

Diverse Approaches to Education: Alienated Learning, Closed and Open Participatory Socialization, and Critical Dialogue

Commentary on van Oers

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Key Words

Alienated learning · Closed and open participatory socialization · Critical dialogue

We have found ourselves both delighted by and in deep disagreement with van Oers' article [this issue]. These two evaluative feelings are mutually supported by his work because our disagreements with van Oers have helped us to deepen our own position on the existing diverse approaches to education and develop nuances that we could not have articulated before reading his paper. In our view, van Oers' major contribution is the clear and coherent articulation of his opposition to alienated, meaningless learning common to conventional schooling, and his effort to offer his alternative for meaningful cultural learning heavily based on Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach and Engeström's activity theory.

Education differs from learning. Not all learning is education. For example, it is doubtful that students learning to hate math would be considered education by any educator. But, in our view, there has been no consensus as to what kind of learning education involves. Conventional schools often define education as students' dispassionate acquisition of a toolkit of the essential knowledge and skills set up by the society. The assumption of this approach to education is that students will learn this predetermined toolkit of essential knowledge and skills unrelated to the students' immediate goals and needs, which are often bracketed and delegitimized in the classroom. This essential knowledge and these skills can then be applied later on in life. We call this approach of postponed desire *alienated learning*. In the alienated learning approach, both curriculum and instruction are predetermined unilaterally by the teacher (and often by curriculum and instruction planners) without seeking

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input from the students. Following Aristotle, we argue that the alienated learning approach defines educational practice as *poiesis* [Aristotle, 2000]. *Poiesis* is characterized by the ideal form of practice and its desired products pre-existing the activity itself. *Poiesis* contrasts with *praxis*, in which an ideal form of practice and its desired products are unknown in advance, rather, they emerge from the activity itself. Thus, for example, the great Russian novelist Dostoevsky not only wrote his masterpieces, but in the process of writing them also developed new, previously unknown forms of the novel that have since become an important genre [Bakhtin, 1999].

Van Oers criticized the alienated learning approach of conventional schooling mainly for its disconnection with the students' personal interests and goals, its alienation of students from intellectual engagement and culture, for being rather superficial, and for the lack of transfer of what students learn in school to activities outside of school (and even inside of school). We want to add one more point, well articulated by Michael Cole and his colleagues. They argued that the purpose of education should not be to prepare students for the teacher's and the society's known past, but rather for students' unknown future [Griffin & Cole, 1984, p. 62]. In other words, education has to be *praxis* and not *poiesis*.

Van Oers partially seemed to recognize this by insisting on meaningful learning, in which there is a connection between taught curriculum and students' personal interests: 'In the cultural-historical perspective, meaningful learning is the type of learning that integrates both meaning and sense, that is, learning that produces learning outcomes with general cultural significance and that makes personal sense for the learner as well'. In other words, van Oers called for a particular, idiosyncratic, and meaningful learning trajectory to the ideal form of the pre-existing culture. He stated, 'according to Vygotsky, the influence of [...] environment is two-fold: First (a) it is a provocative context for pupils' ongoing activity, but it also (b) gives pupils an impression of *the ideal forms of activity* that are modeled by the more knowledgeable participants in the environment' (emphasis ours). Thus, van Oers apparently called for the school instruction to become *praxis*, that is, emergent in collaboration with the student, while the school curriculum remains *poiesis*, that is, making the student arrive at preset curricular endpoints. He is correct that his proposal is not unique but common to some versions of constructivism. What is unique is his way of defining and promoting individual students' idiosyncratic learning trajectories. Employing a Vygotskian framework, van Oers offered 'imitative participation' as a way to define a unique guiding trajectory for students' individual learning in a play-based curriculum that

aims to evoke meaningful learning in pupils by getting them engaged in playfully formatted sociocultural activities (like playing museum, adopting the role of a researcher, or running a third world shop in the school), in which they can participate (taking their cultural backgrounds and level of development into account), and in which they want to be engaged (given their interests, motives, and emotional condition).

We call this approach being advocated by van Oers '*closed participatory socialization*.' We characterize this approach to education as *participatory socialization* because its goal is students' mastery of sociocultural practices in contrast to a dispassionate and decontextualized toolkit of essential knowledge and skills. We call it *closed participatory socialization* because it treats cultural practices as ready made for students to learn and, thus, defines education as reproduction of the ready-made

culture. In this sense, its focus on the reproduction of the existing ready-made culture is similar to the alienated learning approach to education common among conventional schools. Both approaches are concerned with 'the transfer problem' and compete with each other to do it better. Van Oers puts it this way: 'The abilities for transfer appear to be greater (as compared to the imposition of a point of view), when pupils themselves are dialogically involved in the construction of the required problem solving models (i.e., the point of view that leads to successful problem solving)'. The main difference between these two approaches is how they arrive at this predetermined curricular endpoint. The alienated learning approach presets unilaterally pre-designed instruction, while the closed participatory socialization approach relies on collaborative instruction emergent in playful learning activities.

