

BOOK REVIEW

GORDON WELLS. *Dialogic Inquiry: Towards a Sociocultural Practice and Theory of Education.* Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press (1999). 370+xx pp. \$21.95. (ISBN 0-521-63133-5 [hb]; ISBN 0-521-63725-2 [pb]).

Gordon Wells opens his new book by narrating an impromptu exchange (after a loud, metallic crack is heard) between a mother and her five-year old son, James. The short exchange is worth quoting, even in this short review (p. xi):

James: Who did that?

Mother: I expect it was the tin cracking.

James: Why did it make that noise?

Mother: Well, it was in the oven, it got very hot and stretched a bit. . . You see that is what happens when it gets smaller again and goes back to its ordinary shape.

James: Naughty little tin. You may get smacked – if you do it again.

That simple dialogue teaches the child and affirms for the reader that the best learning takes place in a context where the objective is not just to transfer information, but also to inculcate in the mind of the learner the inherent nature of the situation, the subject that is to be understood, and the causes as well as the consequences of why things are the way they are. When this simple, yet instructionally powerful approach is employed, it will make possible systems of education that are important, Wells says, if a society is to maintain its coherence, and if its cultural currency is to remain in circulation. Such an educational system can concretely and effectively respond to actual needs, and to future situations, relationships, and possibilities. That is, relevant and practical programs of learning will not only sustain the viability of social interactions and demands, they will and must prepare us for future roles and unpredictable developments.

The book is divided into three broad-based sections: I) Establishing the Theoretical Framework; II) Discourse, Learning and Teaching; and III) Learning and Teaching in the ZPD (zone of proximal development). Each of the three sections contains a number of specially focused chapters (10 in all), complemented by two short appendices on the social constructivist model, and categories for the analysis of discourse.

Overall, the book's themes, observations and conclusions advocate a type of education that is designed, maintained and conducted via a cluster of dialogical methods/means that are all pertinent to the lives of learners. This simple, quasi-curricular, but also philosophical objective has great relevance: it represents an indispensable way of teaching and learning for both young and adult learners who may live in different locations and be from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Despite their various histories, all these learners would still share one simple, but essential pedagogical principle: making meaning of the surrounding environment for self and community advancement. Even if thousands of pages have already been written to promulgate this "good" advice, in education and other disciplines, Wells' presentation is valuable, because he is anything but ideological about his theoretical recommendations. The author's message is, indeed, clear: the adoption of this educational approach would immediately benefit many learners who may not, otherwise, "get it", or risk being, at best, only partially educated.

Moreover, and probably to "de-sentimentalize" his major points, Wells vigorously enlists Lev Vygotsky's constructivist theory of development where people, by themselves and with others, fulfil the role of co-constructors of the social meaning and interactions that take place in human communities. This proposition, by the very fact that it sees the individual in the context of society (and partially contrary to the Piagetian model where development is seen as taking place within the physical, cognitive and emotional confines of the person) should appeal to the analytical inclinations of cultural psychologists. Cultural psychologists, we should recall, would say that people, by learning from their culture, reproduce it, with the individual's psyche being directly supported by the behaviour, expressions and expectations of those around him or her. This view, of course, does not mean a concoction of cultural relativisms, as some may wish to label it. Wells is not seeking to rob the individual of his or her innate biological and psychological dispositions in any way. Instead, he suggests (with a hard-to-resist Vygotskyian dose of pragmatism) that each human being's capacities for acting, thinking, feeling and communicating are crucially dependent on the practices and artifacts developed over time in a particular culture, practices, and artifacts that are appropriated in the course of goal-oriented joint activity (p. 135).

Wells also draws on the work of the British sociolinguist M.A.K. Halliday, who goes beyond the biology of language acquisition and skills to emphasize the process of enculturation in language learning and usage. Vygotsky would add that symbols and signs made via cultural interactions and expectations sanction or deter all social behaviour. Hence, Wells affirms the congruence between Vygotsky's and Halliday's theories of language and learning.

Wells' emphasis on the primary importance of the subject as well as of the situation of learning carries with it an appreciable recognition of a pragmatic philosophy/psychology of education: the "HOWs" and "WHYs" of teaching and learning. The parallels between Vygotsky's "learning through activities" and John Dewey's "human beings learn best by doing" are clear. Both these statements affirm the educational possibilities the author illuminates with an analytical rigour that is hard to miss, and with an expressive clarity that persuades the reader, despite the occasional use of jargon, to persevere.

To re-affirm the common thread that runs through this book, especially that learning is best achieved by the presence of a "concretizable" relationship between the learner and subject/situation of learning, it may be useful to recall Vygotsky's point that pragmatic instruction is like a magnet that pulls learners along, as they experience new terrains of concepts and knowledge that will still further promote their capacity to develop. This learning possibility needs to be understood more in the context of what Wells calls Vygotsky's most important legacy to education, the zone of proximal development or the difference between what the child can master by himself/herself and what can be achieved with some assistance. Once again, this involves (p. 333) people collaborating in activities with one another, learning from each other, and objectively and optimally contributing to the educational development of all the participants. This last point affirms the recurring contours that form the analytical landscape Wells is presenting. In this landscape a high premium is continually and consistently placed on the relevance of the contents and context, as well as the concreteness of objectives, in education programs now being dispensed in Canada and elsewhere.

If Vygotsky, Dewey, and Halliday were ahead of their time, Wells can be seen, at least partially, as being in his time. The reader can appreciate Well's informed pragmatism and explanatory depth that are continually underscored not by a theoretical fixity, but by the dynamic and situationally "harnessable" (practical) meanings and formulations of an education that is of the "here and now." That is why this book may contain some of the most important and cogent arguments on sociocultural practice and theory in education that have been expounded in the Canadian academic scene in

recent years. *Dialogic Inquiry* should, therefore, be widely read by educational researchers and others in the social sciences, and perhaps selectively recommended as a part of the theoretical literature for teachers-in-training and graduate students in certain areas of education. The work could also be used by teachers at all levels who must attempt to put the ideas of sociocultural theory to work in their classrooms in multicultural, multilingual, and multi-directional contexts. Teachers will then be better equipped to work with people from many different backgrounds, people with diverse beliefs and culturally-based expectations, but with the same learning and developmental needs and rights.

ALI A. ABDI *McGill University*