

Reciprocal Sympathy in the Thought of Lev Vygotsky and the Indigenous American Metaphor of the Heart: Generating a Unifying Learning Climate with Students from Diverse Cultures

Greg Lendvay

Social Studies Department, Dallas ISD (Retired)

Imagine a child using her fingers to reach out for something.

The movement, at first, is nothing more than grasping for an object. However, when an adult sees this movement, a significant change happens. The child's grasping movement gets a reaction, says Lev Vygotsky, "from another person." The child's pointing gesture establishes a relationship between the child and the adult.¹ This glimpse of a qualitative change is characteristic of the moments that Vygotsky passionately describes in his psychology of learning.

Internalization on Psychological Functions

All psychological functions—such as, perception and attention, memory and attention, memory and perception, thought and memory²—begin as actual relations among human individuals. They are gradually internalized, transforming into intrapersonal processes.³ Even though Vygotsky expresses before his death that he is merely at the threshold of a theory, his work is a treasure house for the psychology of learning and consciousness.⁴

The play between inter-psychological processes and intra-psychological processes fuels Vygotsky's psychology of learning. Many internal processes develop "only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers."⁵ In the formation of concepts during adolescence, for example, elementary functions that are internalized in pre-adolescence remain, but, are "reconstructed" through the mediation of signs and words.⁶ Concept formation requires the use of words as tools.⁷

Concept formation opens up new challenges for adolescents. The internal processes of the individual during adolescence are stimulated by external processes in the social environment (including relations with teachers) in order to develop thinking and the internalization of new behaviors. Consequently, every new learning with adults and peers—the new meaning of a word or the use of an operation—is a beginning point and presents new challenges for development.⁸

¹ Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 56.

² Lev Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1962), 41.

³ Vygotsky, *Mind and Society*, 56-57.

⁴ Anton Yasnitsky, *Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography* (London, UK: Routledge, 2018), 119.

⁵ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 90.

⁶ Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 2012), 114.

⁷ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 115.

⁸ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 90.

Cognitive tools, especially words and concepts, lead toward the internalization of cultural behaviors only by means of instruction and interaction with adults.⁹ The internalization of “socially rooted and historically developed activities” becomes, for Vygotsky, the “qualitative leap” that marks human learning and development as unique processes.

When learning is genuine, though, the internalization of cultural behaviors is not a fixed result of genetic influences and environmental forces. Something new and dynamic emerges. The same functional structures and the same environmental systems may be present in learning, but, as Vygotsky forcefully describes in a talk in 1930, what changes are the relations among the functions. The inter-functional links create “new constellations” that are not known in the preceding stages of development.¹⁰

Vygotsky seeks ways to help teachers reveal the “internal, subterranean” levels of each child’s operations that are awakened by the curriculum in the classroom. Every school subject contributes to learning and guides toward new development.¹¹ Subjects become like a “formal discipline” that stimulate psychological functions as they operate through external functions to internal, internal within themselves, internal to external, and newly acted external to internal functions.¹²

An example from the humanities is a method like the operations of experience, understanding, judgment, or decision.¹³ Each operation stimulates internal and external functions using social interactions that develop verbal meanings

and unite affective and intellectual processes with behavior.¹⁴

In light of Vygotsky, a method like *experience, understanding, judgement, or decision* must include *action*, changes in behaviors, necessary for continued learning.¹⁵ Students use words, internalizing meanings and vocabulary in inner speech, while externally demonstrating behaviors of vocalizations and conversations, writing, problem solving, and deliberate actions in ways that can give the teacher glimpses of students’ inner processes.¹⁶

The “zone of proximal development” becomes a strategy to assist a child to perform and learn beyond her existing level of development by using direct interactions, cooperation, and detailed directions that guide successful performances of operations.¹⁷ Furthermore, what happens in the instructional classroom “plays a decisive role” in how a child may become conscious of her own operations and begins to develop “reflective consciousness,” a new type of internal awareness that allows both for changing perceptions of situations and for perceptions of internal processes.¹⁸

Sympathy Characterizes Social Interactions

What gives Vygotsky’s work its most characteristic significance is his method of process analysis and the implications within that analysis for what may be called reciprocal sympathy.

⁹ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 57; Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 200.

¹⁰ Lev Vygotsky, “On Psychological Systems,” in *Cognition and Language: The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 3*, ed. R.W. Rieber & J. Wollock (New York, NY: Plenum Press, 1997), ¶ 6.

¹¹ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 91.

¹² Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 195-221.

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1970), 120.

¹⁴ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 45-48.

