Affinities and Contradictions: The Dynamics of Social or Acquisition Learning

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Our most complex accomplishments as human beings are the cultural and conventional life strategies of which language, in all its many forms, is the central and most pervasive example. One of the delights of parenthood is to stand back and watch our own idiosyncrasies of manner and speech flower in the behaviour of our children. In taking credit for these apparent miracles, from time to time, we know that we have contributed little in conscious effort or deliberation to those sophisticated accomplishments — they just pop up unheralded and thrive in the ecology of family culture, healthily nurtured and well formed. How do these apparent miracles come about? We need a theory, and a perennial one is to hand in the concept of "nature."

That wonderful portmanteau term "natural" has come to be used most commonly to characterise these wonders of normal development. However, this usage hides paradoxes of its own — indeed, the word "natural" throws up implicit contradictions and confusions which appear impossible to resolve. The types of development we wish to identify here — sophisticated skills including language, art, culture, and thought — these are activities which drive human experience quite *beyond* anything that could be called "natural" in normal usage. (Thinking of the DNA helix, or sub-atomic physics, of course, the term "nature" could indeed stand for the level of complexity we observe in developmental learning.) We are concerned with behaviour that is at the same time highly conventional (i.e., *unnatural* in the senses of non-instinctive, contingent, sophisticated rather than primitive, and culturally involved rather than physically simple) and behaviour on the other hand that is basic to human *selfhood* (i.e., *natural* in the sense of being normal, taken for granted, occurring without teaching, becoming functional in infancy or early childhood, and, in the context of development, the *very opposite of artificial or contrived*). Oh, the headache!

This paradoxically "natural" learning (which we can now no longer refer to with any consistency as "natural") encompasses for instance, the primitively simple (waving goodbye), the emotionally turbulent (the tantrum), and the cognitively mind-bending (English grammar). Developmental tasks are among the most complicated and involved undertakings we ever face, often taking many years to master (like giving a lecture) and never being perfectly mastered — we continue to add complexity to all our cultural accomplishments throughout life. They are what make us human. And perhaps in this pregnant sense we may retain the claim to naturalness.

Learning to be human beings with a sense of self-in-community entails *relationship* — with others, with context, with environment, with the world, and with self. Developmental learning prepares us to handle these relationships, and most crucially to *communicate* and to *think*. Considering this, we should not be perplexed that such learning is the most complex we undertake, even though it may appear easy. It also tends to be the most exciting, and the most fulfilling of our undertakings because it takes us into rich relationships and brings satisfying rewards.

Unlike the conditioned reflex — although it might subsume a few of those too — learning social skills defies inclusion within the parameters of the isolated, responding animal, unable to communicate linguistically, to categorise, or to create a culture. Language stands at the heart of these interactional tasks, learned in tiny increments over many years, yet often contributing a significant element to the learning of a non-verbal skill such as dancing or carving a joint of beef. We are unlikely to determine how to support the learning of language without first understanding something about the critical conditions of social learning, and stubbornly refusing to accept oversimplified instructional methodologies based solely on the principles of classical learning theory.

Our first approach should be to analyse the most effective example of social learning, namely the acquisition of spoken language in early childhood. We would be wise to take very seriously any of the conditions which we find consistently displayed there; to be very hesitant about discarding any one of them in planning instruction; and to research assiduously their effectiveness when applied to the teaching of the more challenging developmental tasks such as reading and writing.

Setting up appropriate social conditions can be seen as the most demanding, yet the most powerfully rewarding, aspect of effective language instruction. By contrast, the tendency in schooling has been to consider warm social conditions as a desirable *refinement* applied only to the extent that discipline and an inflexible methodology allows. If a humane educational approach conflicts with the needs of a rigidly applied instructional technology, the tendency has been to abandon the humanity without too much regret. A more considered approach to healthy social interactions in the classroom is justified by a close and honest analysis of acquisition, and the full range of social learning.

Social skills, although including the most complex preoccupations of human communication, are nevertheless acquired within the most normal interactive settings. For this reason they tend to be thought of as simple in structure and unproblematic — indeed "natural," and not a likely source of methodological insights. For whatever reason, the special conditions prevailing in social learning have seldom been carefully analysed and defined by educational theorists, nor clearly distinguished from the more accessible and researchable forms of learning about which a mass of data has been accumulated.

The conditions applying to the interactions of those engaged in social learning contrast strongly with the conditions applying to the isolated individual exploring the sensory world which have been so compellingly analysed in the research of Piaget and others — except, of course, in so far as that learning entails the need to *extend language knowledge*, as in determining new terminology, categorisation, or other linguistic reference (Bruner, 1986). The extent to which the isolated explorer of sensory experience and its meanings depends upon the planning language of inner speech or of organising self-talk also raises issues about the social prerequisites of such learning. There is an extent to which prior language learning is necessary for an intelligent exploration of human sensory experience and the development of logical, reversible, and mathematical learning. In this sense, as has been shown in the

work of Vygotsky, the complex conditions of human social learning have fundamental precedence in human development (Bruner, 1986). The primacy of social and linguistic learning has been implied by the work of such thinkers as Vygotsky, and we are faced ultimately with the challenge of defining in what ways and to what extent primary social conditions modify and qualify *all* learning to some degree (Wertsch, 1985).

Complex human thinking and learning, of course, are displayed in increasingly abstract and academic undertakings as schooling proceeds, and here the actual conditions under which learning takes place are modified in convoluted and depersonalised ways. It would be my contention, however, that these modifications towards abstraction subtly build on the conditions of social learning and never completely dispense with them, even in the highly individualistic and competitive structures often imposed at higher levels. It seems to me to be a matter of some concern to explore these subtle relationships more deeply and to describe with greater precision and refinement the modification of learning conditions occasioned by academic endeavours. This becomes increasingly pressing as the need for our society to achieve more general academic competence in facing an information world that challenges schooling. The level of wastage of human potential as measured by the promise of almost universal early mastery of oral language tends to indicate that this task of achieving educational success that reflects real potential in our communities is something we continue to do very poorly.

