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Sociocultural Theory, Concept Development, and Foreign Language Teacher Training

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SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY, CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT, AND FL TEACHER TRAINING

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Traditional Model of University FL Teacher Development

• Short-term & disconnected
  • Pre-service orientation
  • One-semester, in-service methods course
  • Subsequent professional development activities are haphazard, driven by administrative need

• Transmission based
  • Read research, attend classes
  • Appropriate knowledge from outside in

(Allen & Neguerela-Azarola, 2010; Bernhardt, 2001; Byrnes, 2001; Johnson, 2009; Wright, 2010)
Traditional Model of University FL Teacher Development

• FL teacher perceptions
  • Formal activities such as an initial methods course less helpful
  • Informal interactions with other instructors or the language program director more helpful

• Theoretical grounding
  • Lack of unified framework to ground teacher professionalization, explain teacher development, and generate predictions for enhancing training efforts

(Brandl, 2000; Cross, 2010; Eun, 2008; Freeman, 1996; Johnson, 2009)
Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

1. Learning is a socially mediated activity; mediation connects the social and the individual.

2. Tools and signs (e.g., language, computers, diagrams, etc.) mediate and regulate activity.

3. Mediational means (i.e., tools and signs) are internalized, or appropriated, to aid future problem-solving activity.

4. Learning, mediation, and internalization are best examined through genetic, or developmental, analysis.

(Lantolf, 2000; Johnson, 2009; Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2011; Wertsch, 1991)
Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

- *Everyday concepts* are learned through cultural practice, tied to specific contexts, and allow for limited generalization to new situations.
- *Scientific concepts* are learned through formal instruction, grounded in general principles, and more easily generalized to new situations.
- *Concept development* includes establishing relationships between everyday and scientific concepts; these are in a dialectic relationship and are acquired in relation to the other.
- *Conceptual thinking* is the basis of professional expertise.

(Johnson, 2009; Smagorinsky, Cook & Johnson, 2003; Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2011; Vygotsky, 1986)
SCT and Teacher Development

“The goal of L2 teacher education is to expose teachers to relevant scientific concepts while at the same time assisting them in making everyday concepts explicit and thereby using them as a means of internalizing scientific concepts” (Johnson, 2009, p. 64)

A sociocultural perspective “requires that teacher educators examine existing mediational tools … while also creating alternative ones through which teachers may externalize their current understandings of concepts and then reconceptualize and recontextualize them and develop alternative ways of engaging in the activities associated with those concepts” (Johnson, 2009, p. 15)
SCT and Teacher Development

Designing and implementing SCT-oriented teacher training activities that contribute to concept development:

1. Implement extended professional development activities
2. Create awareness of everyday concepts
3. Encourage collaborative, socially mediated interaction
4. Provide reliable and systematic ways (e.g., through tools) to make decisions, analyze teaching materials and behaviors
5. Engage in active reflection about experiences

(Daniels, 2001; Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2011; Vygotsky, 1986)
Lesson Planning Project

- Large, urban research university
- Three-semester FL requirement
- Courses staffed by GTA and part-time instructors and coordinated by a language program director (LPD)
- 10 French instructors; university teaching experience ranging from 1 to 12 years
- No required methods course
- Ongoing training includes annual orientation workshops, monthly meetings/workshops, collaborative exam writing & revising, classroom observations & feedback
Lesson Planning Project

• Semester-long lesson planning project (Fall 2010) focusing on concepts related to lesson plan components, content, and organization

• Collaborative groups based on course taught and mediated through various activities, interaction with other instructors and the LPD

• Previous professional development activities related to lesson planning included sample lessons, workshops on individual components (e.g., teaching grammar, teaching vocabulary, the “warm-up”)
Lesson Planning Concepts

Components: Warm-up, Review, New Material, Skill-Using

Content: Meaning focused, Inductive, Contextualized, Accuracy, Fluency

Organization: Sequencing, Timing, Transitions
1. Implement extended professional development activities

- Semester-long project (Fall 2010)
  - *late August*: Discussion of lesson planning experiences; Introduction to lesson planning research & concepts
  - *early October*: Review of research and concepts; Discussion and creation of lesson plan components
  - *late October*: Materials sharing; Creation of complete lesson plan
  - *November*: Lesson plan implementation and video recording
  - *December*: Lesson plan refinement

- Reflective statements one month after completion of project (January 2011)

- Follow-up in conjunction with classroom observations in late-February and mid-March 2011
2. Create awareness of everyday concepts

Prior to introducing scientific concepts:

• Brainstorm experiences related to lesson planning (overall approach, problems / concerns, etc.)

• Identify background knowledge related to lesson plan components

After introducing scientific concepts:

• Identify the lesson plan component that is the most challenging to develop, implement, or manage

• Generate ideas to help colleagues overcome difficulties
3. Encourage collaborative, socially mediated interaction

- Informal discussion of experiences (everyday concepts)
- Small group analysis of model lesson plans
- Small group drafting of individual lesson plan components followed by creation of complete lesson plan
- Group and individual sharing and feedback sessions (face-to-face, email, Blackboard)
- Instructor feedback
- Online materials sharing site
4. Provide reliable and systematic ways to make decisions, analyze teaching

- Introduction to / revision of scientific concepts
  - Goals/objectives, components, timing, transitions, contextualized presentation/practice, etc.
  - Research on lesson planning and goals
  - Links to curriculum, textbook, communicative language teaching

- Analysis of model lesson plans based on scientific concepts

- Revision / refinement of lesson plans based on scientific concepts
5. Engage in active reflection about experiences

- Brainstorming about experiences related to lesson planning and implementation

- Post-implementation “debriefing”

- Reflective statement
  - What did you learn from the semester-long lesson planning project? Do you feel you have a better grasp of concepts related to lesson planning than you did prior to the project? Explain.
  - What was your experience working in a group/collaborating with colleagues? How did this experience facilitate or hinder your learning?
  - Has your teaching improved as a result of this project? How so? Do you engage in any new teaching practices as a result of this project? Have you rethought existing practices? Explain.
Shortcomings

• Reflective statements prior to the start of the project to provide a clearer picture of the impact of SCT-oriented professional development activities

• Think aloud or stimulated recall regarding decision-making to gain insight into developmental processes
Future Directions

• Examine additional data sources: lesson plan drafts, email exchanges, video recordings, observation reports

• Follow up (interviews, observations) with participating instructors again in Fall 2011

• Consideration of short-term and long-term teaching needs
  • Explore how lesson planning concepts such as contextualization or the warm-up can translate to other teaching situations
  • Use SCT-based strategies in other professional development activities with an eye toward future faculty's responsibilities as teacher-scholars (Mills, 2011)