

# Provocation in the Halls of Academe: Bringing Piaget and Vygotsky into the University Classroom

by Dale Borman Fink

**M**y Children's Literature students arrive on the first day of class to find seats arranged in clusters. There is no syllabus to pick up but there are colored 3" x 5" cards with names printed on them, folded tent-style, and arrayed on a table. I direct each student to find their own card and form groups to be comprised of one student whose name is on a yellow card, two on green, and one pink. They don't realize it, but the color-coding ensures that each group is a heterogeneous mix of first-years through seniors.

Once seated, each group finds a copy of *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown, and some instructions to structure their activity for the next 30 to 40 minutes. I walk around, welcome each student, and then leave the classroom for a few minutes. Many don't even notice I've left, because they're getting immersed in the work; if they do notice, I hope it crosses their minds that their learning is proceeding very well without me.

When I return, I make the rounds, pausing briefly when I encounter a group that appears thoroughly engaged and well-focused, and offering more intensive support where needed. At least one group has inevitably finished the entire list of guiding questions, way too fast, while one or two others haven't advanced far at all. Brief dialogue often reveals that some of these students are reluctant to contribute

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because they're worried that their ideas will seem puny, even embarrassing, when the professor eventually delivers the "correct" interpretations. I choose portions of the text or illustrations and coax them to simply articulate what they see. You noticed that Brown uses rhymes (moon, balloon) but also words that don't quite rhyme (room)? That Clement Hurd's bold color illustrations alternate with black and white pages? Great! You are bringing exactly the kind of aesthetic sensibility and attention to detail you will need throughout this course.

Before their instructor has provided a syllabus or spoken his first words to the class as a whole, the students have immersed themselves in course content,

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exercised their aesthetic and intellectual chops, and begun to form bonds with their peers. When we take up the guiding questions as a full class, students do most of the talking. Some students contribute ideas I fed them during my floating consultations, but articulate them in their own words—and that works for them and for me. I have relied on my knowledge and scholarship to prepare the ground for the entire exercise. There is no need for me to dominate the conversation.

#### TEACHING COLLEGE LIKE AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

One of the strategies favored by teachers of the Reggio Emilia preschools in Italy is called provocation. These municipally operated infant-toddler and early childhood centers, developed in northern Italy in the wake of World War II, have inspired early childhood educators worldwide since the 1980s. When Reggio (or Reggio-influenced) teachers arrange for young children to encounter novel materials, familiar materials displayed in a novel manner, or an unexpected change in their environment, they call these provocations. They hope their young learners will respond to the encounter with curiosity, excitement, questions—and most of all, by having to think.

I love using provocations as part of my pedagogy in higher education. My ambition is not only to get students to think about the subject matter I am presenting, but to get them wondering (though maybe not always consciously) about the role of learner and teacher.

Most students arrive at the first meeting of a new course with the expectation that they can be passive. They haven't been assigned any reading yet, so how could they be expected to participate actively? Experience has taught many of them that

the first class will be “organizational,” rather than content-focused. If they are anticipating having to think at all, it is to ponder such questions as, “How many papers will I have to write?” or “Is there anybody I know taking this class, someone I can sit with?”

I surprise my students: I require them to participate actively. I disrupt their plans to sit with a roommate or friend. The professor is in the background while texts, websites, or other content are in the foreground. The first dialogue of the semester is peer-to-peer, not professor-to-student. All of these, I hope, add up to provocation—moving students from sedentary to high-alert.

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The provocation can also take place before the first face-to-face meeting, or in a class that is purely online. My website for an introductory class in special education features a large photograph of Aaron Fotheringham upside down in wheelchair. Aaron was the first American to execute a wheelchair backflip off a skating ramp. This image acts as an immediate provocation. What does it mean to “have a disability” if a “person with disabilities” is engaging in such a daring, exhilarating performance? Without the benefit of an instructor nearby, the image provokes the student to pose important questions.

