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by

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Leafing through an issue of *Language Arts* this July, I spotted the advertisement. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) was calling for papers on alternatives to grading student writing to be included in an edited volume. Instantly interested but unsure what to write about, I cut out the ad and filed it in my journal.

Several days later, I made telephone calls to the student members of my summer book club to remind them about our upcoming meeting. The following conversation sparked the paper I eventually wrote for NCTE with my former student, Amy Muentener, now a senior at Norton High School:

> "Hi!, Amy, this is Ms. Chandler. I'm calling to get a head count for the book club meeting. Did you read the book?"
>
> "I'm not quite done, but I've been busy writing my *Catch-22* paper for Advanced Placement."[1]
>
> "How's it going?"
>
> "I know it's going to be good."
>
> "How do you know?"
>
> "The ideas are there. I still need to ask myself some questions, though. Am I backing things up with text? Is it staying with the question? It's almost like you're here standing over my shoulder, saying, 'Why? Explain.' "

Just after I hung up, this five-minute telephone conversation seemed minor to me. I realized after some reflection, however, that it revealed a great deal about Amy's development as a writer. Without teacher assistance, she could identify the strengths and weaknesses of a piece in progress and devise strategies to address the flaws. Having internalized the process for herself, she no longer needed a conference with me to move from a first to a second draft. Although she told me that she could hear my voice in her head, what she really heard was her own writer's voice. She had achieved Arthur Costa's "ultimate purpose of evaluation" by teachers: the student's ability to evaluate herself (Rief, 1992, p. 45).

As I pondered Amy's progress, I wondered how she had gained this independence. What steps had she taken? What support had I given? I couldn't answer those questions alone. Furthermore, as I considered the professional literature I'd read and the conversations I'd had about the assessment and evaluation of student writing, I realized that the piece missing from many of those discussions was the student's perspective.

For these reasons, I invited Amy to be my co-author for the NCTE piece, to share both her own story as a writer and her insights on assessment and evaluation. After much conversation, we

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[1]At Norton High School, where I taught English 10 and an upperclass Literature Seminar, Advanced Placement English courses were available to juniors and seniors. All students were required to complete several summer assignments before being permitted to enter the A.P. courses. After a year of heterogeneously grouped English 11, Amy had decided to enroll in A.P. English 12, which explains her writing a paper for school in July.

agreed that one-on-one conferences had been the most powerful teaching and assessment method for Amy. We spent most of the month of August drafting, discussing, and re-drafting until we had a product with which we were both satisfied. Our paper, "Seeing How Good We Can Get It: Conferencing and Collaborating in the Secondary English Classroom," explored the kinds of conferences that we had during her two years in my classes and the effects that they had on Amy's development as a writer. It was accepted by the committee on Alternatives to Grading and will appear in a Classroom Practices volume sometime next year.

Enter Vygotsky

In August of 1995, when Amy and I wrote our paper, I was preparing to leave Norton High School and enter a doctoral program at the University of Maine. I had heard vaguely of Lev Vygotsky and his zone of proximal development (ZPD) during my master's program, but I knew very little about his work or the implications of it. It didn't occur to me then that many of the issues Amy and I discussed, as well as many of the teaching strategies I used with her, were essentially Vygotskian in nature. Only after I enrolled in Paula Moore's graduate seminar on Vygotskian interpretations and implications did I begin to see those connections. In fact, my conversations with Amy echoed in my mind during so many of our seminar discussions that several weeks into the course I pulled our paper out of my files and re-read it.

This essay represents my re-examination of that work with Amy, given the vantage point provided me by new knowledge. It seeks to pull several strands of my life as a teacher and a learner together. Through the lens of Vygotskian theory, I will analyze my interaction with Amy both as co-authors of an essay and as teacher and student in the two classes—English 10 and Literature Seminar—that she took with me. In particular, I will focus on three Vygotskian concepts—the zone of proximal development, self-regulation, and the role of the more capable other—whose implications seem most powerful to me in working with Amy and other teenage writers.

The Zone of Proximal Development

In *Mind and Society* (1978), Vygotsky defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In other words, teachers should be looking at what students are able to do with help, rather than to focus solely on what they can do independently. The ZPD provides a target of sorts for each student; instruction needs to be aimed at it.

The concept of the ZPD was essential for Vygotsky (1986) because he believed that "the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening function" (p. 188). Rather than responding to what students can already do, as they might have done in a Piagetian developmental model, teachers using a Vygotskian framework need to be sensitive to what students are *almost* ready to do. They need to provide what Jerome Bruner and others have called "scaffolding" so that students may experience, in a supportive context with the help of a more capable person, something they could not do alone.

