
OUTLINES - CRITICAL PRACTICE STUDIES

• Vol. 14, No. 1 • 2013 • (04-25) •
<http://www.outlines.dk>

Confronting School's Contradictions With Video: Youth's Need of Agency for Ontological Development

Lara Margaret Beaty

Social Science Department, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY
New York City, United States of America

Abstract

A basic contradiction in education is that while education and guidance from people with more knowledge is necessary for the development of higher psychological functioning, the constraints imposed on student activity often become a hindrance to development. This contradiction is revealed in how youth participate in video production programs and becomes analyzable because video production brings the conflict to the surface. During video production, students often act with greater agency than they do in other school activities. This shift evokes the agency|structure dialectic as the root of tensions surrounding authority, collaboration, and youth cultures. Based on data from five programs, a comparison of different cases demonstrates how schools damage motivation and initiative, neglect to connect with students and their worlds, and teach passivity while emphasizing an individualistic conception of human activity. New understandings of agency and its connections to the individual|social dialectic are urged. Based on a Vygotskian concept of development as overcoming contradictions, the relationships youth have within school are viewed as an essential part of development, requiring a theoretical shift from individualistic ideas of agency and a clearer connection between youth problems and societal contradictions.

Theoretical Perspective

Programs in youth video production were investigated to explore the connections between schooling, the technology of video, and the everyday experiences of youth as they impact learning and development. Understanding youth development necessitates understanding how youth participate in activity systems and how different activity systems are connected. Because material, collective, and subjective domains are mutually constitutive (Stetsenko, 2005), and psychological phenomena are intricately connected with the sociological (Roth, 2010), youth development, as in all human development, is simultaneously a product and constituent of the activity systems in which individuals

participate. Furthermore, these activity systems, whether marked by school walls, family names, or ethnic groupings, are part of a *network* constituting society (Roth & Lee, 2007). Thus human development is a result of interaction with a vast network of social-material realities, and the very definition of development is intricately connected to society. How do the many moments within and across activity systems shape a person's development, and what role does the individual have in using their networks to develop?

Packer argues that *agency* was central to the development of higher psychological functions for Vygotsky, who also "saw child development as a process through which contradictions are overcome" (Packer, 2008, p. 24). Therefore, drawing on cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), the contradiction of an agency|structure dialectic is sought as a central tension in youth development, but the specifics of how these tensions emerge are structured by the immediate context and the larger society: The "higher psychological functions" to which Vygotsky and Luria (1994) refer remain loosely defined through their connections to symbolic manipulation, consciousness, and practical activity because the social-material realities define the particular contradictions that youth must face and limit the ways in which they can be resolved. Youth efforts to resolve the tensions are viewed as developmental in nature, and their analysis reveals how schools and the larger society both support and impede development. Though inequalities are not systematically investigated here, the existence of inequalities remains an essential backdrop.

Following the Marxist traditions from which Vygotsky's work emerged, "the primary contradiction [of capitalist societies]... is that between the use value and exchange value of commodities" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). Schools, after all, are part of the capitalist system and participate by producing students—with students participating in producing themselves. The production is clearest in the diplomas students seek that will make them marketable. This "credential-granting process" of schools is most clearly a manifestation of the exchange-value of schooling while education for its own sake is [potentially] about use-value (Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006, p. 7). Education for its own sake, however, is not prevalent among the youth who were studied. Students frequently question the value of some courses with statements such as "I'll never use this," suggesting that the use-value is arguably about the skills and knowledge that students anticipate using in the future as opposed to the seemingly un-useful tasks required as part of earning credentials. In theory, the use-value could have infinite variations because it is about the meanings that are not marketable but serve some other purpose. The use-value is similar to de Certeau's (1984) idea that, as more of the world becomes institutionalized, people are increasingly limited to *tactics*—transgressions, circumventions, transformations, and other actions available to people without power—as the only way to pursue non-institutional/non-economical goals. Note that the use-value that any particular student may find emerges from their experiences, which are unique in their aggregate while continuously remaining part of the material and social world: Even the most "personal" values remain products of activity systems, representing their "multivoicedness" (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). In an activity system that explicitly aims at job preparation, actions intended to further one's own development are necessarily tactical.