¹⁵ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 48.

¹⁶ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 190-201.

¹⁷ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 197-199.

¹⁸ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 188; Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 180-181.

Vygotsky explains his process analysis by using the example of water. Investigators can break down water into its chemical elements, two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, and study those elements, just like many psychologists have studied psychological functions as a collection of separate elements. Analyzing water in this way will not lead to the meaning that water has in its daily uses and functions within the community of life—just like the study of psychological functions as separate elements will not glimpse the meaning of psychological functions within the relationships of people in the community.¹⁹ Vygotsky uses the concept of “units” rather than “elements,” explaining units as ways to refer to the whole dynamic of intra-functional and inter-functional relations in concrete situations. Analyzing units sustains an intentional awareness of the “characteristics of the whole.”²⁰

Vygotsky refers to an “instinctive sense of sympathy for another person” that characterizes the meaning of social interactions.²¹ He also explores how children and adults can share the same understanding even if by means of different operations.²²

While people attached to their own meanings often fail to understand other members of the community, people with shared perspectives and subjects that are the same in one another’s

awareness allow for communication and understanding.²³ However, Vygotsky goes deeper than this. He states, “true and full understanding of another’s thought is possible only when we understand its affective-volitional basis.”²⁴

Thought and speech, key to analyzing human consciousness, are generated by desires, needs, interests, and emotions that are at the core of each person. The affective-volitional basis of consciousness is the significant “unit” of Vygotsky’s process analysis that manifests how a reciprocal sympathy between teacher and students is necessary for mutual consciousness, intentional awarenesses, communication, learning, and continuing development.²⁵

“Developmental events,” as Vygotsky calls them,²⁶ require constant interaction between external structures and internal structures²⁷ until the use of signs and words becomes a way of manifesting internal functions, the fruit of internalization.²⁸ Vygotsky repeatedly stresses the importance of understanding the internal relationships to all the processes involved in learning and consciousness.²⁹

However, Anton Yasnitsky uncovers in his recent biography that Vygotsky was uncomfortable with the metaphor of “internalization” because the term could easily be considered an element rather than essential to a whole process.³⁰ Vygotsky avoids understanding

**Vygotsky refers to an
“instinctive sense of sympathy
for another person” that
characterizes the meaning of
social interactions.**

¹⁹ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 43-44; Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 4-5.

²⁰ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 44.

²¹ Vygotsky, “On Psychological Systems,” ¶ 14.

²² Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 134-136.

²³ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 269; Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 253.

²⁴ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 267.

²⁵ Lev Vygotsky, *Educational Psychology* (Boca Raton, FL: St. Lucia Press, 1997). See in particular ch. 12, “Ethical Behavior,” ¶ 22.

²⁶ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 57.

²⁷ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 92 and 112.

²⁸ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 57.

²⁹ Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 43, 92, 112, 126; Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 56-57 and 90-91.

³⁰ Yasnitsky, *Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography*, 86.

internalization as producing an independent self with a consciousness cut off from the community.

The relationship between thought and speech, key to Vygotsky's understanding of consciousness, is a historical process wherein "thought is born through words" and "word devoid of thought is a dead thing."³¹ Vygotsky's results concerning the inward aspects of speech, a word's connection to objects and reality, the "transformation from perception to thinking," leads him to affirm that a living "word is a direct expression of the historical nature of human consciousness."³² What is most internal for the person (the desires, needs, emotions, interests, motivations) is a social-historical core that is not an individually independent entity.³³

Vygotsky's affirmations about human consciousness reverberate in the very language we use. Etymologies breath life back into words we take for granted. "Conscious" comes from the Latin *cum*, together, and *scire*, to know or understand.³⁴ Likewise, "conscience" is rooted in the words together, *cum*, and *scientia*, skilled knowledge and knowledge of the law. Knowledge in relation to law was extended by Cicero's use of *conscientia* to refer to self-knowledge in relation to social values, a declarative act.³⁵ The concept of "conscience" implies a social context.

For Vygotsky, the "internalization" of social-educational aims becomes the only way that genuine socially valuable behaviors can be generated by humans.³⁶ Sympathy, therefore, is at the core of social interactions.

Perezhivanie and the Classroom Environment

In a lecture near the end of his life, in 1934, Vygotsky uses the term, *perezhivanie*, translated into English as "emotional experience," to challenge those interested in child development to find "the particular prism through which the influence of the environment on the child is refracted."