A great deal of confusion has resulted from the failure to clarify and research these matters, especially in identifying optimum conditions for learning in the field of literacy. Tradition has tended to regard the conditions applying to the uptake of spoken language as being *radically* different from the conditions applying to the learning of reading and writing — even to the extent of excluding the "acquisition" of spoken language from learning itself in any classic sense. To my mind this is a dangerous distinction, quite unwarranted by the evidence. There may be *additional* conditions applying to the learning of reading and writing, but these do not in any way exclude or replace the fundamental conditions applying to the learning of *all* social skills — they simply add an upper level of complexity to the social structure of linguistic learning.

The concept of "acquisition," introduced by Chomsky and the modern linguists during the fifties to account for the inexplicable success of early language mastery, has been wholeheartedly embraced by all the disciplines concerned with language development. Despite the often uncritical acceptance of assumptions claiming the innate origins of linguistic competence, the concept has proved to be remarkably generative in many fields. It has at least attracted a vast corpus of descriptive data concerning the development of most aspects of early speech.

Created in direct distinction from concepts of learning, the concept of acquisition has nevertheless proved a powerful focus of speculation predisposing research to ignore any possible comparisons with the mastery of reading and writing. In very paradoxical ways it has constituted a unique challenge to those concerned with the teaching of literacy — a challenge that has never been faced with directness and clarity. Considering the comparative inefficiencies of school instruction in reading and writing — and the almost embarrassing professional warfare of attempts to establish scientifically attested teaching regimes over the generations — it is not surprising that linguists were pleased to dissociate the mysteries of spoken language mastery from anything to do with teaching or learning as understood in schooling. On the one hand, the power of the "acquisition" concept was denied to schooling or instruc-

tion, while on the other, it opened the most fertile territory for research in language development.

The concept is extremely strange in definition. In 1987, James Gee of Boston University formulated the matter in lay terms thus:

> Acquisition is a process of acquiring something *subconsciously* by *exposure to models* and a *process of trial and error*, without a process of formal teaching. It happens in natural settings which are *meaningful and functional* in the sense that the acquirer knows that he needs to acquire the thing he is exposed to in order to function and *the acquirer in fact wants to function*. This is how most people *came to control* their first language.[1] [italics added] (p. 2)

In contrast:

> Learning is a process that involves *conscious* knowledge *gained through teaching*, though not necessarily by someone officially designated a teacher. This teaching involves *explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts*. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter.[2] [italics added] (p. 2)

One might, in passing, question whether the distinctions italicised represent real contrasts between "learning" and whatever this strange "non-learning picking up" might be. However, it is clear that among the academic purposes of the "acquisition concept" was a determination to acknowledge the astonishing success of first language mastery without debt to instruction, together with an intent to hijack this mysterious accomplishment as a phenomenon uniquely different from anything we had previously categorised as learning. Perhaps this was something that warranted an hypothesis of pure innateness. (Recall Chomsky's invisible ghost in the machine, the "Language Acquisition Device.")

At least there was something distinctly "natural" about this process in contrast to the necessary artificiality of school-based instruction in reading and writing. The first implication of this contrast was to suggest that the skills of early oral language were somehow naturally absorbed out of the environment, while those of written language had to be formally taught – one was "natural," the other "artificial." This distinction, in light of the comparative difficulty in the mastery of one as opposed to the other, seemed obvious to common sense. This seemed to explain and excuse the unnaturalness of the instructional environment of school, especially in the need to teach reading and writing in strictly formalised ways.

Certainly, there was now a convenient explanation for the differences between the communal warmth of the settings in which oral language was mastered as compared to the socially stressful environments of traditional schooling. It became more defensible now to accept the corrective and often punitive practices of traditional instruction while dismissing as irrelevant to teaching the positiveness and spirit of approbation that characterised early speech. These were dangerous and perversive assumptions. They allowed the judgement to be made that because so many children failed to master reading and writing in contrast to success in the mastery of spoken language, this indicated how different and difficult written language skills were, and how necessary it was to analyse the parts and drill them systematically. Considering the range of new psychological disorders and debilitating neuroses that result from the great crop of accepted failures, it would seem appropriate to question whether the very radical *differences in conditions* between learning spoken language at home and learning, or failing to learn, reading and writing in school might account for the very difficulty attributed to literacy learning.

The concept of "acquisition," highly ambiguous from the very beginning, has remained so. The underlying process of picking-up-without-learning that is implied by the concept has always been vague in the extreme. When the processes of "acquisition" are examined by any reasonable person, the evidence is overwhelming for the presence of active *learning*, and of the classic *conditions* of learning. If "acquisition" is *not* learning, we may ask, what under heaven might it be?

When we begin to analyse the conditions surrounding early language uptake it becomes clear that the identical characteristics of learning are displayed in the mastery of many forms of developmental tasks wherever conventional, social, or cultural conditions apply. Watch any young child learn to whistle a tune or dance the twist. The same facilitating social interactions are apparent. What we are facing here, I believe, are the common and general conditions of social learning: if we are bound to the term, let's call it "acquisition *learning*." As we shall see later, not only is there a host of skills displaying identical social structures undertaken in this manner, but also this mode of learning constitutes the very basis for human language, thought, and culture. All those conventional and sophisticated behaviours that distinguish human experience and allow for the transmission of cultures depend on powerful social learning structures.