The contradiction between the exchange-value and the use-value forms a dialectic category, and Sawchuk, Duarte, and Elhammoumi argue, "The contradiction within this unity tells us a great deal about the struggle that goes on within the walls of every school under capitalism" (2006, p. 7). This is apparent in many aspects of schooling, particularly

when examining the interactions between instructors and administration (for instance, Worthen & Berry, 2006). Students, however, are the product as much—if not more—as they are participants in the activity system and experience this contradiction differently. Children and youth are “dependents” and as such they frequently are not directly confronted by the material realities of society. Thus, while focusing on adolescent development within school, this fundamental contradiction is not so clearly fundamental. There are undoubtedly exceptions, but among the video production activities of high school students, I found no suggestion that students were conflicted about actions that would earn money versus actions that would serve some other purpose. The subject arose during teacher-initiated conversations or interviews when I asked about their future plans but did not seem to impact other in-school experiences because youth are prevented from having full participation in the economic system. This tension seems not to be a social-material reality for most youth as long as an adolescent’s immediate participation in school is the focus.

Instead, the dialectic of agency|structure is proposed as the major contradiction for youth, though it takes different forms in different contexts. Agency is defined as being present in actions that create or alter events and/or structures, not by re-acting but by initiating action. Structures, on the other hand, both make possible and constrain actions. This analysis begins with the logical problem that structure is needed to give activity direction and movement even while it limits action. A concrete example is an astronaut needing the walls of the spacecraft from which to push off to move, because left in open space, astronauts would be unable to initiate or redirect movement. In children’s development, structure is needed to help bring about higher mental functioning, but it is also poses a limit on how the child can develop. The contradiction exists in Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development: The structure that supports the novice’s more advanced actions is also a limit of her or his agency. Litowitz (1997) discussed the problem by arguing that identity and resistance are important pieces of mastery because youth must overcome the teacher’s authority to assert their own mastery: They cannot assume the identity of a competent person until they resist the dominance of an expertise that is not their own. Development occurs in overcoming the contradiction of agency and structure and finding a unity that uses structure to express agency.

An increase in agency is irrevocably connected to cognitive advances because higher psychological functioning becomes visible in willful actions:

Will and self-mastery are right at the center of Vygotsky’s account of the genesis of the higher psychological functions. He viewed the ability to control oneself, to master one[’s] own natural psychological functions, such as memory and perception, as what makes possible these higher functions. In these higher processes the individual is not simply using more sophisticated forms of cognition, they are acting upon themselves. (Packer, 2008, p. 27).

Higher psychological functioning as symbolically mediated action is what allows people to influence their relations with the world. It is through them that humans can move beyond stimulus-response behavior and become freed from the moment to objectify reactions and plan for the future (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Accordingly, the reason humans can create increasingly complex tools, while apes cannot, is because of the tool of language. Vygotsky and Luria’s insight was to reveal how symbolic mediation was a more meaningful difference between apes and humans than the use of tools. The tool of symbols allows people to create new and better tools and to change the social-material structures

upon which our species depends. Symbolic mediation allows higher mental functioning and agency.

The emphasis in psychology tends, however, to be on the agency employed in self-control. The individualistic nature of the field leads to a view that “self-control problems” are problems contained in the individual, thus people are given medication and behavioral modification to enable them to submit to contextual structures rather than helping them cope with or redesign systematic influences (Vianna, 2009). In theorizing an agency|structure dialectic, the context and the histories associated with it are brought into the analysis. Structure is not limited to internal and external factors, and agency exceeds self-control to describe how one relates to the world. The resulting analysis moves the problem from the individual to interactions among people and environments.

Higher psychological functioning allows us to shape our environments and our behavior, but only to the extent that it is materially possible. Some material structure is an absolute necessity, but the nature of society poses further limitations on what is possible beyond the material affordances (Costall, 1995). In this way, affordances are shaped by the social structure as well as the material structure. The subjective domain, the third part in the three-fold dialectical system proposed by Stetsenko (2005), is structured and structuring according to individual histories with the material and social environments. The human mind is material, social, and subjective, and agency emerges when the structure is used as a tool to change or initiate events rather than as a stimulus to direct activity. *Agency is thus the expression of higher psychological functions.*

The contradiction between agency and structure reaches a peak in adolescence because youth have developed considerable capacity to freely choose their actions (Vygotsky, 2004), but they frequently lack affordances for it, due in part to their exclusion from the market. Among the youth studied, the conflicts that arose in direct response to authority and within the struggles and compromises of peer interactions are analyzed as being directly related to the agency|structure unity. The tensions around agency|structure are found to be intertwined with contradictory cultural practices, the individualistic emphasis of schooling, and the need to create identities that connect one to a community rather than isolate one from the context of activities, thus complicating youth development.