In order to work within the ZPD, English teachers—or any teacher for that matter—must recognize each child as an individual, not merely part of a group or class. They must observe closely and interact with students working through real reading and writing tasks in class. If the ZPD

measures the difference between independent and assisted problem-solving, then teachers who want to work within it need to devote a good deal of their class time to *assisting* students. As I see it, it's hard to identify the ZPD, much less guide kids through it, when students are doing assignments alone at home.

Teaching Occasionally in the ZPD (Fall 1993). If I had worked from Amy's independent efforts, rather than from her assisted performance, I might never have realized how much she had to offer as a writer. When my relationship with her began, more than two years ago, she "didn't like to write. I hated English. I dreaded going to that class more than any other." Poor grades and red pen bleeding over her papers had convinced Amy that she was a poor writer. And, indeed, her technical skills were weak—her punctuation haphazard, her grammar erratic, her spelling more creative than correct. Much of her previous writing had been graded harshly because of these errors in mechanics. No one had made it clear that her lack of control over a text's surface features didn't make the text meaningless, so she was afraid to express herself on paper.

Because her reading skills had not been harshly criticized, Amy defined herself as a reader, rather than a writer:

> I have always been a reader. I remember when my family would go on trips and I would pack bags of books, instead of clothes. ... Although I read a lot, writing was never one of my strongest abilities. It's something I need to constantly work on. I was never encouraged to try harder at writing until my sophomore year in high school.

Encouraging Amy was what those first conferences in English 10 were all about. Because of her previous negative experiences, I needed to "deprogram" her, to use Zemelman and Daniels' (1988) phrase, from her expectation that her work would be evaluated for its correctness, not its content (p. 227). I needed to provide her with an interested, supportive audience, to convince her to keep going when she was inclined to give up on a piece.

In the early stages of my relationship with Amy, I did not pick her pieces apart or focus on her errors. I don't mean to suggest, however, that I didn't instruct her. Instead, as Amy recalls, those early conferences were focused on the "big picture" of the piece, "looking at the whole paragraph to see if it said what I wanted it to say, making sure I had all the elements of the paragraphs and of the whole paper—introduction, conclusion, thesis."

According to David Wood (1988), "If the task involves a number of steps, the [unguided] child whilst concentrating on how to execute one ... may lose his sense of direction ... and lose sight of the whole problem" (p. 76). I saw this happen to Amy frequently. In her attempt to maintain correctness in her first drafts—a tough battle for anyone but especially so for her because of her poor skills—she often lost sight of the task as a whole. She was so busy trying to write an error-free sentence that most of her paragraphs, and often the entire paper, didn't make sense. When I taught her to write her first drafts fluidly, without stopping to worry about errors, and to ask herself big questions about structure and organization, her writing improved significantly. Those questions, which I asked first and then Amy learned to ask herself, provided the scaffolding she needed to produce coherent, cohesive drafts.

Unfortunately, my English 10 classes at that time were not primarily organized around the workshop time and one-on-one conferences. Those days were sandwiched between quizzes and role-playing, research projects and film clips. In my writing program, I sometimes spent more time on brainstorming exercises and revision activities than I did on coaching students through a piece of

writing. I knew I needed to modify the structure of my class so that I could assist my students' performance more effectively.

Tutoring in the ZPD (Spring 1994). I learned the difference between sporadically teaching in the ZPD and systematically doing so when I began tutoring Amy midway through her sophomore year. This experience was so powerful that it helped me to make the shift within my classes that I had been considering since the fall. In January Mrs. Muentener called me to ask if I would give her daughter some extra help with grammar and mechanics, and I agreed to work with Amy once a week, on Thursdays. Instead of asking Amy to complete grammar exercises from the textbook (at which she was already quite good) we decided to work on her technical skills in the context of her writing. Paragraph by paragraph, we edited Amy's work together, eliminating surface errors.