Emotional experience, *perezhivanie*, for Vygotsky, includes children's attitudes, how children become aware of an event and situation, how they interpret the sense (what is actually happening and how they determine meaning), what the event means for themselves and others, and how children emotionally relate to the characteristics present within the situation.³⁷

Seeking to relate to the "prism" that students have lies at the core of teachers' sympathetic

Sympathy, therefore, is at the core of social interactions.

responsibility to their students.

An immigrant high school student who knew some English, for example, was assigned to a classroom in which the instructor was lecturing to students sitting in desks positioned in long rows. The student became filled with anxiety because she could not comprehend the sonorous delivery of the instructor and found it difficult to follow the other students' verbal interactions, during and after class. Fortunately, the school counselor checked on the recent arrival and sensed the girl's anxiety and distress.

The counselor arranged to transfer the student to a teacher who had the walls of his classroom filed with prints of art works from

³¹ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 270.

³² Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 270-271.

³³ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 271.

³⁴ Charlton Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 426 and 1643.

³⁵ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, 426.

³⁶ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 57; Vygotsky, "Ethical Behavior," ¶ 45.

³⁷ Lev Vygotsky, "The Problem of the Environment," in *The Vygotsky Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 341-343.

various cultures and who employed strategies of second language acquisition. Lesson delivery involved short readings with graphics that illustrated the text and questions to guide analysis and synthesis of the information.

The graphics and short texts were projected from a computer to a screen and the students had their own printed copies of the visuals, text, and questions to notate and highlight. The students were to work in groups, first to analyze the visuals and texts, then to synthesize the content and make connections with other topics. The short reading was slowly read aloud by the teacher, pausing to emphasize key words and make connections for all students to hear.

The teacher read the passage aloud again. This time breaking the reading into short phrases and inviting the students to repeat the phrases several times. Then each group read the passage again to each other. The teacher visited each group as the students read.

The same procedure was used to answer the questions that accompanied the text and visuals. The newly placed immigrant student felt comfortable with the three other students to whose group she was appointed. She repeated aloud the phrases that the teacher stressed. She read with her group and began to discuss the written and visual information that related to each question.

This student's involvement in these two classrooms illustrates that emotional experience is both something outside the child and, also, how the child experiences the situation. As Vygotsky emphasizes, "all the personal characteristics and all the environment's characteristics are represented in an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]."³⁸

In dealing with emotional experiences, different students, with their own constitutional characteristics, will experience the same event in different ways. Different events, with their own situational characteristics, likewise, will "elicit different emotional experiences" in students.³⁹

The term, *perezhivanie*, relates to affective-volitional, emotional, intuitive, imaginative, and intellectual experiences as well as external perceptions, internal proprioceptions, and memories. The term packs more than the usual meaning of the English words, "emotional experience."⁴⁰ The term, *perezhivanie*, refers to a student's "process of experiencing" and to the "contents" of what the student is experiencing⁴¹ on the one hand, and to the total situational characteristics of the classroom, on the other. Vygotsky's process analysis, therefore, yields that a student's personal characteristics and the classroom environment are an "indivisible unity."⁴²

This "indivisible unity" is at the core of Vygotsky's principle regarding the role of the environment: "that which is possible to achieve at the end and as a result of the developmental process is already available in the environment from the very beginning"—and that which "is only supposed to take shape at the very end of development, somehow influences the very first steps in this development."⁴³ This principle can become a way for teachers to envision the classroom environment.

The "ideal or final form" of the developmental period is to be modeled and represented in the classroom environment. If the "ideal or final form" is not adequately modeled and represented, the chances for students' achievements are limited as a result. Therefore,

³⁸ Vygotsky, "The Problem of the Environment," 342.

³⁹ Vygotsky, "The Problem of the Environment," 343.

⁴⁰ Nikolai Veresov, "Perezhivanie as a Phenomenon and as a Concept: Questions on Clarification and Methodological Meditations," *Kul'turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya* 12, no. 3 (2016), 130.

⁴¹ Veresov, "Perezhivanie as a Phenomenon and as a Concept," 135.

⁴² Vygotsky, "The Problem of the Environment," 342.

⁴³ Vygotsky, "The Problem of the Environment," 347-348.

the classroom acts both as a support for development and as a source of development.⁴⁴

Vygotsky's understanding of emotional experience, *perezhivanie*, brings together valuable insights relative to the responsibility of teachers and the art of teaching. Students' social interactions and internalization of interrelated functions do not lead students to an independent self, but, rather, toward the heart of social connections.⁴⁵

In several of the ancient Mesoamerican cultures the primary task of the human being was to develop a face, a unique character, which was presented to the community and the powers of the

Those connections are characterized by a reciprocal sympathy and sympathetic forms of operation. Inspired by Vygotsky, the planning and operations of teachers involve a constant "dynamic and relative interpretation" of the classroom environment—one which influences a student's "personality, consciousness, and relationship with reality."⁴⁶

Consequently, teachers connect with socially embodied psychological life within the situational characteristics of the classroom environment. There, teachers can seek to find out and appreciate the unique "prism" of emotional experience that belongs to every student.