For those of us who teach as a profession, the claim of innate exclusiveness for spoken language learning presents a special challenge, for if such a claim can be sustained, our tasks in teaching language become fatally confused. Do we change the basic structure of our relationships as we move from oral to written language preoccupations in the classroom, from "acquisition" to "instruction?" In the practical situation the suggestion is absurd — it is pragmatically impossible, since spoken and written language tasks meld together inextricably. The suggestion that children will pick up spoken language from the environment without conscious analysis, while it is necessary to break written language down to its parts in analytic ways, confuses the teaching of *both*.[3]

The first clear signs that this phenomenon of early language mastery occurring without instruction was *not* unique to spoken language arose in the early seventies when the successful pre-school literacy of a significant proportion of young children began to be studied around the world (Holdaway, 1979). It is not surprising that, in studying the situations in which these cases of early literacy were happening, it became obvious that exactly the same facilitating conditions as surround the acquisition of speech were present in those early literacy environments *par excellence* — and their effects were quite as startling. As pre-school studies of literacy proliferated, it became obvious that all children in our society have developed concepts about literacy to one degree or another before the beginnings of formal education and that they do so in contingencies strikingly similar to those prevailing in spoken language learning. The study of these "emergent literacy" behaviours has radically altered our understanding of readiness and literacy programs in early schooling. We may now assert that the principles displayed in the early mastery of spoken language are both relevant and critical to mastering literacy and have serious implications for the nature of efficient instruction in the school context.

Furthermore, as we have noted earlier, in the mastery of other socially motivated developmental tasks of a non-linguistic nature, such as tying a shoelace or riding a bicycle, or applying cosmetics at a much later stage, we again find the classic conditions of so-called "acquisition" at work. In the fascinating area of developmental play (currently unfashionable as a model among educators despite its central relevance to schooling), we cannot but acknowledge striking similarities to the conditions that

support oral language development. Indeed, upon examination, the mastery of most developmental tasks is clearly *integrated with* the development of speech — talk surrounds and supports the learning of almost every task, and self-talk, including inner-speech, continues to organise and guide the operation of most non-verbal tasks.[4] (When the seven-year-old manipulates his toy front-end loader in the sandpit we can hear the instructions he gives himself, and his intent expression and protruded tongue signify the passage of purposeful inner-speech.)

If we take the view of Vygotsky on these matters, the development of thought itself in the young child shares the same conditions as support the acquisition of speech, and are, indeed, an integral part of that process (Wertsch, 1985). Each of the situations we have touched upon — early speech, emergent literacy, developmental play, and what might be called "emergent thought," share the same structure of learning conditions, including all the features of "acquisition." In apparent contradiction to the distinction made by Gee above, all involve the use of both "metacognitive awareness" and what might be called "natural instruction" to some degree. Even the extent to which conscious or unconscious processes involve sophisticated analysis is a matter of degree in all developmental tasks, including the "acquisition" of spoken language — which clearly involves such precise distinctions as those of phoneme boundaries.

Obviously, there is something real and fascinating in the acquisition/learning distinction, but it is neither exclusive nor skill defining. The distinction points to something very basic about human abilities and the way in which they are transmitted — especially in contrasting with the non-conventional or non-cultural learning of rats and pigeons.[5] However, a fundamental reformulation is required to avoid the paradoxes which arise in regarding acquisition as something other than true learning. The use of the concept historically has proved both confused and deeply misleading.

I am suggesting, along with Vygotsky and Bruner, I believe, that the critical common ground for these particular forms of learning that sometimes involve learning-without-formal-instruction resides in the social and conventional nature and purposes of the accomplishments involved. This type of learning involves complex and socially sophisticated conditions which are displayed only in the development of human skill and it is simply not sufficient to provide the conditions of classical learning theory alone to ensure efficient socially mediated learning, especially for language oral *or* written.

No set of educational problems has been experimented with so confusingly nor researched more energetically than the teaching of reading and writing over the generations and with increasing urgency and expense than our own. Despite this enormous investment, however, it has been all too easy to neglect the social imperatives that underlie all successful linguistic learning. Our favoured teaching methods over the years have usually displayed what seems obvious to common sense and manifestly "rational" but have often been scornful of the need for an underlying structure of sound and humane social imperatives. Such, for instance, is our confident application of analytical and abstract structures of teaching and socially isolating regimes of corrective and competitive instruction even in the early years of literacy teaching. Why should we be baffled and appalled by the social despair of so many of our failing charges when the sources of their dysfunction or despair lie so clearly in the conditions of instruction which have blithely scorned the social necessities of healthy linguistic learning. But is it possible to define with any clarity what are the important facilitating social conditions that support linguistic and academic success? I believe it is.

The conditions that control the operation of social learning are displayed wherever conventional or socially mediated skills are involved and clearly include *both* spoken and written language. They determine the structure and procedures of optimum response and their neglect not only dumb down response but may even actuate compensatory mechanisms or dysfunctional development. I wish to emphasise here that the learning of reading and writing, together with a range of other socially mediated skills, may display the same remarkably facilitating conditions as are displayed in the acquisition of oral language as outlined below. Furthermore, I believe that in overlooking the actual processes of *real learning* in the "acquisition" of oral language we have obscured a proper awareness of those conditions *that most powerfully support the acquisition of literacy.*

The Dynamic Conditions of Social Learning

Learning which occurs spontaneously and without ostensible instruction in natural cultural settings, such as speaking, singing, dancing or riding a pony, can be seen to display four distinct processes or strategies: demonstration, participation, role-playing or practice, and performance. Each requires different dispositional stances by the learner and, once the process begins for a particular skill, tends to display a driving, compulsive, progressive quality from stance to stance. These four aspects of learning activity may blend or change rapidly or slowly — over seconds, minutes, or days — and may therefore be difficult at times to distinguish clearly or to program in an attempt to set up the conditions deliberately. Even in the pedagogic situation, deliberate application of the conditions in each area demands a certain spontaneity or, at least, authenticity and purposive intent.

Demonstration (Immersion in Environments of Skill Use)

The learner *observes and admires* the important members of his or her family or community using the skill naturally in carrying out genuine life purposes. In the literature of language instruction this has been technically called "immersion." The motivation to become a skill user is engendered by such immersed "demonstrations" especially when the learner is strongly *bonded* to the significant, competent other who is using the skill. The bond produces a curiosity of a very special kind — intense, persistent, fascinated, and sensitive to detail. The learner turns this deep observational attention to how the skill functions and what purposes it fulfils by viewing it in this holistic way. This intense form of curiosity and observation begins a process of "engagement" which characterises the learner's attention throughout the entire sequence of interactions with "teacher" and with task (Smith, 1983).