From these conferences, I learned a great deal about teaching and evaluating skills in the context of a student's piece—something I'd previously preached but not really practiced. Trying not to overwhelm Amy by pointing out all the errors she had made, I learned to focus on one skill at a time until it was mastered. For example, I sometimes selected a paragraph and told her that there were three comma errors in it, but not what or where they were. She worked until she fixed them, reviewing rules concerning commas and ignoring any other errors she encountered. She learned how to identify her own particular demons—inconsistencies in verb tense or omitted words—and how to isolate those mistakes when reading a draft. She also learned how to pay closer attention to initial sounds and to count syllables in order to better approximate words when using the spell checker. Because I modeled working on one kind of error at a time in our conferences, Amy began to focus her independent editing as well. In time, she was able to self-correct a much larger percentage of her technical errors.

When I saw how much progress Amy could make with regular coaching, I realized that I needed to spend less time on my couch with my comment pen and the student's paper and more time in my classroom with the student and the paper. Most kids in my English 10 classes were not getting the personalized attention that Amy had in our Thursday sessions. My conferences with them were neither frequent nor sustained enough. I was not consistently working with them in their ZPDs; nor did we have enough opportunities to solve problems jointly. Consequently, I began to explore a format for my upperclass elective, Literature Seminar, where I could replicate the tutoring time as closely as possible. Amy signed up for that course in the spring of her junior year, and our partnership continued.

Teaching in the ZPD (Almost) Every Day (Spring 1995). The basic requirements of Literature Seminar were simple, designed to provide maximum choice and individualization for students. What I didn't know then was that I had also created a structure within which I could provide help for students within their own ZPDs. Each quarter, students read a minimum of four books of their choice, completed at least two polished papers or projects related to their reading, participated in conferences and discussions, and wrote weekly letters to me about their progress. At least half of each eighty-minute block was reserved as workshop time for the students and me to read, write, and—most important—conference. For the first time in my teaching career, I was able to give *all* of my students the kind of focused, personalized instruction I had given Amy on Thursdays.

Having established a relationship of trust with Amy, I was able to address more sophisticated issues in her work during that second year. Although she met with me at various stages of her writing process, depending on her needs, we usually sat down for a full-fledged conference only after

she had completed a first draft. Then we critiqued her writing together in almost the same fashion one would close-read a literary text. I call this kind of student-teacher interaction an "analytic conference," where the purpose is to analyze the piece for meaning on both the sentence level and paragraph level while making sure that the entire piece hangs together. Amy made big strides using this approach. As she explains it,

> The course that helped me the most in writing was the Literature Seminar. The method that benefited me most was sitting down with the teacher and picking the piece of writing apart, not only looking for grammar errors but also questioning thoughts and ideas. This time was spent reading each line and asking, why was that put in? what is its importance? does it make sense with the rest of the paper? I found that it helps when someone questions my ideas because that makes me think of a better way to justify myself.

By this time, Amy had learned to accept criticism constructively. She needed fewer "big picture" conferences for validation and more analytic ones for sharpening and polishing her pieces. She had moved far enough from her previous negative feelings about writing that she no longer took feedback personally. At this stage, Amy became more independent because she "could do the first draft on my own. I didn't need to talk to you all the time. From having had similar conferences before, about the same kind of weaknesses, I knew what to do and how to change them."

Analytic conferences required Amy to look at her writing in a more sophisticated way than "big picture" or editing conferences. As a sophomore, she would have been intimidated and overwhelmed by the practice. As a junior, she was ready to be stretched further. Working within her ZPD, I was able to identify her "ripening functions" and up the ante without frustrating her.

Only in Literature Seminar, where I had ample time to work with all of my students and identify their ZPDs, could I regularly provide the kind of one-on-one assistance—"big picture," editing, or analytic conferences—that writers like Amy needed. Only in that setting was I able to function effectively and efficiently as the more capable other. Because I no longer tried to take all 24 students through the same sequence of activities, I could plan more appropriate, individualized instruction for each of them. I could spend one-on-one time with each of them at least once a week. Last, but certainly not least important, I could provide them with opportunities to make choices, to work independently, and to practice being self-regulators of their own learning in a structured situation.

Self-Regulation

My summer telephone conversation with Amy provided the catalyst for our NCTE paper because her ability to self-evaluate was so striking to me. What I did not realize then, however, was that the list of questions I asked myself about how she had achieved it and how I had helped her could have been subsumed by a single question: "How did Amy learn to self-regulate?"

One of the most important of Vygotsky's concepts, self-regulation is always a socially constructed process. Defined by Diaz, Neal, and Amaya-Williams (1990) as "the child's capacity to plan, guide, and monitor his behavior from within and flexibly according to changing circumstances," (p. 130) self-regulation emerges from interaction with more capable others. Students do not learn it independently in a vacuum, nor can others simply "teach" it to them without the students' active engagement. For Vygotsky (1986), self-regulation is not just a desirable by-product of teaching; it is the whole purpose of what we do in schools. He writes, "What the child can do in

cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow" (p. 188). This process can only take place if students learn to self-regulate their behavior.