An American Mythic-Philosophical Metaphor of the Heart

Inspired by Vygotsky, reciprocal sympathy is a unit within the whole of the classroom environment—a "prism" of each student that is at the heart of development. His understanding of development, related to the classroom environment, is similar to the metaphor of the heart that still operates in many diverse cultures.

I explain to my students that in several of the ancient Mesoamerican cultures the primary task of the human being was to develop a face, a unique character, which was presented to the community and the powers of the universe. This was an individual task in the midst of complex relationships to both the community and the cosmos. It would be achieved through a work of the heart. Individuals who achieved this task formed a people with a face.

The mythologem of the heart-face echoes an ancient philosophical and symbolic understanding of the heart shared by Nahuatl and Maya cultures.⁴⁷ This mythologem was expressed in agricultural contexts and intuited by common people in villages,⁴⁸ even though it was distorted through the rigid caste system and rituals that developed in the urban political centers of the empires.⁴⁹

The renowned Mexican anthropologist, Miguel León-Portilla, established that the mythologem was kept alive and maintained its philosophical and symbolic meaning through the poets and artists of these cultures.⁵⁰ The work of the heart involved the most fundamental of

⁴⁴ Vygotsky, "The Problem of the Environment," 348-349.

⁴⁵ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 271.

⁴⁶ Vygotsky, *The Problem of the Environment*, 346-347.

⁴⁷ Irene Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology* (New York, NY: Peter Bedrick Books, 1985), 7-10 and 76.

⁴⁸ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 85.

⁴⁹ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 76.

⁵⁰ Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 145.

educational issues—to find meaning in life and establish ethical behavior in relationships with others.⁵¹

The heart-face mythologem involves two ways of understanding the heart. First, there is the physical heart that we are born with. The Nahuatl word for this heart is *yollotl*, derived from *ollin*, and connotes movement.⁵² Examining both the denotations and connotations of these interconnected words, a sense of inner movement and inner impulses emerges.

The word *ollin* refers to movement in the sense of “stirring into life” and the word *yollotl* suggests inner impulses like the movement of seeds coming alive or the stirring of buds as they blossom into flowers.⁵³ Second, the heart that is to be made by the disciplined effort of learning and education is called *Yoltéotl*, the heart near the gods or “deified heart.”⁵⁴ León-Portilla translates *yoltéotl* as “a heart rooted in God.”⁵⁵

The next part of the mythologem involves the efforts to bring the heart and face together. The Nahuatl words are *ixtli in yollotl*,⁵⁶ which literally means, “face, or surface, in the heart.”⁵⁷ Nicholson says that it is “a process whereby heart and face must combine.”⁵⁸ The Nahuatl word for face, *ixtli*, comes from the Nahuatl word “to know oneself” and “to know one another,” *iximatimo*.⁵⁹ The meaning of the word “face” in this context involves mutual recognition and acknowledgement that what can be seen or recognized on the surface of affairs is simultaneously what is in the heart.

“Face-making”⁶⁰ is the process of making what is in the heart available for others to see. A

heart rooted in the source of all principles must act on the surface where interactions happen to let true things loose in the world. León-Portilla emphasizes that this process allows the individual to originate contact with the powers (principles) through actions and originate expressions of the truth through metaphors “conceived within the depths of one’s being.”⁶¹

Acknowledging this Metaphor of the Heart

As a teacher, I decided to become more explicitly aware of this metaphor because so much of my own cultural life is intertwined with elements of Mexican culture.

Key cultural metaphors can become new objects of awareness that can enrich concepts shared by teachers and students.⁶² Also, many of my students were born in Mexico, have family connections in Mexico, or an extended family history in parts of the United States that go back many generations.

The Mesoamerican mythologem of the heart-face has universal reverberations. It strikes a common chord among people and lets students make connections with poetry, songs, and stories from their own experiences. It also serves as an illustration of a core educational issue that Nicholson expresses as “creating some firm and enduring center from which it would be possible to operate as human beings.”⁶³ Thus, it is no longer sufficient for me to refer to the heart

⁵¹ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 8 and 76; León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, 145-153.

