

Social Relations and the Use of Symbolic Resources in Learning and Development

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Introduction

Social relations unfold between people, in specific societies. Doing so, they participate both in the making of people and societies, and, in times of tension and war, in the unmaking of groups or the harming of individuals. Yet social relations are never immediate, or naked. In a world of culture, they appear as always mediated. In effect, people's relationships are made through exchanges of words and objects, are filtered by beliefs and expectations, and are facilitated by phones and books. Yet, interestingly, these mediations – be they material tools or more semiotic mediation – mostly have a double mode of existence. Not only do they actually mediate a social relation between two people – as when a flag is passed from one hand to another – but also they are mostly likely to mediate, or trigger, or facilitate a more symbolic dynamic, as when a flag is used by one person to remind them of their childhood home, or for the other to think about possible conquests for their group. In other words, a cultural psychology invites us to examine the cultural elements which mediate human relationships. These, which usually have a material and a semiotic dimension, have both an existence in the present – the here and now of an interaction – and also a more virtual one, opening memories or worlds of possibilities.

In times of intergroup conflict, education is seen as one means by which teachers might bring children to imagine a world beyond the limitation of stereotypes, mistrust and violence. Teaching about democracy, civic rights, personal or collective history appear as means to go beyond the here and now, the difficult and the painful, and to support a

movement that could, ideally, allow children to recognize the perspectives of others (Makriyianni & Psaltis, 2007; Daiute, 2010, 2013; Keller, Chapter 3, this volume). But in what ways can teaching help young people to go beyond mistrust, the fear of Otherness and the uncertainty of the unknown, and to reflect on their situation in the world and their relationship to others and the social world? My starting point here is to consider that teaching-learning is a mediated activity: at its core lie objects of knowledge, cultural elements or artefacts (Cole, 1996; Downing Wilson & Cole, Chapter 10). Therefore, to understand how teaching-learning can bring the recognition of the Other, or to reflect on one's relationship with the Other, one needs to consider the dynamics that take place with and through these cultural elements in their double mode of existence. These objects can on the one side be the vehicle for the transmission of facts and historical narratives, while on the other side, and simultaneously, they are likely to awake a more personal, emotional and imaginary engagement. In this chapter I therefore examine the role of cultural elements, as these trigger imaginary experiences, in people's development of a better understanding of Self and Otherness in teaching-learning situations.

Imagination and territorial conflicts

The social sciences in studying intergroup conflict have in general shown the negative, if not destructive, role of imagination in dealing with Otherness. Classical social psychology shows that two groups in a situation of competition each tend to develop simplified and stereotypical views of the other group, which emphasizes differences and reduces similarities (Tajfel, 1981). Such representations can also lead groups to be immune to any change towards an openness to the other (Gillespie, Chapter 6). Current studies on geographic imaginations show how, in the case of territorial conflicts – such as in the Israeli-Palestinian situation – imaginary dimensions prevent negotiations and the search for compromises. Indeed, mythical narratives of the past or religious projects are heavily emotional and value-laden. Consequently, when two groups hold contradictory “geographic imaginations” of a place, these are often deeply mutually exclusive (Newman, 1999). Such studies also suggest that actual negotiations can only start when the interlocutors leave the plane of imaginary narratives to focus on pragmatic problem-solving. On the other hand, a few studies also suggest that imaginary productions might actually participate in a positive transformation of the representational field in the case of intergroup conflict.

Studies of the evolution of mural painting in Ireland (Gillespie, 1999), or of the role of poetry in the same country (Reid, 2008), suggest that fiction and imagination can have a role to play in the resolution of conflict. Such studies are promising and demand a better understanding of the processes involved. I will thus consider young people's uses of fiction – focusing not on intergroup relationship (as in Downing Wilson & Cole, Chapter 10) but on interpersonal and intrapsychic dynamics.