An empathy is set up in which the learner's system begins to feel and reflect aspects of the skill in use. The observation of genuine demonstrations seldom remains passive. It drives the learner into action, closely reflective of the details in the activity. Where conditions are congenial, questions will be asked and comments made but the action of choice will usually be to join in or to participate (see section on participation below). As an instance of this activity: if the bonded adult claps hands, this will be observed with delight and immediately a participant attempt will be made — not at first very successfully — to clap. If the mother chatters to the baby, the baby is likely to babble back. These attempts at participant action display a crucial characteristic of *approximation*. When a favourite story is read repeatedly, the baby is induced to participate at crucial, repetitive, or stressed parts of the rhyme or story.

Participation (Hand-in-Hand Learning)

The learner attempts to "get into the act," often compulsively and clumsily, and *participates* with the bonded user being emulated. This behaviour always displays *approximation*, accepted by the skilled user, and inevitably progressive over time. The learner makes a determined approach to the skill both physically and psychologically, reducing the distance from the user in both of these ways — perhaps snuggling up and smiling attentively. Where a tool or instrument is involved, the learner will handle the artifact associated with the skill or a play substitute for it.

At this point the competent user being emulated usually takes the learner "by the hand," so to speak, and engages in a special mixture of showing-and-explaining-while-doing. The teacher figure may initiate an appropriate entry to that part of the skill that the learner is *ready* to undertake by a comment, a question, or a facial expression. This "instructional" activity has often been referred to as providing a "*scaffold*" for the learner, often carried out quite intuitively but sometimes with deliberate instructional intent (Clay, 1999, 1998; Wells, 1986). This is the powerful teaching opportunity of the acquisition model. Despite the direct inducement to "have a go," this activity essentially retains the form or spirit of real participation — it is a trial activity while help is at hand.

This cooperating activity initiates the process of *learning-by-doing* which continues relentlessly and even accelerates, especially in the next phase of independent practice, and then powerfully on throughout the final phase of performing. We are reminded ever so warmly of the work of John Dewey, who was the first to develop an educational philosophy around socialisation, and who first clearly enunciated the dictum of "learning by doing." How long do we have to wait?

Role-Playing or Practice (Self-Improving Reflexive Activity)

When left alone to his or her own devices, the learner engages in aspects of the skill at the current level of competence, *role-playing* as a skill user and *practicing*, often with remarkable application. This practice usually takes place beyond the direct influence of the bonded people who are being emulated: the learner imagines what it feels like to be a skill user and explores the experience in a *degree of privacy*. Although the important people may be present or within call to answer questions or give support, they are usually otherwise preoccupied. The behaviour is *not being performed for an audience* — the learner performs exclusively for self, listening or monitoring in self-appraisal. In this setting it is normal for *self-correction* and *self-regulation* to occur spontaneously from the earliest stages of learning.

This latter activity is self-reflexive; that is, directed back on itself in persistent monitoring, turned inwards on self-evaluation rather than turned outwards to seek an external evaluating or correcting audience. An additional, complex level of operation is added on top, or in addition to, the basic output or response (which may be clumsy and contain approximations or errors which may now be corrected). This self-monitoring or checking activity develops a cybernetic level of spontaneous feedback which supports, maintains, and where necessary corrects, the primary responses (Bateson, 1972). In this way, errors become learning points in a tangibly improving process built on approximation — errors, through self-correction, become positive stepping stones rather than points of failure or embarrassment as they tend to become when corrected by an outside agent. Only in this way can the learner develop what Marie Clay calls a "*self-improving system*" (Clay, 1991).

This reflexive element of social learning can be seen to be radically different in form from the much recommended, and externally administered "reinforcement contingencies" of classical learning theory. Here we have one of the great advances or enhancements involved in social as distinct from classical learning. This self-regulative dimension that is added to simple response provides for a remarkable boost in efficiency and explains the enormous productivity of what I have called "acquisition learning." Here we have an explanation for the apparent miracle of learning to speak — that mystery which tempted linguists such as Chomsky to believe that spoken language is intuited through some innate mental agency without learning or instruction. Even today this crucial aspect of social learning is largely overlooked both in research and in pedagogy, and especially in the teaching of literacy, which takes its linguistic and pedagogic pedigree from spoken language as is plain to see. Major emphasis in standard methodologies is given to external reward contingencies and to the questionable inducements of competition, rather than to this powerful source of intrinsic reinforcement that operates whether or not an external agent, such as a teacher, is present.

In dealing with this most complex aspect of social learning, another insight about the structure of learning needs to be suggested. In his germinal speculations about the development of mind, Gregory Bateson, in his fascinating study titled *Steps to the Ecology of Mind* (1972), presents a complex hypothesis about what he calls "deutero-learning" or what might more simply be called "learning-to-learn." He suggests there is a hierarchical structure in learning by which the repeated experience of simple modes of learning generates knowledge about *how to learn*. This amounts to the creation of higher order *strate - gies* for learning which may provide for significant efficiencies in later learning.

There is much to support this hypothesis that learning-to-learn is necessary to the efficiency of higher order operations such as those entailed in conventional tasks, for instance those involved in linguistic, cognitive, and logical processes. These are highly suggestive areas for research into complex learning and related pedagogies. I simply make the suggestion here that the significant increase in skill that results from the reflexive and self-corrective processes we have noted in the mastery of developmental tasks represents a sophistication that might best be categorised as "learning-to-learn." When they role-play and see themselves as being users of developmental tasks, learners take advantage of a strategy that lifts their efficiency to new levels. To become dependent on being corrected by someone else is to remain at an inefficient level of learning and to be cheated of the opportunity for rapid independent self-improvement.