⁵² Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 74.

⁵³ John Bierhorst, *A Nahuatl-English Dictionary and Concordance to the Cantares Mexicanos* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 248-249 and 417.

⁵⁴ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 74.

⁵⁵ León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, 172.

⁵⁶ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 74.

⁵⁷ Bierhorst, *A Nahuatl-English Dictionary and Concordance to the Cantares Mexicanos*, 179.

⁵⁸ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 74.

⁵⁹ Bierhorst, *A Nahuatl-English Dictionary and Concordance to the Cantares Mexicanos*, 177.

⁶⁰ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 74.

⁶¹ León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, 173 and 179.

⁶² Vygotsky, “On Psychological Systems,” ¶ 43.

⁶³ Nicholson, *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, 76.

metaphor as developed by, for example, Gertrude of Helfta or Albert the Great.⁶⁴

Conscious understanding of important metaphors from different cultures contributes to the effectiveness of educational leaders in a pluralistic society. Campus-based staff development can incorporate networking with scholars from diverse cultures and disciplines to explore vital metaphors that express both cultural heritage and imaginative ways for engaging, succeeding, and thriving in life within a pluralistic society.

Many of the tools to assist teachers to do this research are available online at cultural and university sites.⁶⁵ Rigorous, systematic research can be done by teacher-learner groups, which can avoid superficial or patronizing acknowledgement of cultural symbols. The heart-face metaphor both offers a glimpse of an important heritage and affirms a dynamic and imaginative process for engagement in society that is rooted in family and community.

Heart Learning: From Empathy to Sympathetic Behavior Change

Stephen Covey, in *Principle-Centered Leadership*, expresses ideas regarding behavior and ethics similar to Vygotsky. Covey advocates for leadership that gets its bearing from fundamental principles for “security, guidance, wisdom and power.”⁶⁶ One of his guiding statements for teachers is, “if we create the environment that models the characteristics that we want in

students, we never have to teach integrity, honesty, or trustworthiness.”⁶⁷

Vygotsky expresses that it is “pointless to teach morality” because objectifying moral precepts disassociates them from how they emerge in actual behaviors.⁶⁸ Virtues, abilities, and powers of character are not objects of content. They are built by disciplined processes through which behaviors are generated, correlated by specific interactions within environments, and transfigured through specific relationships established in those specific environments.⁶⁹ The metaphor of the heart challenges us to consciously and intentionally respect this dynamic in practice.

Learning within individual students may happen despite our aims, or against our aims, or sympathetically connected with our aims—depending on our relationships with our students. As teachers, our appreciation of unique individuals should keep us from grabbing pre-packaged brain-based learning activities.⁷⁰ These lead us away from our goal, which is a profound respect for the human organism and the environment in which it can thrive through connection to others.

The classical sense of education still applies. As educational leaders, teachers are involved in the action of, using the Latin term, *educandum*,⁷¹ leading out and into the community. Our teaching efforts are the communal business generated by our social responsibilities.

The metaphor of the heart in indigenous American cultures is a beautiful illustration of the imagination in learning. For example, the heart is like the bowl of the sacred pipe that Black Elk

⁶⁴ C. Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: The North Central Publishing Company, 1976), 800-803.

⁶⁵ Yuko Iwai, “Using Multicultural Children’s Literature to Teach Diverse Perspectives,” *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 51, no. 2 (2015), 83.

⁶⁶ Stephen Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1991), 24.

⁶⁷ Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership*, 309.

⁶⁸ Vygotsky, “Ethical Behavior,” ¶ 33.

⁶⁹ Vygotsky, “Ethical Behavior,” ¶ 34-36 and ¶ 66-67.

⁷⁰ Olaf Jorgensom, “Brain Scam? Why Educators Should be Careful About Embracing ‘Brain Research,’” *The Educational Forum* 67, no. 4 (2003), 364-369.

⁷¹ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, 627.

describes. The core realities that imbue all life forms and physical presences—the two-legged walking and flying ones, the four-legged ones, the plants and stones, ground and sky, and the imaginal powers of the six directions—are envisioned and held within the heart.⁷²

What is seen and sensed in close detail can be envisioned through imaginative hearing, smelling, tasting, seeing, and touching which are present as sensations and visions simultaneously. Through the heart, people can see and envision in a single imaginative act. The heart is alert and aware of the simultaneous interconnections among beings and creates relationships through ritual actions, sympathetic listening, and understanding that recognize generative connections within the heart-of-self and the heart-of-the other.⁷³

Conscious understanding of important metaphors from different cultures contributes to the effectiveness of educational leaders in a pluralistic society.