Sociocultural approach to learning and development

My perspective here is a sociocultural, developmental psychology (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 2007). Sociocultural psychology sees our society as a world of circulating webs of meaning that have strong canalizing functions. People live in social frames as well as symbolic networks that favour some modes of thinking and action and render others almost inconceivable. Yet this psychology also sees people as having unique perspectives in that world. The person has a history, they feel, they have memories, desires and imagination, and they have experiences and activities in the world. As a person acts and interacts with others (present or imaginary, specific or generalized) and with objects that result from the experiences of others, they internalize some of the socially shared meanings and discourse, but also appropriate them and create a unique understanding – their personal culture. On this basis, they also externalize meaning in a unique manner, by which they will contribute to the symbolic fields and shared discourse. Through this ongoing dynamic, the person can thus define a unique melody of living (Zittoun et al., 2013). My focus here is on semiotic processes – that is, processes by which we understand the signs in the world and how these shape our mind, and how our mind, through signs, transforms the world.

Uses of symbolic resources

Children and young adults – as well as people throughout life – find many occasions for learning and change in their daily lives. People interact with others, learn with them, reflect on their own action and learn by experience; they also play and so explore new possibilities for actions. Finally, they spend a lot of time interacting with “imaginary worlds” offered by fiction: they read and are read stories, watch cartoons and movies, listen to songs, and see drawings and paintings. Let us call these films, novels, comic books and so on “cultural elements”.

Interacting with them, children and adults engage in a fictional, imaginary experience, supported by the language, images and sounds, and demanding from the child to “nourish” the fiction with their own knowledge of the world and their own feelings. One needs to mobilize one’s own experience of forest to understand Little Red Riding Hood. One also needs to draw on one’s understanding of the relationship of plausible causalities. On the other hand, imagination demands to follow new paths, and enter into an “as if” mode: one reasons not only with what is – it is dangerous to be a child in the forest – but also with what could be the case: What if the child meets the wolf? What if the wolf is in disguise? And so forth (Vygotsky, 1971; Miller et al., 1993; Harris, 2000). Imagination triggered and guided by cultural elements thus demands both a strong emotional commitment and also the exploration of alternatives to what is known. These explorations are “safe” in the sense that even strong emotions triggered by a story (the pleasure of killing the wolf) have no actual consequences.

In addition, people very often have the opportunity to reflect about these cultural experiences when they talk about them with parents and friends or remember them in new situations. Cultural elements are thus likely to be used by children and adults as symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2006, 2007, 2014). As such, they are mobilized not only for what they actually say or represent but as means to do something else – to reflect about oneself, to capture and understand one’s emotions, or to understand better other people’s actions or the world. In past studies I have thus shown that in daily life, people use symbolic resources in such a way that they might redefine their identity, learn new ways of doing things or confer a new sense to a given situation. For these reasons, uses of symbolic resources might be candidates for transforming Self–Other relationships.

Philosophy, literature and movies as symbolic resources

Michele Grossen and I have explored how upper secondary school students could relate to philosophical and literary texts encountered in the classroom, and in what contexts they could possibly use them as symbolic resources. We studied three secondary schools in the same Swiss canton, the project including 230 young people in 15 group classes. We observed 56 lessons, interviewed teachers (N=16), asked students to complete a general questionnaire (N=205) and interviewed some of them alone (N=20) or in focus groups (N=6). Each type of data was analysed as a corpus, and we also built case studies, bringing together

data related to one teacher and their class (see e.g. Zittoun & Grossen, 2012; Grossen et al., 2012).

From the interview data it appears that young people from our sample are very likely to use symbolic resources in school and out of school. In what follows I take some examples of uses of symbolic resources, with a specific emphasis on those that might change how young people see themselves, or their group of belonging, in relation to others. For instance, asked about literature or movies that he particularly liked, Ismaël, a young man in a vocational school, mentioned the movie *Remember the Titans*, which describes the victory of a mixed white and Afro-American football team. In that case, he spontaneously thought of a film that he had discovered at school a few years earlier, when a teacher presented it to a class after a racist incident had occurred. One of the cues suggesting that this movie is used as a symbolic resource is the fact that Ismaël watches it often, and so the interviewer asked what triggered Ismaël's need to watch the movie again:

Interviewer: Could you say when [NB: at what moments] you feel like seeing the moving again?