Performance (Sharing Accomplished Increments of Skill)

Finally, as the learner feels comfortable with the stage of skill reached at a particular point — a perception that stems from self-evaluation — he or she seeks out an audience, normally the bonded skill user who has shared and introduced the skill. Driven by the expectation of approval, or the fulfilment of real literate purposes, the new learner *performs* in ways that display small improvements in skill. This process does not wait on complete skill or perfection — it follows the progressive and approximating practice of significant parts of the skill.

The intent of these often "bitsy" performances is to be acknowledged as a member of the community of skill users and this is almost universally successful regardless of the actual level of competence — any display of skill, no matter how clumsy or elementary in the early stages, is sufficient

to gain a ticket of membership of the club. In this way the learner enjoys a sense of belonging, an assurance of acceptance even when skill is at a primitive level.

This display of a new increment of skill is seldom driven by an intent to compete. The aim is to become, and to remain, a full member in the natural community of users of that skill, equally with others. The tokens of performance are offered as both a claim to approval and an appeal for group acknowledgement, not an appeal to be judged as *better than* others.

Combination of the Processes

These four processes, so distinct from each other in cognitive structure and intent, yet crucial to the singular process of mastering a social skill, are often blended together with great fluency and rapidity, obscuring the very different nature of the operations. However, it is this operational complexity that characterises the wonder of human cultural transmission, especially in the central, dominating tasks of language and the self-talk (inner speech) of thinking. Properly understood and applied in authentic ways they offer a path to powerful instruction.

Classic theories of learning, in the search for simple scientific regularities and based largely on animal studies, overlook the most obvious characteristics of social learning. Even the subtle and detailed insights springing from Piaget's lifetime of observation failed to analyse the specific conditions prevailing in social and particularly in linguistic learning, perhaps because of the socially isolating individual interview procedures upon which so many of his insights rested.

Vygotsky comes much closer to identifying the highly sophisticated nature of social learning from its beginnings in infancy, leading as it does to that phenomenon of inner speech that operates as the organiser of human perception, categorisation, problem-solving, and logical thinking (Bruner, 1986). Even the more recent research stemming from the work of Vygotsky leaves much of detail and sophistication still to be explored and ratified. My own concern has been in the main for the implication of these insights upon the teaching of literacy in particular, and more generally for implications of pedagogy at all levels, even in exclusively academic concerns. (Although it is not germane to my present purposes, the implications of post-modern points of view — particularly the work of Foucaux and the post-structuralists — suggest some fascinating critical implications.)

Interactional or Dispositional Stance in Social Learning

In the analysis of social learning above, I have attempted to highlight a number of important *interactional* conditions often described in anecdotal ways in the literature but not commonly identified with any clarity in discussions of complex learning. These interactional conditions or phases demand that distinctive cognitive attitudes be taken up by both learner and teacher as social emphases change during the total learning process — for the learner: moving from observation, to participation, to privately committed practice, to performance or display — for the teacher: moving from authentic use or demonstration, to helpful participation or scaffolding suggestion, to absence or availability only on request, to affirmation and appreciation as special audience. The proper disposition of each phase acts as a gateway to the next and mediates motivation. An adequate completion of each phase is necessary to the successful and progressive acquisition of skill, and the relative efficiency of the learning is dependent on the extent to which each phase has been properly experienced.

Certain conditions additional to those normally specified for efficient learning seem to me to be strongly facilitative of if not absolutely necessary to mastering the complexities of social learning. In each of the four processes I have outlined as sequenced in social learning there are characteristic psychological processes essential to efficient, progressive skill mastery. Each party to the learning, "teacher" and "pupil," takes up a particular cognitive and emotional attitude (i.e., dispositional stance) to the other party at each phase of the process. At the risk of some repetition and for the purposes of clarity and emphasis, I would like to characterise these highly significant relational, cognitive, and emotional attitudes or dispositional states.

The initiating processes of *demonstration and emulation* go further than simple modelling for they suggest a powerful, invitational relationship that pulls the learner in, rather than *forces* attention or presence. The setting is greatly facilitated by there being a *bonded relationship* between learner and teacher, one which heightens curiosity, observation and perception in strongly amplifying ways — every act of a bonded or mentoring figure is observed as if through a magnifying glass. Learners will attend much more perceptively to *authentic displays of skill* by "teacher" figures than they would do to artificial, didactic, half-hearted, or put-on-for-the-pupil behaviour. Powerful and dominating only at this brief, initiating stage of the process the teacher's task is to capture the learner in an intense *engagement* that will persist right through the complex changes of interaction that characterise the full learning protocol.

In the instructionally rich sharing situations of participation or hand-in-hand learning, lie the most fruitful situations for powerful teaching. Here it is the intuitive skill of the "teacher" in initiating, guiding, suggesting, questioning, supporting, backing-off, acknowledging — and a host of other facilitating interventions or withdrawings — that mediate the efficiency of the situation. These complex interactions, which have variously been called *scaffolding, prompting, hinting,* and *cueing*, form the foundation skills of effective instruction. It is in this interactional relationship that Vygotsky's insights about operating in the *zone of proximal development* are at their most functional. In the give-and-take of participant interaction, intentions, confusions, ways of doing things, and so on, are negotiated with a free flow of opinion, query, explanation, and clarification taking place largely at the behest of the learner (Clay, 1999). It is seldom that even a non-verbal skill will proceed into participant co-operation without a constant flow of language. This allows for a smooth flow of social feeling and for fruitful negotiation of new, puzzling, or tricky passages of "instruction." We could label this complex interchange *co-operative negotiation*. In this relationship can be seen the central secret of that remarkable motivation and "stickability" shown by very young children in mastering such highly complex human skills as listening and speaking.

In the apparently *non-social* activity of *role-playing* and *practice as genuine skill users*, learners take the opportunity of being left to their own devices in a degree of *privacy* to have a go at their own level of development, monitoring themselves, and pushing their endeavours a notch or two further along the scale of competence. The striving and persistence usually displayed is marvellous to observe. (Think of the toddler waking and babbling in the crib, or left there alone in the room with a favourite book after the bedtime story.)