I began working with preschool-aged children long before I thought about becoming a professor, and nearly every element of my approach to teaching in higher education is rooted in early childhood theory and practice. In addition to provocations, I seek to activate the “whole student,” promote peer supports, and incorporate informal and authentic forms of assessment. In the upcoming pages, I elaborate on each of these, after first explaining the origin of my commitment to transform the college classroom into something more like an early childhood setting.

#### UNSATISFYING ENCOUNTERS WITH “LEARNING” IN THE IVY-COVERED HALLS

During my senior year as an undergraduate at Harvard, I began working at the KLH Child Development Center, which opened in the late 1960s as one of the first employer-sponsored childcare centers in the country. It was one subway stop from Harvard Square, and drew its primary constituency from parents who worked at local factories. Alternating my time between young children and college students gave me an unusual opportunity to observe and contrast vastly different approaches to education.

In my college courses, the professors “taught” and the students took notes. In lecture classes, which were the majority, faculty never knew my name, or whether I was even there. A few stylized their discourse by toking on pipes or cigarettes, and one chemist used to bound energetically up the steps of the lecture hall to interact with anyone who raised his hand. But most professors remained behind their podiums, did not encourage questions, did not use audio-visuals, nor encourage any kind of work with peers. In four years, I never experienced a student-led presentation or a student-made poster. Professors evaluated our learning by two methods: exams and papers.

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The tutorials and seminars were small, enabling those instructors to get to know students. But even there, faculty relentlessly focused on printed texts: reading them, discussing them, and writing about them. “Learning,” when I was not sitting in a classroom scribbling notes as keenly as possible, consisted of spending long hours laboring alone in a library or a dorm room, struggling against the fear of falling hopelessly behind

I was excited when an English professor of history included the Beatles album, “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” on our reading list. Peter Stansky’s lecture on that text must have been compelling, because I can still recall the gist of it: The “one and only Billy Shears” alluded to the traditional English music hall, which symbolized the glory days of the British Empire. The Empire was in decline, as illustrated by the plaintive lyrics of “She’s Leaving Home,” the minimalist aspirations of “When I’m 64,” and the rudderlessness of the political class, as shown in “A Day in the Life” (“He blew his mind out in a car/He didn’t notice that the lights had change”).

What I recall as keenly as the brilliance of the lecture was the fact that it was nothing but a lecture. There was no opportunity for students to develop, explain, or defend our own interpretations of the lyrics, or even comment on Stansky’s ideas. Moreover, the experience did not include listening to any of the audio tracks.

Meanwhile, at the day care center, things were very different. Singing and listening to music of many varieties were routine. There was no waiting around for an instructor to step forward and signal that the learning was about to begin. Teachers prepared the environment and set out materials but they were not the focal points of the classroom. Once children hung up their coats, they began

interacting with peers and choosing activities, turning to teachers for support as they deemed necessary.

Learning and teaching were not solitary but collaborative. All the teachers worked in teams, and they communicated with each other daily as together they guided young children to assimilate and master language, social skills, literacy, science and math concepts. Helping each child to cultivate a strong, positive sense of personal efficacy was treated as of equal importance to the mastering of specific skills.

A few years later, I obtained a master's degree in early childhood education,

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and came to realize that the approach to learning I witnessed at KLH was not unique. The ideas they put into action were consistent with a multi-generational tradition of American “nursery education,” and supported by theorists like Dewey, Piaget, and Montessori. According to this tradition and these theorists, students do not assimilate or absorb knowledge by having it handed over or explained by someone who knows more but rather, they construct knowledge. They do this through hands-on engagement, using all their senses, and having opportunities to fail over and over before arriving at a “correct” understanding.

During that first year at KLH, I did not yet have that background in early childhood education. Yet over time, I began to believe that the teaching and learning I witnessed at the childcare center had a deeper, richer, and more authentic quality than what I was experiencing at Harvard. I found myself perplexed. Why did professors restrict themselves to such a limited repertoire of instructional approaches? I could see that some concepts might best be explicated in a lecture, but why such a disproportionate reliance on that single mode of instruction? Did the phrase, “higher education” mean to separate and elevate knowledge acquired through “higher” (i.e., intellectual) powers, while denigrating forms of knowledge more tethered to one's body, senses, social relationships, cultural context, or emotional development?