Another approach to education, developed by Lave and Wenger, can be defined as the *open participatory socialization* approach. In this approach, the goal is also for learners to become capable members of a community of practice, but the focus is on production (rather than on reproduction) of culture. The participants, including newcomers, are viewed as active in shaping the cultural practice. The problem of transfer is moot in open participatory socialization because learning is not separated from the practice itself in the newcomer's 'legitimate peripheral participation' [Lave & Wenger, 1991]. Both curriculum and guidance are *praxis* in this approach. The curriculum is an emergent moving target here as well as being collaborative.

Yet, elsewhere Matusov [in press] criticized the open participatory socialization approach for being noncritical. Not all communities of practice are good. For example, at the end of the 1960s in Palo Alto, Calif., USA, a high school history teacher named Ron Jones created a pedagogical experiment. Like van Oers (and us), he was highly dissatisfied with dispassionate alienated learning. So, for teaching about Nazi Germany, he created a simulated totalitarian movement, 'The Third Wave.' Although similar to van Oers' 'imitative participation,' in our judgment the teacher was happy to let the students transcend 'imitation' and to start a real community of practice which, unlike van Oers' 'imitative participation,' is always open-ended and transcendental by its nature. The teacher was highly successful in socializing his students in a Nazi-like movement so that they not only felt it from inside their culturally prescribed roles (as van Oers' desires), but also creatively and legitimately transcended these roles and took over the practice as 'full participants' (as Lave would probably desire for successful apprenticeship) [Jones, 1972]. However, it is difficult to claim that Ron Jones provided his students with a good education by the fact that they enthusiastically became empowered and creative neo-Nazi. Thus, it appears that in addition to promotion of meaningful learning for students and newcomers, education must involve critical evaluation of values and taking responsibility for one's own practice – meaningfulness, emotional authentic experience, creativity, transcendence, agency, and legitimate peripheral participation are all probably necessary but not sufficient for defining education.

Elsewhere [Matusov, 2011a; Matusov, Smith, Soslau, Marjanovic-Shane, & von Duyke, under review], we argue for the critical dialogue approach to education, rooted in Bakhtin's dialogic framework, an alternative to all three approaches above. It focuses on students' testing of ideas, values, desires, goals, emotions, perceptions, worldviews, and perspectives in 'internally persuasive discourse' [Bakhtin, 1991], in which 'truth becomes dialogically tested and forever testable' [Morson, 2004, p. 319]. The critical dialogue approach involves interaddressivity (i.e., people's genuine interest in each other's contributions), ontology (i.e., participants' life concerns, social re-

lations, relevant conditions of life, and interests), heteroglossia (i.e., multivoicedness among and within the participants), and heterodiscourse (i.e., a network of diverse discourses and genres legitimately propagating the discourse) [Bakhtin, 1986, 1999; Matusov, 2011b]. Thus, we view the critical dialogue approach as *praxis of praxis* because it is based on students' legitimate and necessary investigation of cultural values, including the value of their education. Below, we will provide our critique of van Oers' view on culture leading him to the closed participatory socialization approach from our own view, rooted in the critical dialogue approach to education.

The Concept of Culture in van Oers' Closed Participatory Socialization Approach to Education

Van Oers' definition of culture is essentially restrictive, if not oppressive. He stated: 'Each culture sets limits as to what is acceptable and often sanctions transgressions of these limits with exclusion, disdain, or even punishment ... an essential function of culture is to control diversity within a community'. This view of culture is similar to Sidorkin's view that the main function of culture, and thus education, is to limit students' creativity, spontaneity, and freedom and channel them to socially important ready-made cultural standards. '[T]eaching involves both the enhancement and the restriction of learning; it involves channeling the omnivorous hunger of young minds into a narrower path of learning what the adults consider 'the most useful things.' ... In other words, teaching begins when an adult selects what should be taught and how it should be taught' [Sidorkin, 2009, p. 5].