Ismaël: For example, mornings, when I am watching Euro News, and I see bomb attacks or so, in the evening I might feel watching a bit of it

Interviewer: You see bits... what are the bits which...

Ismaël: Impressed me most, it's when they enter on the football field because they decided to make a song together in order to show everyone that they could associate together with that song

The film appears as a symbolic resource that Ismaël uses when he is exposed to the violence of world news – suicide bombers and attacks, which can be seen as caused by intergroup conflict or racial hatred. The movie represents intergroup conflicts and violence. In addition it offers an alternative resolution through the reunification in a common song, which makes the group stronger. One might therefore think that Ismaël finds there a representation, in a transposed way, of violence and cruelty. The fictional world thus invites him to reflect upon the real world and to consider alternative resolutions. A few turns later, the interviewer returned to the antiracist nature of the movie:

Interviewer: How come do you resonate with the movie – did you experience racism personally?

Ismaël: Actually, when I was younger, during a period I had a cousin who was a racist and he was always telling me that I was, well, that if one is not a racist one cannot be a good Swiss or so; so I told myself I could be a racist too, I sort of thought that it was a matter of style; but then after seeing that movie, I reflected and I told myself that I didn't need to do that

Watching the film, *Ismaël* seems first to have recognized something he had experienced himself. Following his cousin, he used to define himself as a “racist”; at the beginning of the film, he “recognises” some closeness to the most racist character. This is the first step for a transformative process. A form of “resonance”, based on some kind of similarity (in characters, emotional situations, structure of events, etc.) between personal experience and the fictional world triggered by the cultural element, is one condition to start using it as symbolic resource (Zittoun, 2013). In effect, after this first identification, the fictional resolution seems to have invited *Ismaël* to reflect upon his real-life position and identity, and to see that there is an alternative to it. Of course, the fact that the movie was presented at school in the context of an activity intended to get students to reflect about racism probably supported that movement. I'll return to this later.

Using a symbolic resource on the basis of a personal resemblance, and in order to reflect about oneself, is often the first step to other uses, such as uses of symbolic resources to question the social environment, or the world in which one lives (Zittoun, 2007). *Gaëtane* is a young woman who was also moved by an Asian movie which, she felt, reflected some aspects of her difficulties in dealing with her parents' divorce and which she watched often (Zittoun & Grossen, 2012). This led her to see more Asian movies, to learn some martial arts, and to explore Asian culture and history:

Through these films precisely I learn Asian culture and ... otherwise historical movies I ... like history so watching them even if there is a love story in the story but there is a historical movie behind or ... a real story about war, I like it. It is because it always teaches me something, and then I look for more information, I go on Internet or I buy books about things the story was talking, and so I can deepen my knowledge on the topic.

Not only is the movie used as a symbolic resource but also it brings the young woman to a more systematic enquiry, in which she explores more cultural elements so as to have the mastery of an organized field of

knowledge. Thus she refers to this exploration as “learning” and “deepening her knowledge”. In such a case we might say that uses of symbolic resources are generative – they inspire a self-sustaining dynamic of searching, exploring cultural elements, using them as symbolic resources and so forth.

We also found many occurrences of uses of literary texts as symbolic resources in the classroom. Asked about a book that might have moved her, Monica speaks about a personal use of resource oriented towards self-understanding:

It happened to me with a recent book, I was reading it, and I said to myself, I felt I saw myself...six months ago, and it disturbed me, I didn't expect to find myself in such a book by Emile Zola [*L'assommoir*] ... Let's say... the woman in the book, she felt totally abandoned, she was upset against everyone and it was nobody's fault, if someone was guilty it is herself, and she was falling in depression, so I thought... I reacted similarly... only at the end she dies, and I managed to reverse the spiral.