Sympathetic understanding respects the life force manifest in one another. Sympathetic understanding happens when issues emerge within the heart. Through relationships in which understandings, evaluations, and behaviors of the heart are encountered, new understandings, evaluations, and behaviors can be co-created through relationships with others. That is, those understandings, evaluations, and behaviors originating within the individual hearts are made

possible and external through social relationships.

A Perspective on Heart Learning

Heart learning generates synergy, *synergia*, “a working together.”⁷⁴ Synergy is a way that understandings, values, and behaviors “combine to form integrity.”

The first application of the term in the social sciences was expressed by Ruth Benedict and elaborated after her death in 1948 by Abraham Maslow. Ruth Benedict selected the Greek term in connection with her work with Native Americans who created societies in which individuals acted with one heart, individual behavior served the community, and the community served the individual.⁷⁵ Benedict affirmed a mutual interpenetration of hearts that was practiced by many Native American nations.

The leaders of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy,⁷⁶ for example, use the art of consensus-making as the core of their social responsibilities. The process involves listening imaginatively and accepting every concern brought to the council, discussing how each concern can be addressed, and arriving at a unanimous decision that includes addressing every concern.⁷⁷

Our commitment to education is a social enterprise and, yet, also individualized.⁷⁸ A young female student, who had been in our country for a little over a year, was placed in my sheltered history class at the beginning of the second semester. Her test scores were very low, and she had failed the first semester of the course. She was discouraged and ready to give up school.

⁷² Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 3-9.

⁷³ Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, 3-115; Joseph M. Marshall III, *The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons for Living* (New York, NY: Penguin Compass, 2001) 223-229.

⁷⁴ Charles Hampden-Turner, *Maps of the Mind* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982), 148.

⁷⁵ Hampden-Turner, *Maps of the Mind*, 148.

⁷⁶ Also known as the Iroquois Nations.

⁷⁷ *The Constitution of the Iroquois Nations: The Great Binding Law* (Fordham, NY: Modern History Sourcebook, 2019), ¶ 8.

⁷⁸ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 198 and 208.

Giving her time to feel welcome, I inquired about her native town and region. Even though she had difficulty generating English, I grasped details about her native town that she knew. She was aware of factory work, the needs of factory workers, and the struggles of women. She had a keen sense of justice. There were great resources from her experience and moral sensibility that directly related to the curriculum that we dealt with in class. I tailored the class notes to incorporate her concerns (and those of other students) to provide an intentional angle to the materials to be learned.

The notes drilled her on the little pieces of the English language that she grasped and carefully linked that language with new academic language. The class exercises forced her to match concepts she understood and concepts that were important to her with new framings of information and more advanced language related to curriculum information she had to acquire. Her higher-level thinking abilities began to be expressed in English based upon a clear grasp of the facts in English. At the end of the semester, she passed the course and scored the highest grade in the class, a 93, on the district final exam.

At another time, a student turned in a twenty-five-question objective test after answering only three questions. "What's this?", I asked. She responded, "There is just too much information there for me to remember. I can't do it." I told her she could retake the test the next class. The next class I gave my students an orientation to materials and work that I had organized on computers for them. After they started to work, I went to the young woman who had to make up the test. I held it out. She wouldn't take it from my hand. She said, "I really can't remember that stuff."

I put the test back on my desk and then had this student call up the review materials on the computer. I said to her, "When we are discussing

these issues in class, you are one of the students I rely on most to evaluate the issues. You are talented and capable and I'm not going to let you give up." I checked to see if the other students were on task. They were engaged with partners working on the assignment in the computer file.

Then I had the student call up review information on the computer screen. I went through the information showing her how to paint a picture of the information in her mind using visualizations. I went through several examples and told her to go through the rest of the review, duplicating the visualizing technique, and, then, for her to do the practice test on the computer.

I turned and went to other students. They showed me their work on the computer. After a few minutes I noticed out of the corner of my eye that the student who had refused the test was doing the practice test on the computer.

I watched her eyes move as she read across the computer screen. She made the selection of an answer and quickly squinted her eyes shut. She opened her eyes and a big smile flashed across her face. She clapped to herself. The answer was correct. I watched her do this several times. She continued to get the answers correct. The next day I gave the student another version of the objective test. She answered twenty-three out of twenty-five questions correctly.