In retrospect, I used several strategies with Amy that were designed to support and encourage self-regulation. When I conferenced with her about a piece in progress, I usually began with Lucy Calkins' classic questions: "Tell me about your piece" or "How's it coming?" (Atwell, 1987, p. 70). From the beginning, our conversations about her work grew out of her own self-assessment of it. As mentioned before, I taught her a series of questions to ask herself to make sure that each paragraph and the entire piece made sense and said what she wanted to say.

As another way of encouraging self-regulation, I included Amy in the summative assessment and evaluation process. When she was enrolled in Literature Seminar as a junior, I asked her to write a self-evaluation before participating in an end-of-the-quarter conference with me to negotiate a final grade. Preparing for these conferences forced Amy to articulate her strengths and weaknesses, her accomplishments and goals. She couldn't rely on me to tell her how she had performed during the quarter; she had to think for herself. In her third quarter evaluation, Amy acknowledged her developing self-regulation: "I have become more independent with my writing ... [I'm] not just waiting until you tell me what the next step is."

I tried to encourage that independence even when we were collaborating on our NCTE article. When we conferenced over a draft, I sometimes deliberately left the room on errands so that Amy could work through a problem in our paper on her own. When I returned, she had to articulate to me how she had solved it. We wrote some pieces of the text on our own and then combined our ideas, ensuring that Amy's voice did not get subsumed by mine and requiring her to make choices about what to include. In fact, one of the most exhilarating moments of our collaboration came when we shared our methodological footnotes, written separately. After I read Amy's, I asked with mock sternness, "Do you have any idea what you did here?" "What? What's the matter with it?" she said in a panic. "There are NO technical errors in this entire typed page," I answered. "You self-corrected everything."

Anyone who had seen Amy's error-littered drafts two years before would have understood her wide grin. My grin was just as wide, though, because I knew that this improvement didn't happen by accident or divine intervention. It happened because of Amy's hard work—and mine. Because of her interaction with me, as the more capable writer in her life, she had become more capable, too.

The More Capable Other

According to Vygotsky's theory, development depends on social interaction between the learner and a more capable person. Without that interaction, the ZPD cannot even be determined. Analyzing my interactions with Amy using Vygotsky's framework allows me to draw three conclusions about the role of the teacher or expert other in teaching writing to adolescents: The teacher must be active in service to the student, demonstrate his or her expertise, and value the collaboration as beneficial for both people. I will discuss each of these conclusions in turn.

Active Service to the Student. I learned from Amy how important it is for the more capable other to be active in the service of the learner. Ironically, this was most clear to me not when she was working with me directly, but when she was someone else's student. In the fall of her junior year, Amy was enrolled in English 11, a year-long course taught by another teacher. She did not flourish in this class; she earned a C for the third quarter and once she even received a midterm failure warning.

Amy's most significant criticisms of English 11 concerned writing instruction. She particularly resented the teacher's practice of grading final drafts without having seen the previous stages. According to her, when he gave an assignment, "He didn't talk about it at all. There were no conferences about the paper. It was just due. A week later it came back with a grade on it." Amy didn't question her teacher's basic fairness or his knowledge about writing. She was more upset by his lack of knowledge about *her*. She wanted him to be actively involved with her work in progress. Unfortunately, her teacher didn't see his role that way, so Amy sought out other people, including me, to assist her with her drafts.

Amy's frustration with her English 11 teacher reinforced my emerging belief that teachers who adopt a "hands-off" stance with student writers do them a great disservice. Since then, I have tried hard not to be what Tharp and Gallimore (1988) call the "noninstructing teacher" who deprives the learner of "the most valuable residue of the teaching interaction: that heard, regulating voice, a gradually internalized voice, that then becomes the pupil's self-regulating 'still, small' instructor" (p. 57).

It may seem paradoxical to some people, but I've found that in order for students to be active learners on their *own* behalf, they must first have interaction with a teacher who works actively on their behalf. This is consistent with Vygotskian theory, which suggests that all learning takes place in a social context before being internalized by the learner. As Wood (1988) further explains, "interactions between the child and his teacher in which both co-operate in the development of mutual understanding are the stuff of development and learning" (p. 82). This social interaction requires *action* on the part of the learner and the teacher: it's the root of the word.