Marc read another book by Zola and used it to reflect on a social and political situation that he was experiencing as a member of a workers' union during a strike in the company in which he did his apprenticeship. Hence here, as outside school, symbolic resources can be used to think about one's location in the world, and the world itself. This is also very clear in Gaëtane's description of her courses in history, which had become a semiotic resource to think about one's own environment:

I have a teacher that often makes connections with the past and the present and it enables us to understand realize that sometime we criticize, for example, people who could not – for example, during World War II, we criticize people who failed to see that Hitler was a bit mad, but one could do the same with us because we don't react about Iraq or things like this so... I like this teacher's way of teaching because I... become aware of more things and I open the eyes on the present and the future, yes.

Symbolic resources, whether they are met in daily life or at school, enable imaginary explorations of spheres of experiences offered by cultural elements. These can be seen as a semiotic construction made to evoke or transmit the experience and perspective of other people upon

the world. In that sense, using a symbolic resource is always a confrontation between one's knowledge and experience, and that proposed by the fiction, and part of the reflective movement supported by the symbolic resource is given by this junction of perspectives (Gillespie, 2006, 2007). Yet in most uses of symbolic resources there is the presence of a real, social Other.

Symbolic resources and social relationships

In what contexts can young people use symbolic resources that are discovered in daily life or at school? In daily life, people's first encounters with cultural elements that are likely to turn into resources often take place within a personally significant relationship. A mother read tales to her daughter for many years before she started to develop a passion for a certain type of literature (Zittoun, 2010); a friend introduced a teenager to a pop band whose lyrics changed her life at a moment of deep sorrow (Zittoun, 2007); a father tried to share his passion for cinema with his son (Zittoun, 2006). In the case mentioned above, Gaétane shared her passion for Asian culture with a cousin. In these situations, the adult, or the Other person, often simply exposes someone to the cultural element; there is probably a shared understanding of what it is about, but also there is interpersonal trust and mutual recognition. In such situations there is usually an implicit recognition that, beyond the shared meaning of the cultural element, each person is actually developing a personal sense of it. Uses of symbolic resources are likely to start as people discuss the cultural element that is commonly experienced, while reflecting on the personal meaning that it has for each of them.

When people encounter cultural elements during classroom activities, the situation is slightly different: the teacher-student or peer relationships do not have the same emotional quality. In addition, the task of the school is to aid students in developing a historical knowledge of a certain domain, to be able to develop a metalanguage – to talk about the evolution of style or language – and to analyse the texts or argumentative structures. The role of teachers is thus more or less explicitly to enable students to develop a shared, if not conventional, way of talking about literature or philosophy. Can the teacher both support the necessary transmission of formal knowledge about texts and the sort of acknowledgement of personal sense-making that might facilitate uses of symbolic resources?

A close analysis of teachers' ways of talking about their work, their own uses of symbolic resources, interactions in the classroom, and what students said about what they learned from them suggests that students are likely to develop a personal way of using symbolic resources at school when they experience a form of safety (as in a "thinking space") (Perret-Clermont, 2004, Chapter 4). Such forms of reappropriation appear in two main relational configurations. In a typical modality, the teacher simply gives their class, with a clear focus on the shared meaning of cultural elements, leaving space for the children to work on their own but with no allusion to the potential personal "sense" that these might have. In a more proactive modality, the teacher creates a situation in which they clearly mention the fact that they have developed a personal relationship with the text – they like it, find it interesting, for their own reasons, without necessarily saying why. In turn, they invite the students to develop their own personal relationship with the object for knowledge, although they don't need to know what it is. This is at times conveyed in expressions such as "I love the book. I hope you will love it too, although you might love it for different reasons than me." Yet, in parallel, the teacher focuses the work on the shared meaning of the cultural elements – how it is made, to which tradition it belongs and so on (Zittoun, 2014). In this way a double relationship seems to exist (Figure 8.1).