I make it clear to my students that they are welcome in my class, we have a joint work to do, and our business is their education. We are partners in discovering the best way for them to learn and master the materials and skills required by the curriculum. Learning to value and honor one another in the process leads to other things as well. Learning generates changes in behavior that press on to new learning.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 176-181.

My work as an educator has confirmed that the processes within each individual student generate a locus, or place, where learning can really happen.⁸⁰ Those inner functions belong to a “sacred” space in another individual that the educator cannot directly touch or shape. That “place of learning” within the individual can be stimulated, though, in a genuine partnership that unfolds when individuals establish a relationship of integrity and respect.

Inspired by Vygotsky, I recognized that one key aim of instruction was to establish a connection between the “inner-core” of one person to the “inner-core” of another via a professional relationship. My pursuit was to find ways to invite that “inner core” of a student to awaken to our business at hand, right there, in the classroom. That joint business was always the learning and success of each student.

The sequence of *experience, understanding, judgment, decision, and action* are examples of operations that work to intentionally stimulate the internal and external functions and interactions that can become part of the learning in the classroom.⁸¹ If my students and I are engaged in a learning activity, alert and aware, a shared experience is possible.

If that experience is significant enough, the student will grapple with the experience until some measure of meaning is held. Then it naturally flows to value the meaning as “something good” or “something important” or even “something not so good.” The students’ intellectual, affective, and moral sensibilities begin to work with the issue like two knitting

needles taking the threads and weaving a pattern that shapes a fabric.

If one of the students, for example, encounters some value related to the issue, she is faced with what to do with that value. “Is this important enough for me to remember it? Do I connect it with other things that are important to me? I see something differently and I’m going to follow up on it.”

These statements illustrate that the student makes decisions regarding the issues processed. If the student’s decisions involve follow up rather than setting aside the issue, behaviors change.

The student writes or ponders or organizes material, goes back over raw experience, repeats words and phrases to herself, marks a note, looks up a reference, draws a pictograph, moves her torso rhythmically, asks questions, associates stories with the issue and wants to tell those stories, verbalizes something that has been troubling her for a long time, completes the written assignment by checking and rechecking information, envisions a project that she would like to do, and/or discusses an associated event with another student.

Then the student builds on this learning and has another means, a little success step, which creates a foundation for the student to be open to a new learning experience. In the process, as Vygotsky maintains, the internal core of the individual generates thoughts aroused by emotion, values, and interest.⁸²

Those inner functions belong to a “sacred” space in another individual that the educator cannot directly touch or shape.

⁸⁰ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 91; Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 197.

⁸¹ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 91.

⁸² Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 263-271; Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speaking*, 279-284.

Conclusion: Reciprocal Sympathy as an “Ideal or Final” Form for Classroom Environment

As Vygotsky’s process analysis emphasizes, reciprocal sympathy is not an object to be taught. Reciprocal sympathy emerges in “actual behaviors” within the classroom activities.⁸³ Such behaviors can be modeled and represented, as suggested by the examples of teaching practices above, through cultural concerns, procedures for lesson delivery, and interactive practices.

Planning involves researching how the subject matter of the course connects with diverse cultures, particularly those represented by the students. Classrooms with immigrant students as well as local students have diverse cultural experiences and different experiences of a common culture.

In planning for a World History course, for example, threads relevant to students can be identified. These can be concerns, such as human rights, unity of members of a community, women’s rights and equal rights, and contributions of practices and products from various cultures. This research effort applies to all the disciplines. Math and science developments and uses can be examined by identifying cultural contributions and linking connections of math, science, technology, and economics to diverse communities historically and to current local communities.

As a way to use respectful listening and sympathetic understanding to promote reciprocal sympathy, teachers might give students opportunities to comfortably highlight their own cultures and some of their treasured experiences. One example I used with many classes was to have students design and color two

dimensional masks that represented their cultures. I showed examples of masks from local cultures to help students trigger their imaginations.

Students were invited to use their imaginations to envision colors, figures, and shapes to illustrate values from their cultures. Upon completion, students explained their masks while the other students listened and gave positive feedback for each presentation. The masks were displayed on a wall in the classroom for the duration of the course.

Works of art from a variety of cultures can be displayed at various locations in the classroom. These can be works of beauty as well as scenes that depict events and themes that the students will be investigating. Photographs from communities illustrating historical products and practices can be displayed and updated according to topics to be researched. As soon as this practice is introduced to students, they can take over researching, selecting, and displaying the art and photographs themselves.

