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Interactive Cognition – The Peanut Butter Culture

Roles:

Instructor

Left learner – if at all possible, make this a right-handed student

Right learner – a left-handed student would be much more fun

To her excellency, Mme. Bentley:

Text boxes and bold words are indications of chapter-related materials. *Bon appetit.*

Note how the instructions take people out of their culture of “handedness” for the lesson. You don’t think it’s a culture? Look up the root words of “sinister” and “dexterity” and tell me it’s not a culture.

Instructor:

Words in text boxes don’t apply to you. Skip them. The first thing you’re going to do is make a sandwich in front of the students. Tell them that one will be performing the role of the right hand and the other the left. Choose which is to be which. They need to be able to draw or write about their role when they’re done. Here’s a suggestion on how to get started. Say:

“Today the two of you will be making a sandwich together. You (choose one) will be the right hand and you (point to the other) will be the left hand. You’ll need to watch what I’m doing and follow along. Then you must make a sandwich without my help. Later you’ll have to write down or draw what you did.”

Note how immediately this new way of functioning moves what was automated learning into the new learning category. It becomes necessary to **enact** the making of a sandwich rather than rely on memory alone. If students merely had to write about the role of their non-dominant hand in sandwich making, they would probably pantomime the act of making the sandwich to spur on new learning. Note also how this pushes the learners into their **zones of proximal development** – forcing a directed learning environment which is necessarily going to involve **inquiry** as a basis of answering the needed questions.

Instructor:

In silence, make a peanut butter sandwich. Not talking will be difficult as they struggle to learn, but listen instead. Go very slowly and make sure your learners keep up. If necessary slow down. By the way, if you add in a couple steps (like tapping the side of the jar with the knife) you can probably get the students to do what you do, in spite of the fact that they've made sandwiches before.

Once the students have made the first sandwich, praise them. Ask what they've learned.

The students must communicate either verbally or non-verbally to get this done. This will not only demonstrate the students' different **cultures**, but create a semi-culture between them. Vygotsky would refer to this as **intersubjectivity**, or a shared understanding of the task. The ideal situation of using the non-dominant hand forces the students to consider another's perspective. It would be highly entertaining to do this between people who don't speak the same language, forcing them to develop their own communication, but let's not be too brutal today.

Instructor: After they have made the first sandwich, have them make a second one. This time, you can add comments. After they are done, process the experience with the students. Here are a few good starter questions:

Could there have been an easier way to do this?

(alternative predictions)

Would it have been easier or harder if you were the other hand? Why?

(hypothetical cases, alternate predictions)

Could your sandwich have been open-faced?

(counter examples)

How do one-armed people make sandwiches?

(Hypothetical, hypotheses)

Is the way you learned the best way to learn?

(Questioning authority)

Note how this **interaction** helps "make the learner as 'autonomous and self propelled a thinker' as possible" (Driscoll quoting Bruner). Also, the questions are explorative in nature, and do not necessarily show that the learning is teacher-mandated, but the mental exploration is learner-generated. The students will **transfer skills** from what they have already developed to the new task.

Instructor:

From here, have the students write or draw what they did. They are allowed to communicate about the project. When they're done, ask them whether their instructions would be sufficient for a new learner. Then ask them if the instructions would be sufficient for them one year from now. Figure out why, or what would need to be done for these instructions to be most beneficial. Allow them to change or alter their instructions as needed.

After they're satisfied, have the two learners switch papers and read each others' instructions. Have them give each other feedback on what they would add or change in the instructions

Note how the learners move from enactive to **iconic and symbolic** learning. They may still pantomime to get all the actions in, but they're no able to convey meaning in other ways. Because the students have vocabulary sufficient for most of what they did, they will probably use both icons and symbols, or perhaps just symbols if they're self-conscious about their ability to create icons. Also, this **interaction with others and the environment** creates what Vygotsky considers a good learning situation.

Instructor:

Make sure the students clean up. Listen to their talk as they clean to see if their lesson fits into the chatter. If not, it has probably become routine and you may be below the **zone of proximal development**. If students are processing, you've probably hit the mark, but if they're complaining more about unfairness, you may either be beyond their zones or just have a cranky group of learners.

All through this lesson, there is a lot of processing going on. It occurs both between students and teacher and student to student. If I were "performing" this in a classroom of my own, I would then have the students who wrote the papers give the newly-written paper instructions to another pair of students and see if they could follow. I believe that by such interaction, a classroom-culture would emerge as one of interdependence. Hmm... I may have to try this or some variation when I'm back in the classroom. Maybe not a full semester (wink), but I see value in the type of interactions taking place. Overall, Vygotsky and Brunner have taken this field up to the next level, but I'm grateful we did behavior-based learning first so as to better be able to put this into a contrast. If this was the first lesson, I'm sure we'd be lost.