Here, because of the lack of an audience or an immediately satisfying social setting, learners are thrown on their own resources. The process now becomes crucially *reflexive*, being turned back upon

itself in feedback processes of *self-evaluation, self-improvement*, and *self-correction* — learners listen in to or observe their own behaviour in a complex cybernetic regulation that turns mistakes into plusses. It is my conviction that this cognitively sophisticated operation, layered on top of association or conditioning, constitutes the critical factor in effective mastery of complex skills. It mediates reinforcement in powerful ways by providing reliable positive rewards for every *appropriate approximation* or small improvement in skill through a self-administered schedule requiring no outside evaluating agency. It occurs at those times when the parent or teacher is not available or is not attending.

The gradual acquisition of complex skills is characterised by *accurately rewarded approximations* that are available on flawless contingencies. When these vital cognitive strategies fail to develop appropriately in grappling with a complex skill, the learner becomes *dependent* and attempts to force "teacher figures" to take up co-dependent roles. In my estimation, much meticulously corrected and supervised instruction displays all the characteristics of co-dependent manipulation, denying learners the opportunity of independent success. In this way, very conscientious teachers who overlook the negative effects of unrelenting supervision may become enablers of pupil failure.

Approximation rules the contingencies of complex social learning such as spoken and written language, which take many years to mature and which continue a lifetime of development. The learner constructs a complex superstructure of self-awareness, approximating fearlessly even in the earliest bumbling stages before there is anything like real skill to suggest approbation. And the learner operates confidently in this way largely without embarrassment because most of the self-approved approximations have been made in private. This double-functioning, cybernetic process opens the possibility for continuous self-reinforcement and without the need for dependence on external agencies for correction and praise.

In self-chosen *performance* or the display of tiny improvements of skill, the learner seeks and achieves acceptance as a skill user even before there is any real skill. By making elementary responses the learner *claims membership* in the community of skill users. In natural social learning, such as the mastery of speech, the learner is never put down or ridiculed because of early ineptitude. These interactions establish and continually mediate a sense of *belonging* — the imprimatur of acceptance in a "family" of non-equals. In this "look-at-me" activity, whatever progressive installments of skill are displayed demand the *validation* of expert opinion — that response so deeply valued by the learner, especially if it comes from the bonded adult most closely emulated.

Freedom from ridicule or exclusion of any kind constitutes an essential condition for social learning. Indeed, even to be *noticed* as a learner has positive effects, and to be simply ignored proves almost as debilitating as to be punished. Uncompromising competition that normally feeds information of exclusion, disapproval, and blame onto a considerable percentage of participants can be everywhere observed as counter-productive to efficient and emotionally uncomplicated social learning. Just as damaging in my estimation is the *failure to take note*, either positively or negatively, which normally falls to the lot of a majority of learners in a competing social structure.

In highlighting these relational and interactional processes as necessary to efficient social learning, we face a range of conditions that seem to complicate accepted pedagogies. Some of these very demanding conditions appear even to contradict common instructional advice and practice, or at least require attention to factors regarded as unnecessary or irrelevant in common strategies of teaching. A

remarkable fact about this demanding list of interactional imperatives is the extent to which they have been confirmed in the research underlying the practices of Reading Recovery.

Implications of the Social Model for the Teaching of Literacy

Demonstration

The need for bonding and emulation implies that effective teachers of literacy must regard themselves as real, even enthusiastic, readers and writers — those whose authentically literate behaviour deserves to be emulated. It also implies using the most genuine and satisfying materials at the centre of "instruction" rather than spurious, worthless, or bowdlerised material devised for suspect instructional needs. The most powerful literature and the most meaningful material in any genre ought to be the basis of instruction at every level. Furthermore, the community in which the learning is to be fostered should display all of the genuinely literate human activities evidenced in the real social world. This activity will often become participant quite rapidly and blend into natural processes interspersing the activity with conversation, question, and response.

Participation

This attempt to share in the ongoing skill of a competent user implies a need for children to partici-pate in other people's acts of reading and writing. It also implies that they will receive sensitive, invita-tional instructional help from the "teacher" within this meaningful and supportive context. The primary objective of "Shared Reading" and "Shared or Modelled Writing" in the classroom is to set up this partic-ipant structure in group settings within which learners discover what the teacher actually *does* when she is reading or composing text (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). One reason for the comparative difficulty of mastering reading and writing is that in adult practice they tend to be such covert, even private and secretive activities. A wise teacher will display and discuss even the processes that occur *silently in her head* as she reads, writes, revises, edits, and publishes as a result of genuine literate activity.

There will be many forms of corporate and co-operative activity in an effective literacy classroom[6] — social interactions that involve all the major satisfactions of what it is to be literate — and the avoidance of strongly competitive motivations. (Competition may be powerfully motivating in the later developments of some linguistic skills, such as public relations, but it has no place in supporting the mastery of spoken and written language — which we all need in order to take our respected place in community and to bind us in common purposes before we become divided by either adulation or contempt. Nor can competition, when systematically applied to social learning, produce anything like comparable results in learning. Indeed, the "take" we get from school instruction in literacy often displays the precise outcomes predicted by the effects of a competitive regime — in that case we should not complain about our cohort of the disabled, the dysfunctional, and the distressed.) In these sharing and participating forms of "instruction," there will be a subtle input of leading questions and suggestive comment by the teacher providing jumping off points from which to develop new concepts and insights. As conversations, readings, writings and editings are engaged in and discussed, a large measure of the interactions will involve the *negotiation* of meanings and strategies for clear expression (Clay, 1999; Midkiff-Borunda, 1989).