Further, to provide a context for reciprocal sympathy among students with diverse backgrounds, establish a common experience in the classroom for the students to actively participate in and share. One Native American story that I used frequently was the story of “Jumping Mouse.”⁸⁴ The teacher assigns students to act out different characters—mouse, frog, hawk, buffalo, wolf, and eagle. Other students become the river, the prairie, the bushes, the mountain side, hidden trails through a forest, and the source of a river at the mountain top. Every student has a part to play.

As the narrator unfolds the story, the actors play their parts, mimicking movements and gestures suggested by the narrator. Key phrases of the narrative are repeated by the students, like a chorus highlighting the actions observed.

⁸³ Vygotsky, “Ethical Behavior,” ¶ 33.

⁸⁴ Hyemeyohsts Storm, *Seven Arrows* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1972), 75-85.

When the story is completed, the students reflect and quietly write a description of their favorite character and favorite scene. Each student reads his or her reflection, and then the whole group explores how the story has universal meaning.⁸⁵ Such a process can become a reference point for processing topics in the future—look closely, investigate different perspectives, examine different paths, and see from a wholistic perspective.

What becomes invaluable is that students with diverse backgrounds establish a common experience shared immediately by each student and together with each other. Stories from the wisdom tradition of native nations provide additional resources for the classroom. For example, the Lakota storyteller, Joseph M. Marshall III, presents important imaginative stories on respect, character, fortitude, generosity, and honor that can be used for dramatic participative experiences.⁸⁶

Additionally, teachers can design ways for course content to be processed by establishing procedures to trigger behaviors for learning with the heart. Building on behaviors like sympathetic listening and understanding for reciprocal sympathy, students can openly practice the art of consensus making. For example, use structured group work with step-by-step directions and roles for each member to process the content and provide a foundation for assessments.

Teachers give students detailed criteria to read short passages, reflect on and interpret textual and visual information, research topics and make new connections, interact with group members and the whole class, prepare and present reports, and affirm the work of others. Crucial to the procedures is to model how students can listen with their imagination to envision what other people are saying and hear something that they can value with their hearts rather than

Teachers can design ways for course content to be processed by establishing procedures to trigger behaviors for learning with the heart. Building on behaviors like sympathetic listening and understanding for reciprocal sympathy, students can openly practice the art of consensus making.

listening in order to criticize another person.

Students at tables with three to four members or at desks placed close together promote group work. Students alternate among roles like: the reader, to make sure that every member of the group actively discusses the text and visuals; the interpreter, to make sure that each member participates in discussing answers to questions; the coach, to make sure that every member has accurate answers to each question assigned; and the report organizer, to make sure that every member of the group presents a section of its report.

Teachers provide questions to accompany each section of textual and visual materials so that students analyze and synthesize information, make judgements of fact and value, and illustrate how the information addresses the group's interests and concerns.⁸⁷ Thus, the group's interactions are structured in ways that provide a

⁸⁵ Gregory Lendvay, "Unleash the Dramal Make Vocabulary and Content Come to Life," *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 52, no. 3, 121-125.

⁸⁶ Joseph M. Marshall III, *The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons for Living*.

⁸⁷ Gregory Lendvay, "Structured Learning Teams: Reimagining Student Group Work," *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 50, no. 4 (2014), 187-188.

measure for the group to make sense of and interpret the meaning of their assignments, practice consensus-making through each step of the group's process, and learn through interactions with the teacher and one another.

Interactive processes, such as one group responding to the presentation of another group, provides students with a crucial pathway for imaginatively listening and sympathetically responding to each other. If you have four groups, for example, ask group four to respond to group one, group three to group two, group one to group four, and group two to group three. Give positive criteria for responding before reports begin, and emphasize that each member of the group is to give at least one comment affirming information or points of synthesis cited from the other group's presentation. This way, imaginatively listening to each other's presentations and responding by affirming key points about the presentation become standard behaviors of the learning dynamic.

Vygotsky shows us what is most internal in the use of words, concepts, and the interrelations of functions that make up human learning. He shows us that—at heart—consciousness is *consciousness with others*. Vygotsky's theory and the indigenous American metaphor of the heart can inspire teachers to stimulate a reciprocal sympathy that joins students to teachers through rich social interactions with each other.

Learning with the heart can and must become a reality, one that comes to characterize more and more of our classroom environments.

After beginning a career teaching adults and youth, Greg Lendvay received his PhD from the University of Dallas. He then taught secondary Latin and History in public schools, trained teachers, and served as an Instructional Coach and Curriculum Coordinator for the Dallas ISD Social Studies Department.