Of course, culture can be restrictive and oppressive but, in our view, these are not essential or necessary functions of a culture. Rather, according to our critical dialogue approach to education, we understand culture as essentially transcendental, in which people transcend their ready-made culture using it as material for their transcendence. As Boesch pointed out, 'a main trait of human reality is to transcend itself ...' [1993, p. 15]. Thus, education, in our view, is about production of culture, like language is about production of new meaning and not about reproduction of ready-made words.

We think that van Oers' restrictive and oppressive definition of culture comes from at least three deeply rooted and mutually related points: (a) his prioritization of agreement, (b) his viewing culture as a set of codified cultural meaning (e.g., dictionary definitions, rules, norms, roles), and (c) his essentialist view of culture as 'the shared style of living of a group of people, and ... the set of shared attitudes, values (including knowledge and techniques), goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization, or group'.

First, prioritization of agreement, sharedness, and commonality in definition of culture is very widespread. However, in our view, agreement is rather secondary, and even an artificial feature of culture. Rather, culture is based on participation, engagement, coordination, and involvement. Wittgenstein's [2001] notion of 'language game,' Latour's [1996] notion of 'interobjectivity,' Star's and Griesemer's [1989] notion of 'boundary object,' and Matusov's [1996] notion of 'intersubjectivity without agreement' all focus on the emergent and participatory nature of culture. People learn a sociocultural practice not through its impositions of cultural codes, rules, roles, and schemes on them but through their pragmatic and interested participation

in the practice. The focus on agreement is coercive and violent: 'Culture is everything we find valuable and acceptable *for us as a group* and as a member of this group in the realization of everyday life' [van Oers, this issue; emphasis ours]. Since a 'group' does not naturally have its voice, somebody has to assume/usurp the power to talk on its behalf about what is culturally acceptable and what is not by the group. The focus on agreement creates opportunities for manufactured consent [Herman & Chomsky, 1988]. The agreement-based vision of culture is unavoidably violent, authoritarian and even totalitarian in its nature, as van Oers notices writing that each culture '... often sanctions trespasses of these [cultural – authors] limits with exclusion, disdain or even punishment'. The word 'control' appears 11 times in his article. Control has been the function of the school system historically in Western societies in the first place – control of the citizens of the nation state [Foucault, 1995].

Second, van Oers defined culture as a set of codified meanings which involve dictionaries, textbooks, protocols, rules, norms, preset roles, and so on. For him, education is a student's appropriation of the important sets of codified meanings to fill them with personal interests, lived authentic emotions, personal motive, values, and affections. He stated: 'In the cultural-historical perspective, meaningful learning is that type of learning that integrates both meaning [i.e., codified cultural meaning] and sense, that is, learning that produces learning outcomes with general cultural significance and that makes personal sense for the learner as well'. For van Oers and many other educational scholars, a set of codified meanings is the necessary precursor of masterful and capable participation in a sociocultural practice. However, other sociocultural scholars argue that codified cultural meanings (e.g., dictionaries, phonemic awareness, standardized language and spelling) are not a precursor to people's mastery of a sociocultural practice [Matusov, 2011a; Smith, 1985; Wittgenstein, 2001]. Rather, the codified cultural meanings can be a byproduct of a special cultural practice, historically developed around the 18th–19th century in Western cultures as a transition from a reign-based state to a nation-based state in order to support the newly emerging phenomenon of nationalism [Anderson, 1991]. Although an observer of or a participant in a sociocultural practice can abstract patterns, which can be useful for the practice, these reified patterns of participation remain dynamic, emergent, temporary, situated, limited, and contested. Pushing these abstractions to become totalizing, stable, and comprehensive – i.e., a set of codified cultural meanings (e.g., Standard English or Standard Dutch) – is a power tool for gatekeeping and oppressing subaltern groups in the name of transmitting 'correct and important' culture to a new generation. If Anderson's theory of nationalism is correct, the conventional school's focus on codified cultural meanings raises an issue of how much conventional schools participate in the maintenance of the modern nation state and nationalism.

Third, following many other scholars of culture, van Oers provided an essentialist view of culture as shared ways of doing things, shared styles, as a 'set of shared attitudes, values (including knowledge and techniques), goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization, or group.' Although he seemed to be uncomfortable with this list being static and not necessarily meaningful for an individual, thus leading to alienation, he saved this list of essential features of culture through his notion of appropriation, in which a student fills the ready-made culture with his/her own personal sense. An alternative, nonessentialist, approach is dialogic provided by Bakhtin [1999]:

One must not ... imagine the realm of culture as some sort of spatial whole, having boundaries but also having internal territory. The realm of *culture has no internal territory*: it is entirely distributed along the boundaries, boundaries pass everywhere, through its every aspect, the systematic unity of culture extends into the very atoms of cultural life, it reflects like the sun in each drop of that life. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries: in this is its seriousness and its significance; abstracted from boundaries, it loses its soul, it becomes empty, arrogant, it disintegrates and dies. (p. 301)

Matusov and his colleagues elaborated on Bakhtin's notion of 'culture has no internal territory' in educational contexts by focusing on dialogic boundaries between cultures [Matusov, Smith, Candela, & Liliu, 2007]. Thus, for example, the Roman number system was just the number system and not cultural until it encountered another non-Roman number system. In this encounter, the Roman number system (and the other cultural number system) dialogically constructs its *arbitrary* culturalness rather than *logical* naturalness as it was before this encounter. Not recognizing intercultural dialogue as the creator of culture forces van Oers to focus on restrictive and oppressive functions as generating the cultural phenomenon; 'an essential function of culture is to control diversity within a community in order to maintain identities (at a communal and personal level) in the present and in the future'.

Van Oers proposed 'imitative participation' as a means for students' appropriation of the ready-made culture to make this ready-made culture the students' own, filled with the students' own personal meaning:

Elsewhere, however, Vygotsky [1984, p. 263] stressed that by imitation he did not mean 'mechanically copying an intellectual operation.' Rather, it refers to reconstructing an activity with the help of others. It is called 'imitation,' because it concerns the re-enactment of a pre-established cultural activity, but it is still an act of creation allowing the child to make his own version of the imitated activity within the boundaries allowed by the social environment that is in charge of controlling the acceptable variations within the socially shared definition of that practice.

Vygotsky's emphasis on imitation, in which the boundary between students' voice and the imitated ready-made culture is erased, contrasts with Bakhtin's [1999] notion of 'double-voicedness:'

Someone else's words introduced into our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them; that is, they become double-voiced. All that can vary is the interrelationship between these two voices. The transmission of someone else's statement in the form of a question already leads to a clash of two intentions within a single discourse: for in so doing we not only ask a question, but make someone else's statement problematical. (p. 195)

We argue that Bakhtin's notion of double-voicedness, which evaluates and problematizes the ready-made culture, is the key for education and not Vygotsky's notion of imitation or van Oers' notion of 'imitative participation.'

We argue that van Oers' process of 'appropriation of cultural tools in collaboration with more knowledgeable others' masks, hides, and erases boundaries between the student's own voice and the authoritarian voice of the ready-made culture (and status quo and embedded tacit power relations in the cultural practices). Although van Oers mentioned students' creativity (and even critical thinking) several times in his article, this 'creative digestion' remains essentially limited to students' personal

Table 1. Diverse approaches to education

| Approaches to education | Example | Curriculum | Instruction/guidance |
|------------------------------------|---|---|----------------------|
| Alienated learning | Often conventional schooling | <i>Poiesis</i> : reproduction of the ready-made culture | <i>Poiesis</i> |
| Closed participatory socialization | 'Imitative participation', appropriation of the ready-made culture (van Oers, Vygotsky) | <i>Poiesis</i> : reproduction of the ready-made culture | <i>Praxis</i> |
| Open participatory socialization | 'Community of practice', 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave, Wenger) | <i>Praxis</i> : production of culture | <i>Praxis</i> |
| Critical dialogue | 'Dialogic education for agency' (Matusov, Smith, Soslau, Marjanovic-Shane, von Duyke) | <i>Praxis of praxis</i> : critical stance on culture | <i>Praxis</i> |

and idiosyncratic appropriation of the culturally given. Thus, we see this process of appropriation not as a student's appropriation of culture but in fact as the ready-made culture's appropriation of the student. In cultural appropriation, the student becomes a host for the ready-made culture with all of its hidden power relations embedded in the existing cultural practices, while the ready-made culture becomes a parasitic virus controlling the student without the student's awareness of this control.

Conclusion

We developed the framework, presented in table 1, of four approaches to education to situate van Oers' proposal of 'imitative participation' in abstract thinking as the main goal of education. In our view, this framework (see table 1) was helpful for deepening our understanding and evaluation of his proposal as well as for the further development of our framework. We add parenthetically that we do not think that our framework is comprehensive and exhaustive. It is itself a work in progress. For example, we are not sure that the so-called free school movement – e.g., Summerhill School [Neill, 1960], Sudbury Valley School [Greenberg, 1992] – will fully fit within our framework. Finally, despite the critique we offered of van Oers' educational approach, we applaud his critique of alienated conventional schooling and view his efforts to develop an alternative practice that meaningfully engages students in learning as a step forward.

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