In this configuration, two different intersubjective dynamics take place. On the one hand, a "learning-teaching" interaction takes place along the dotted horizontal line in Figure 8.1. This is clearly an asymmetrical relationship because the teacher has more expertise regarding the texts than the students. They can also transmit knowledge about

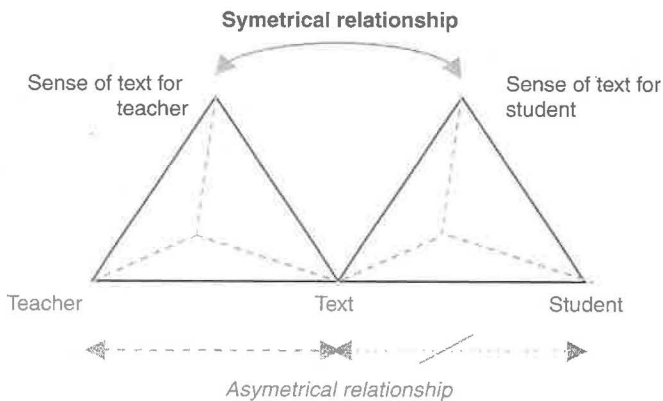


Figure 8.1 Double recognition in teaching-learning interactions

it and help them to develop specific skills. On the other hand, there is a symmetrical relationship (upper curved line), by which it is openly recognized that each participant has their own personal relationship of sense to that text (Zittoun, 2013). My hypothesis is that such a double relationship enables a real structure of recognition. In the symmetrical relationship, the learner feels recognized “as a person”, as a full human, with a private life, wishes and desires, problems and worries about the world. In the asymmetric relationship there is the possibility of a mutual recognition – of the teacher’s capacities by the student, of the student’s capacity to learn from the teacher. These two relationships might precisely coexist as they reinforce each other: when a young person feels recognized, or acknowledged as a person, and thus in return acknowledges the teacher as a person, they might be more ready to acknowledge them as a more knowledgeable person. And when such a structure of recognition exists, learners are more likely to engage in a dialogue with a cultural element encountered in the classroom, and to accept using it as a symbolic resource to reflect about themselves, others and the world – and thus be changed by it.

Facilitating uses of symbolic resources for peace

In this chapter I proposed to give theoretical and empirical support to the idea that imaginary discourse – as in fiction – might be used by people to develop a better understanding of themselves, in their relationships with others and with the social world.

If we look at what people concretely do with fictional texts, we see that they very often use them to think about issues which are problematic to them. When they feel concerned, or moved by a movie, song or novel, they are likely to find some resonance between them and the fictional world, and they might consequently confer a personal sense to it. After the experience, people are likely to reflect on why they were moved by that cultural element. In this moment of post-hoc reflection, people often explore the imaginary world proposed by the fiction, and go back and forth between what is, and what has been represented as alternative – what could be – in the world of fiction. This sort of dialogical movement enables thinking about the relationship between present and past, and often present and possible futures. Such uses of symbolic resources are the source of all forms of reinvention: changing one’s gaze on Self and on Others, and therefore changing one’s understanding of Others and their motivation. Uses of symbolic resources can be extremely powerful means to transform one’s understanding and

action in Self–Others relationships. However, the conditions in which such self-reflection and understanding, mutuality and critical thinking take place are quite frail. Yet these naturally occur in daily, informal situations, and sometimes in the classroom. My analysis of these situations suggests that some modalities of social relationships facilitate such constructive uses of symbolic resources. These include an unconditional recognition of the specific perspective of the Other as Other when the same cultural element has been mutually recognized. Hence mutual recognition in teacher–learner, adult–child interaction, or generally in interpersonal relationships, might be a prerequisite for people to engage in using fiction as symbolic resources to develop new, cooperative and peace-oriented understandings of Others.

Note

This chapter appeared previously in the university journal *Cahiers de psychologie et education* (Zittoun, 2011).

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