Role-playing as a Skill User — Meaningful and Dignified Practice

This factor is perhaps the most difficult to provide for in school settings since it appears to conflict with the teacher's perceived responsibility to supervise everything that pupils do in the classroom. Yet, I would insist — this need for private and self-motivated practice constitutes a vital part of efficient learning. Until a child is reading and writing actively outside the contexts of instruction, satisfactory progress cannot be expected. In natural settings, much practice of this self-monitored kind occurs *in the presence of but beyond the direct attention of the "teacher."* For literacy learning this means providing opportunities for much non-directed and non-dictated activity with books and writing materials, including provision for publishing (what are walls for?) and for the compulsive desire to share, which arises as a result of satisfactory self-evaluation. When motivation is at a high level because of a communal environment, self-sustaining practice will arise naturally and will move forward to find an audience. In lively language classrooms, of course, much of this activity which is independent of adult supervision occurs naturally among peers — who role-play communal responsibility of every kind with interactive enthusiasm.

Unless readers and writers operate in self-regulative and self-corrective ways from the earliest stages, the learning process becomes dysfunctional, producing a variety of dependency disorders, very intractable to remedial intervention later in schooling after the first opportunities for healthy learning have passed. Self-motivated and self-sustaining practice is the activity in which self-regulation is developed to the sophisticated levels required for literacy. Until readers and writers are gaining sufficient satisfaction from the intrinsic rewards of reading and writing to motivate this authentic practice of literacy, they are unlikely to achieve anything but spurious forms of response to print. Indeed, they are likely to remain at fundamentally pre-literate levels despite intensive direct instruction.

A problem highlighted by this model of social learning, and noted above, is the radically changing role of the teacher as she moves from the highly visible and impressive stance she must take in the demonstration mode; through the gentle, hand-in-hand sharing of the participant mode; to the inconspic- uously "absent" or almost-invisible-but-still-available stance of the practice mode. As the wheel turns full circle, another remarkable change of stance is demanded as the teacher, now captured by the children's desire to display their growing skills, seek her out as the special, affirming audience whose respect and approval are valued above that of peers or strangers. She changes stance finally to take up the validating receptiveness of the special audience as the children enter the performance mode.

Performance and Validation

The need to display even small improvements of skill or to share an enthusiasm arising from a reading or writing task follows naturally from self-regulated practice. Such displays of skill deserve validation ranging from sharing in a genial community to receiving approval from someone looked up to either within or beyond the classroom. Simple acknowledgement of membership in such a community beats ranking any day. Just because you cannot yet read or write as well as other members does not preclude full acceptance — validation is distinctly different from selective or exclusive reward. Literacy learning demands a lot of validating — years of it every day.

The healthy literacy classroom rapidly becomes product-rich without external pressure being exerted to produce it — story-writing, publishing, play reading, audience reading, literacy-generated research,

and a host of other activities, all add to the hum of a community using literate skills for authentic and satisfying purposes. The walls are bursting with displays of children's output and all manner of studies are arising from reading and discussion. A healthy literacy classroom is a good place to be in.

Reading Recovery in Light of the Model

Never having been trained as a Reading Recovery teacher, nor taught in that context, I am in no position to speak with any authority on the subject. However, I have been an admirer of Marie Clay's research for a professional lifetime, and indebted to it in countless ways, proud to be an early colleague. Reading Recovery brings together that vast and learned body of research, unparalleled in the field of literacy, into a pragmatic system of instruction that may properly boast of documented success in its undertaking to remedy early literacy failure in a way which no other international program of intervention approaches. Like its author, the program is neither ideological nor doctrinaire, and I am very conscious of the scepticism about theory that the program represents. By comparison, my own work, although directed to general classroom teaching rather than to remedial intervention, has been patchy, superficial, hortative, and most suspectly, theoretical. I am mindful of the dangers of ideology. As W. J. T. Mitchell (1986) puts it in his *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology:* "... that is just the paradox of ideology: it is not just nonsense or error, but 'false understanding,' a coherent, logical, rule-governed system of errors (p. 172).

I do quite sincerely trust that my humble contributions to speculation about literacy and learning do not fall into that category. It is certainly my fervent hope that the ideas I have put forward about "acquisition" and social learning will, if they are worthy of it, attract research and enquiry — and *that*, hopefully, of a depth and penetration so evident in the studies that validate the Reading Recovery Program — and such as I have had neither the wisdom nor the opportunity to undertake.

Because I have been associated with the need to humanise instruction and quite mistakenly and illogically characterised as being opposed to structure and rigorous precision in teaching, I have often been expected to oppose the highly efficient intervention strategies of Reading Recovery. Far from having any sympathy for this point of view, I have always asserted that I know of no more balanced and humane system of instruction in any field. An instructional system is humane when it supports the learning integrity of clients and has the effect of accelerating their progress, maximising their skill and sustaining their sense of personal dignity. Reading Recovery does all of these things superlatively, and I believe that in being able to do so — in trained hands — the program represents the soundest principles (Routman, 1996). Indeed, in providing for a balanced range of social priorities, learning strategies, and instructional imperatives it is quite unique. Let me mention just a few.

Marie Clay's research was the first to identify and support the absolutely critical role that self-correction plays in early language learning, and there is no program that so systematically and effectively provides for it. Close observation of the program with individual children over several months of instruction demonstrates the movement from dependence and uncertainty to independence and self-assurance in the context of literate tasks. The instruction leads very deliberately to the creation of a self-improving and self-sustaining system of operation. Anyone curious about inducing healthy processes of self-regulation and self-correction could do no better than study the detailed teaching strategies of Reading Recovery.

The program is built around the processing and the creation of authentic texts. Because of the quality of little books processed in great quantity and with assured success, it is easy for the teacher to introduce the material with genuine enthusiasm, and to establish a strong bond based on shared pleasure. A large proportion of the daily program is participatory in the true sense, providing scaffolded support and a range of inducements to stretch insight and skill to new levels within the proverbial "zone of proximal development."

Each day there is also the opportunity, in handling the text introduced in the previous session, to operate quite independently as the teacher keeps the "running record," and without that corrective intervention that produces dependence and undermines self-assurance. In producing their own short written text and participating in the analysis of it, the clients are led into essential engagement with essential print and phonemic detail through work on deeply meaningful, personal text.