Decades passed, I became a faculty member in higher education, and I knew I wanted to bring to my students better opportunities to think and learn than were given to me as an undergraduate. I aimed to reach and engage their emotions, their social interactions, their senses, even their need to physically get out of their seats and move. I wanted them to be as eager in their learning as the children I got to know at KLH.

The photograph (left) is from a series titled *Surface Tensions*. The artist is Meggan Gould, assistant professor, at the University of New Mexico. For more, visit [www.meggangould.net](http://www.meggangould.net).





## TEACHING THE “WHOLE STUDENT”

In early childhood education, we call it “teaching the whole child.” Why approach learners at other stages of life differently? My pedagogy intersperses music, drawing, hands-on activities, physical movement, and structured social interaction along with more commonly used formats such as printed text and multimedia.

As I prepare for each class, I envision how much time students will spend accessing various channels for learning. I find there is seldom any reason that “listening to prepared remarks” should take up more than 20 percent of a class, while

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lecturing plus whole-group discussion need not exceed 50 percent. I constantly ask myself: How can students discover, uncover, or construct knowledge about today’s topic, rather than hearing about it from me?

How can a study of statistical tables—for example, the ones that annually describe special education trends by state, school district, and so forth—become a “whole student” activity? I find I can make the activity personal, independent, interactive, and engaging simply by letting each student choose one state or city and providing them with a list of questions. These web-savvy learners enjoy ferreting out the data—especially if they’ve chosen places they care about. It comes naturally to the ones who finish first to support their peers. When we have a display of data that they have dug up and care about, I use this “numerical portrait” to help them uncover some key underlying ideas and issues: the fluid definitions of learning disabilities, the rapid increase in students with autism, the wide disparities between states.

## PEER SUPPORTS

The legacy of Soviet theorist Lev Vygotsky to early childhood educators around the world was to recognize that every learner has a “zone of proximal development,” and that support targeted to that zone—just beyond what the learner is able to achieve independently—will assist the learner in advancing to the next stage more quickly than otherwise. When work with partners or small groups is orchestrated thoughtfully, peer models can play as powerful a role in a university classroom as their younger brothers and sisters do in a sandbox.

In all my classes, I create partnerships and small groups whose longevity ranges from a few minutes to several weeks of collaboration. There is no blueprint that guarantees the correct composition of a group, but I learned from my early

childhood background (Vygotsky again) that social context is a critical input to any learning process. By taking responsibility for the way groups are formed, I can more effectively advance the learning agenda. Also, I can subtly encourage connections that cross generation, gender, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. Toward the latter part of the semester, I do permit students to select their own partners for certain kinds of projects. But by then, everyone has worked with a variety of classmates.

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me they have terrible recollections of small-group work in high school and in other college classes, mostly stemming from situations where more committed students “did all the work.” Assigning roles within groups, defining those roles clearly, requiring students to keep me posted about their progress, and having students submit individual written reports in the aftermath of group presentations help me ensure that my students get the benefits of peer support while avoiding the pitfalls.

When asking students to post and interact with their peers online, I similarly create roles and structure. For example, I will designate one or more specific students to be the first to comment on a reading. Everyone will eventually have that responsibility. The first student has an earlier deadline than the others and a different, more extensive rubric to follow, because the first post will build a framework for further class discussion.

#### INFORMAL AND AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Educators of the youngest learners do not quiz for “right answers.” Rather, they engage in dialogue and support their ability to discern and learn. In science, for example, they help them to explore phenomena, look for patterns, make observations, generate and test hypotheses, make predictions, document their findings, and share their insights with peers. As a faculty member in higher education, I do not have as much freedom to let the learners set the agenda and the pace. But I experiment every semester in hopes of moving the balance away from having my students “jump through hoops” and toward spending their time in ways that are meaningful to them.

One of my experiments has been to create assignments that are graded only as “completed” or “not completed” and that require students to engage in dialogue

with me. For example, I have asked my education students to write about their least favorite curriculum area. “What are your memories of this subject? Can you think of a way to teach it—perhaps differently than it was taught to you—that would be engaging for students and that you would enjoy?” Knowing that I will write back to them with my own thoughts, but without any evaluative comments, students understand that I am actually interested in their honest reflections. Often, it requires a few assignments of this nature before students stop trying to impress me, and begin trying to impress themselves.