Demonstration of Expertise. Those social interactions also require the child to acknowledge the teacher as a more capable other whose help is worth accepting. In a Vygotskian model, it is not enough to say, "I'm the teacher; therefore, I'm the expert. Do it my way." I believe that the more capable other also needs to *demonstrate* his or her skills to the learner in a way that the learner can value.

Moreover, conceiving of work in the ZPD as an apprenticeship, as Barbara Rogoff (1990) does, suggests to me that language arts teachers should be readers and writers, as well as reading and writing teachers. After all, people have not historically apprenticed their children to weavers who wouldn't touch the loom or carpenters who didn't use hand tools. Teachers need to have experienced the learners' issues and problems in order to help the learner explore those issues and solve those problems. They need to be intimately familiar with the processes of reading and writing in more than a vicarious way.

Even before my collaboration with Amy, I frequently shared my writing—both the process and the products—with my students. When I taught a unit on position papers, I wrote my own essay on the overhead, using student input, on why Oprah Winfrey should run for President. Students co-constructed the essay with me—from taking a position to supporting it with evidence—before they began one on their own. When Amy's English 10 class was reading *Lord of the Flies*, they were simultaneously struggling with peer response. Too afraid to hurt each other's feelings, they said little in conferences with each other that would help the writer. To address this issue, I penned a poem from Simon's point of view and made copies for the students to critique. Then I asked for the specific kinds of feedback that I wanted them to give each other. The quality of their peer conferences improved after they experienced the process in a safe, guided situation.

Because Amy had seen me—and helped me—struggle personally with organization, revision, and other issues writers face, she trusted my advice. She knew that I, too, was working to improve as a writer, that I was learning (as she was) from my colleagues, my teachers, and my favorite authors. I was also learning from her.

Mutual Benefits of Collaboration. Working with Amy in the classroom and as co-authors also helped me to recognize that relationships between teachers and students are interdependent. In our NCTE paper, she described our Thursday tutoring sessions as time when "we worked *together*, sharing ideas about how to make my writing better and ways for students and teachers to collaborate better." Her comment illustrates her understanding that students aren't the only ones who benefit from journeys into the ZPD. With Amy's help, I learned to be a better teacher of writing at the same time she learned to be a better writer. Our experiences provide evidence of Tharp and Gallimore's (1988) claim that "assistance flows most often from the more competent to the less competent participant—from teacher to learner ... but *influence*, a more general concept, is inevitably reciprocal and shared" (p. 89).

Writing our paper together made this influence or interdependence even clearer. Neither of us could have done the task without the other. I needed Amy's insight and personal experience to tell a story that would have credibility with my teaching peers. I also needed her perceptions to help me critically evaluate the success of my own teaching. Amy had never written a scholarly article before. She needed me to demonstrate the format and model the tone. In the course of our work, she also learned how to integrate quotations smoothly into a paragraph, how to subdivide an essay into smaller topics, and how to footnote necessary information that might otherwise interrupt the flow of the narrative. Our work on this project was mutually beneficial.

I know that my experience with Amy is an unusual one: most teachers will not—indeed, could not—co-write articles with the 100 or more students they teach. I believe, however, that ordinary teaching and learning interactions in the classroom are strikingly similar, resting on the same foundation of interdependence. I think Vygotsky would agree. He presents a view of instruction that is reciprocal, "dialectical," to use his word. Again, Tharp and Gallimore (1988) explain this phenomenon further with their claim that "The interpersonal plane, created in joint activity, is a joint product" (p. 89). Instead of an article for publication, most students and teachers who enter the ZPD together create a relationship, a climate of both expectation and support. When they do this, students' chances of becoming independent learners increase exponentially.

In an essay heavily influenced by Vygotsky, researcher Susan Sowers (1988) advises teachers to "ask questions that you want students to ask themselves, so that they may have ... individual conferences with themselves. What they can do with you today they will do on their own later" (pp. 140-141). I quoted this passage in the conclusion of our NCTE paper, without realizing how much Sowers' ideas—or my own, for that matter—borrowed from Vygotsky. I became initially interested in writing with and about Amy because I saw that she was taking steps toward having those individual conferences with herself, and this was fascinating to me. In a sense, however, this present essay represents *my* conversation with myself, my own stretching of the zone of proximal development while I reflect on my own teaching. As I complete these lines, I realize that I am still learning from Amy, even after our work together is completed.

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