Video production as methodology and context

Video production programs are the focus of this paper because production activities unsettle normal relations while introducing new kinds of activities. Through video production, students are allowed to travel almost anywhere they want within the school, they can ask questions and direct the actions of teachers, staff, and students, and they can alter the meanings of environments, people, and events at least within the world of the camera (Beatty, 2005; 2008). They are consequently led to more active roles. These affordances of video production activity allow many goals to be sought while a project is being completed, yet projects are shaped by assignments, equipment, and the entire social-material context. Cases from five programs will be discussed, in which structures and explicit purposes varied widely. The programs are as follows:

- *Digital Art program*: a project run by college interns and funded by a not-for-profit arts organization as part of a fine arts course in a boarding school for Native Americans with the intent of promoting digital art

- *Documentary Workshop*: a not-for-profit program that conducts after-school and in-school programs with the goal of motivating urban youth
- *New Media program*: an attempt to create an “academy” integrating disciplines through new media and initiated through a reform program in an inner-city high school
- *Television Production program*: a vocational program in a mixed income and ethnically diverse suburban high school
- *Video Club*: a short after-school project initiated in an inner-city high school with the intent of exploring video production as a research method

The relevant details are described below as space allows. Courses were observed weekly from beginning to end, which resulted in every class meeting being observed for the video club, the digital art program (for three separate courses), and the documentary workshop, one fifth of the television production classes (in three courses), and two-fifths of the new media classes. The methods used to gather data included formal and informal interviews, participant-observation, the collection of edited and unedited videos, and narration of video excerpts; however, methods were not consistent across programs and focused on the youth who volunteered. A number of cases are briefly described below to emphasize common processes and distinguish important differences.

Critiquing authority

Adolescent rebellion against authority has been heavily remarked upon and immortalized in art and popular media. These tend to be the extreme cases and often emphasize the maladaptive or abnormal aspects of youth rebellion. The prevalence of defiant actions in adolescence, however, suggests a developmental and structural origin. Rebellion against authority would be expected if the capacity for increased agency is a developmental result, and subtle forms were evident throughout the video production programs. The authority that is rebelled against is present in individual people, buildings, and in implicit and explicit rules about the ways things are done; yet the authority that was contested within video projects was never about the direct authority of a teacher. Video production allowed, perhaps encouraged, resistance at a more abstract level. Authority is always implicit in the structure of a place and is why de Certeau (1984) connected power to places and the absence of power to time (in the sense of taking advantage of the moment). There is authority in the voice that insists, “This is the way things are done,” but even cooperation can be a disguised rebellion if it serves a purpose other than the official one.

In the video production programs, authority was not uniformly regarded or enforced, but each setting seemed to include the spectrum of *complete cooperation*, *subtle resistance*, and *open defiance*, and these all found their way into the video projects. Cooperation was apparent when videographers followed instructions while they recorded: In one instance, a teacher interrupted an interview to tell the camera operator/interviewer to move closer and zoom out, which he immediately did. Cooperation was more often invisible and silent; it simply happened according to expectations and without comment. Typically, there was not enough information to indicate whether students had hidden agendas in these acts.

Subtle resistance, by comparison, was rampant. Satire and humor are indirect and symbolic expressions of resistance that were common: Student-made commercials mocked professional and established commercials (i.e. “Mentos” changing a youth from