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until I realized that I could not find a fair way to measure it. I decided that I should give college students the same respect I had always given younger learners—to recognize that they acquire knowledge through myriad different learning styles. Why reward or penalize a student for the learning and communication style that comes naturally to her or him? When it comes to whole-class discussion, I work on spreading the participation around, signalling to some to “hold onto your thoughts,” while asking to hear from “voices we have not yet heard.” And I frequently call on students unsolicited. Of equal importance: most of the questions I ask in class are open-ended. One of my early childhood mentors, Lilian Katz, used to say that you are insulting young children if you ask them questions to which you already know the answer, because, “That is not a dialogue; that is a test.”

A related question I have asked myself is how to make papers meaningful and authentic to the specific content area—not a repeated measure of whether someone is a capable and competent writer. My best strategy has been to ask students to stop writing papers for me and write them for a different (imagined) audience, perhaps a letter to a disgruntled parent. “Why is my daughter playing with marbles and ramps when I come to pick her up?” the parent wants to know. “Is the teacher too tired at the end of the day to work with her on her letters and numbers?” They have to reference concepts we are studying, but contextualize them in concise and jargon-free communication.

DO WE PASS ALONG WHAT IS KNOWN OR  
SUPPORT STUDENTS IN GOING BEYOND?

Jean Piaget, the Swiss biologist who became one of the 20th century’s leading child development theorists, divided education into two types—passive and active.

To choose, he explained, we must clarify our goal. “Must we shape children and individuals who are simply capable of learning what is already known? To repeat what has been acquired by the preceding generations? Or is it about shaping innovative, creative minds?”

I had read *Where the Wild Things Are* a couple hundred times, browsed through some secondary commentaries, and shepherded many classes through the iconic work before “Rebecca” joined my course. I had cancelled the first class of the fall due to a conflict, but in lieu of the opening class, I had given them an assignment: to study Maurice Sendak’s most famous book and write a short paper or make a

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video on any element of the book that drew their attention. And there it was, from a soft-spoken sophomore with dark, curly hair who had not yet had the benefit of attending a single one of my classes: an unmistakably brilliant insight, right there in her video, which she had shot using her laptop or phone in her dorm room. She said that most kids around the age of the protagonist, Max, are into dogs or cats, or maybe even more exotic animals like elephants. But the text and artwork revealed that Max was wearing a “wolf suit.” A wolf, Rebecca commented, is popularly known as a solitary animal, as in the phrase, “lone wolf,” thereby foreshadowing Max’s solitary journey.

I had thought about the wolf suit as representing a boy who wanted to feel strong and aggressive, but I had never thought about it as insightfully as Rebecca had. I showed her video to the class and acknowledged that this student had found meaning where I had overlooked it. I did not want them coming to this class to sit there and absorb my knowledge and erudition. I was inviting them to bring their critical faculties and to find their own unique ways to surpass me.

Young learners like the ones I worked with at KLH do not need a great deal of prodding or encouragement to explore materials, express themselves artistically, or articulate opinions. They assume—until socialized otherwise—that they are entitled to their own ideas and even to their own learning agendas. With university students, it is not so simple. We encounter them after a long process of socialization. Most arrive in our classrooms with a set of assumptions forged through years of experience, assumptions about schooling and assignments and classrooms and that are incompatible with the meaningful and unbridled quest for learning. Would you like to see some of those assumptions begin to unravel? Why not plan a provocation? 

## ENDNOTES

1. Edwards et al., *100 Languages of Children*.
2. Mooney, *An Introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky*, pp. 83-84.
3. Adapted from Neill, *Real Science in Preschool: Here, There, and Everywhere*, p. 10.
4. Spoken during took a class I took with Dr. Katz at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1995.
5. Films Media Group, "Piaget's Developmental Theory: An Overview." From the opening segment of the film. The English translations are my own, not those given in the subtitles.

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