The success of the program rests, of course, on the host of factors built into the meticulous training of teachers at the level of detail and precision, but the structure of the program reflects quite clearly the priorities of "acquisition learning" as described in our study. The movement from emulation through participation and committed, self-regulated practice stands out very clearly, and the opportunity to be validated in successful performance must be one of the features that make this program unique. The certainty of daily successful performance is, of course, assured by the precise monitoring of levels and the meticulously accurate choice of material that keeps the client at a constant level of challenged success.

The structure and techniques of Reading Recovery were not based on an untried theory but were gradually formulated with careful pragmatism through extensive trial and error and massive detailed research. The procedures developed and were applied because they *worked* in the setting of six-year-old intervention. They display eminently teachable strategies — and also strategies which teachers can be trained to teach successfully. Arguing backwards we can ask whether or not the hypothesis about the interactive nature of literacy learning is borne out by the Reading Recovery model. To the partial extent that it is possible to make such a judgement free from bias, this would appear to be the case — the two models appear to be largely consistent. Since the model of social learning explored above has wider implications for classroom application across the grades, it may be hoped that teaching strategies from Reading Recovery will be widely explored as pointing to practical ways in which social learning strategies may be applied throughout schooling. It is also to be hoped that such ventures will receive a comparable degree of research and pragmatic testing in teaching situations, as has been the case with Reading Recovery. It is my impression that this process is well under way, particularly in the States.

In describing the phases of social learning so distinctly above, the impression may have been given that a sound instructional program based on the model would be structured to represent the four phases in markedly distinct organisational ways. This is far from the case: it is the principles involved that must be given expression, together with the crucial requirement that the teacher should be capable of taking up those very different relational stances in response to the needs of learners. This is not an easy thing to understand, let alone carry out in a classroom of many children. It is even harder, in some respects, to replicate in a dedicated and pressured half hour of intensive individual instruction. Reading Recovery, properly understood, fulfils that function as nearly as might be possible within the restrictions of time and of natural social engagement — and with manifest success.

Footnotes

1. One is tempted to respond that, far from establishing a distinction with "learning," these would be highly desirable conditions for most of the processes that we *do* refer to as "learning" — especially, "the acquirer knows that he needs to acquire the thing he is exposed to." The only exception would be "natural settings" — which we would forlornly *wish* to associate with schools and other educational institutions.

2. The contrast here is with "instruction" in the traditional sense, but historically this contrast has included the Behaviourist concepts of learning, which are not seen to contain a meta-cognitive element. Conversely, it is by no means obvious that the acquisition of speech is accomplished without a significant degree of meta-knowledge. I would wish to argue that meta-knowledge is crucial to "acquisition learning."

3. If the teaching of spoken language *in schooling* (as distinct from that picked up in infancy) at some stage needs to become formal, at what stage should this occur, and for what reasons? (Because *schools* are formal or because spoken language now *becomes* formal?) Conversely, do *all* of the tasks of reading and writing taught in school need to be formalised? How is this to be related to the many varied levels of emergent or early literacy acquired preschool without instruction? Are all new entrants to school to be taught in the same way? Further, are the levels of meta-cognitive knowledge about literacy that have been acquired before school entry, and often displayed quite consciously, to be regarded as spurious, or improper, or even undesirable? If meta-cognitive awareness can be developed only by abstract and formal instruction, how do we account for the meta-cognitive sophistication about literacy displayed by a small percentage of pre-schoolers, as evidenced copiously in the professional literature? How do we now define reading readiness?

4. Wertsch (1985) notes: "...because the external processes from which internal ones derive are necessarily social, internal processes reflect certain aspects of social structuring…" and quoting from Vygotsky (1978): "The very mechanism underlying higher mental functions is a copy from social interaction; all higher mental functions are internalized social relationships... Their composition, genetic structure, and means of action — in a word, their whole nature — is social" (p.66).

5. Although Bateson (1972) appears to countenance the possibility of *animals* being capable of deutero-learning or learning-to-learn in some real sense.

6. In her study of the Cambridge/Lesley Literacy Project in which the four phases of social learning were deeply explored with a number of classes at Longfellow Primary School over two years, Shelley Midkiff-Borunda made the following comments:

> In both the Shared Book Experience Environment and the Doing Environment there was a supporting preponderance of interactions that were social and cooperative in nature. The give-and-take negotiations between teachers and students and among students during shared readings seemed quite different in their character – as well as their abundance – from the interactions normally occurring in elementary classrooms. These interaction patterns, termed "cooperative negotiations," were dominant in both environments. It seemed that these social interactional patterns were so powerfully demonstrated in the teacher-centred Shared Book

Environment that they emerged in the student-centred Doing Environment without direct
instruction by adults. (p. 11-12)

and in concluding statements, she says:

Detailed observations of classroom behavior have confirmed the validity of the acquisition
model for predicting the transfer of behavior from observation of demonstrations and participa-
tion to role-playing and performing. Thus the premise of the acquisition model – that students
given the opportunity to observe and participate in demonstrations of real reading and writing
and then to both role-play and perform will achieve competence in literacy – appears to be
valid. (p. 253)

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Don Holdaway, international author and scholar, has been involved in literacy initiatives in school systems in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States. He has presented and published widely on the topic of literacy learning, including books such as *The Oral Foundations of Literacy, The Foundations of Reading, Literacy and Early Childhood,* and *Stability and Change in Literacy Learning: The Early Eighties.* He was the first to publish "Big Books" and teaching guides for Shared Book Experience procedures, a concept that has been duplicated worldwide. He has served in a variety of teaching roles at such places as Lesley College in Cambridge, MA, Auckland Teachers' College in New Zealand, Adelaide College of the Arts and Education in Australia, and the University of Western Ontario in Canada. In May 1999 Don Holdaway was inducted into the International Reading Association's Hall of Fame.