the target of bullies to someone who chases the bullies away) and societal ideas (i.e. automobile insurance for “wetbacks and drunks”). Videographers labeled and challenged school staff, often without the staff being aware of these actions. The Video Club, for instance, included an interview of a vice-principal in which the interviewer refused to speak, relying on written questions instead, and the administrator was recorded in an extreme close-up with parts of his face absurdly drifting out of the frame. In this case, the teacher had pressured the student to conduct the interview, and his behavior seemed silently to protest his participation. More often, students used humor. The activity embodied in these videos demonstrates agency because the structure of assignments and places was changed through reinterpretation. Adolescent activities frequently exude a carnivalesque quality (Bahktin, 1968), and in video productions, the assignments became genres to shape and distort as students twisted them into something unintended by teachers. One teacher complained to me that his students did nothing but joke, seeming to think that there was no value in it, yet these jokes engaged students in symbolic mediation while protecting their identities: They exerted non-institutional purposes while participating in institutionalized activities. A group of students made a joke of the portrayals and exploitation of immigrants in their commercial for insurance, fulfilling the assignment while mocking it, commercials, and common stereotypes. Places, objects, and people were often renamed and distorted to assert student agendas with and without intending to be funny. These subtle forms of resistance did not threaten the authority of school or teachers, but they often tested it by seeing how far assignments could be stretched, and they acknowledged disrespect and contempt toward authority without confronting it directly.

Open defiance was less common. The projects were used to socialize, get out of the classroom, and bring non-academic activities and tools, such as skateboards, music, and martial arts, into school, but these were integrated into the projects and thus remained largely invisible or briefly acceptable. Some students interpreted assignments quite differently than the way they were intended, but teachers tended to be so happy that students were working that their adaptations went without comment. These were forms of resistance that did not openly defy the structure but sought space within it. The most common form was the use of cameras for actions that had nothing to do with the project, such as seeking out friends. A more clearly defiant act occurred in the after-school Video Club when two students pressured a teacher into revealing his first name at a school where teachers *never* shared their first names, but the drama of the moment was revealed only in the expression on the teacher's face and the self-censure displayed by the students immediately afterward as they became increasingly passive. The most serious offense was not witnessed but reported by a teacher in the New Media program: A student recorded inside a girl's shirt—defying school and legal authorities—but not entirely crossing the line because the girl was not touched and the video could be destroyed. The teachers were shocked that the student let them see it because the basic problem with truly open defiance is that it usually has consequences. In the Documentary Workshop, one student was expelled after getting into a fight over not wanting to be videotaped. Thus open defiance could not be open in the sense of visible to everyone but some actions were open in the sense of not disguised as cooperation. The fact remains, however, that youth are always in a position of weakness with respect to the video programs, their schools, and their communities and therefore must hide their “open defiance.”

Authority in a Native American boarding school

One case stands out because it is in the form of a direct critique and challenge to authority. The project was completed by two youth who chose the pseudonyms Wicket and Jerome and consisted of twenty minutes of improvised video and a one-minute art project. The youth were participants in the Digital Arts program, during which they were given relative freedom during their work. All the students in the program had the opportunity to explore their campuses for subject matter, often without any adult supervision. Time was the greatest constraint because they had only two sessions to shoot video and two more to edit. Three courses were observed, during which college interns led five to six class periods in the pursuit of a video project as part of a regular art course. Wicket had been part of the first such course, but that course was discontinued before the projects were completed due to scheduling problems. This second course was with a smaller class than the first with only ten students (whereas there were 15-16 in the first). The second course divided itself into four groups: Two groups with two male students each and two groups with three female students each. The interns were surprised to find themselves without supervision and as a result took a more hands-off approach. Wicket and Jerome were the only group in this course to take a second day for recording before beginning to edit, and Wicket in particular showed an enthusiasm for using the camera beyond the other students.

The school itself contained many relevant contradictions: As a boarding school, it had once been a place for Native American youth to lose their cultural identities and practices but had been transformed into a place that attempted to celebrate their cultures while providing a Western education. The school's centennial festivities memorialized the past abuses while asserting by comparison that the present was without problems. At least one website, however, lamented the dominance of Christianity at the school. Students' affiliations with Native cultures varied, so some came from urban areas with little awareness of their ancestry, whilst some came from reservations. Ironically, the school promoted contradictory attitudes to Native culture: Murals of Native images were painted on the concrete walls of school hallways, asserting Native ideas but in a thoroughly non-Native way, and the large campus was carefully mowed and landscaped, which Wicket described as shocking when he first arrived from his reservation due to the sheer amount of concrete. A teacher described the school as the last hope for many students, yet the school expelled approximately one third of the students over one winter break that academic year. Most of the staff and faculty were Native, but the campus was clearly not, and though Native history was a dominant subject, classes had a distinctly Western structure. These contradictions were important for Wicket, in particular, because he was the only participant to identify himself as part of a Native tribe when asked and because he explicitly spoke about some of these issues. Jerome was less open but remained influential throughout the project. It is important to note that all the students in this school were relatively quiet and inactive in the presence of adults, and Wicket spoke openly only in relation to the video project.

