational means. In short, through our cultural practices, we come to internalize, transform, and adapt various cultural means that help create our circumstances of life, even as these circumstances help create us as human beings.

Here, the ideas of Vygotsky show that we are so embedded in our built environments (including schooling) that we consider them, their values, and the ways they operate somehow natural, underestimating the significance of the artificial for our thinking. It is not only that we

possess cultural artifacts, but that they come to possess us: consider that you have come from across the country, and even from foreign locations, motivated by the opportunity to talk to others about reading and writing. This social thing called literacy has come to possess you, you find it un-thinkable to live without it, and for most of you, reading has become a substitute for life.

In fact, societies have come to create special cultural settings, namely schools, to make these artifacts, especially literacy, and other valuable resources of the culture widely available, particularly to children. But these settings are never neutral, a fact we readily acknowledge and just as readily ignore in our research or in making curricular prescriptions, for schooling practices carry plenty of ideological baggage. After all, the major goal of mass schooling, as Cook-Gumperz (1986) reminds us, was to control (popular) literacy, not to promote it: “to control both the forms of expression and the behaviors which accompany the move into literacy” (p. 28).

Schooling, therefore, is shaped by two contradictory movements: to facilitate access to literacy and to control it. Thus, the selective transmission of knowledge, through different conceptions of schooling, for different sectors of society, is a cornerstone on which schooling for literacy is built.