Wicket (15) and Jerome (14) worked together yet maintained a frequent verbal teasing as they wandered around, recording whatever they stumbled upon. On their second and final day of recording, they clearly sought out a "mysterious antenna" to include in their

project, but even this contained an improvised verbal banter. During their two days of recording, they visited the classroom used for suspensions three times, shot students playing instruments, engaged with one teacher but cut other teachers out of the video, showed art they appreciated, and teased as many peers as they could. These students had fun with their project, playing and using it as an excuse to find friends and see what was happening in other parts of the campus. Wicket seemed to dominate and articulated clearer explanations of the work they completed, but Jerome asserted his interests very clearly during the recordings. Wicket explicitly expressed antagonism toward the school security yet he happily teased peers who were being disciplined. He also spoke of conflicts with Christianity and a respect of tribal differences. Both in the video and during observations, all the students' interactions with adults were formal and passive, but Wicket and Jerome's interactions with peers were largely dominated by play with identities and power.

The following is an excerpt from the video's transcript with the clearest commentary about the role of students in the school:

A student is seen running through the central quad. Wicket yells as he records, "He's on the run!" The student gestures with his middle finger as he runs toward the camera. Wicket yells, "He's running! Who are you running from?" The student runs behind a wall but is still visible from where Wicket is recording. He bends over and then looks back over his shoulder. The student answers, "Security." Wicket repeats, "He's running from security." The runner whispers, "Fuck you," and extends his middle finger again. The camera turns toward the quad and the area beyond it. Wicket says, "Oh, man. Oh, there's the security!" The camera moves quickly over some trees. Two men walk beneath the trees on the other side of the quad. Jerome asks, "Where they at?" Wicket answers, "They're over there." Wicket almost sings, "Security." Wicket says, "Osh. Here they come. They're looking this way." The student is shown again. Wicket says, "Here's a runaway slave against those bozos."

This sequence is one of many, both using a camera and not, that made up the activity aimed at creating a digital art piece. The actions that depicted students as "slaves" and security as "bozos" were, of course, jokes, but Wicket had stumbled upon a moment of open defiance and speaks of the lack of freedom students face. He is, however, in a position of power: He could reveal the "runaway slave" to security. Furthermore, the camera and a hallpass give him unprecedented freedom, an authority with which to become involved in the unfolding events, a symbolic power to bring security nearer via the zoom lens and his narration, and an excuse to play at being a news reporter as he continues, "This is live! This guy just ran from security, and he's from Choice Dorm" (this is a dorm where students are placed as punishment and is visible because he wears a shirt that says "Choice Dorm"). The structure of school has been temporarily altered through the video production activity even as it is visibly in full force through the presence of the punished student. Wicket asserts his agency as the new structure affords. The joy with which he asserts his agency in this and other shots—as is clear in his tone of voice and laughter—demonstrates the sense of *carnival* (Bakhtin, 1968) he is experiencing as well as the significance of this moment. Wicket escapes his own slavery and changes an event that has important symbolic meaning for him through a series of actions. In these, he has found a way to use the structure of the video activity and the school to change events by

becoming part of them and by asserting his own interpretations. Wicket uses the camera as a tool to change the structure temporarily. The joking hostility between Wicket and the student being recorded enables them both to influence the direction of events: They are negotiating the next moves. Wicket does not turn him in but enjoys the moment and then moves on, giving the student an opportunity to find freedom.

The actions that made up this activity were improvised and seemingly unrelated to the purpose of a digital art piece, yet the analysis of different levels of activity is revealing (Roth & Lee, 2007). In other shots, Wicket and Jerome repeatedly teased fellow students, taunted the same security to come “stop” them (except that a window prevented security from hearing them and the youth quickly stopped recording after they politely greeted the men), recorded a church while joking, “They crucify you if you don't believe in the church,” and constantly zoomed in and out, rotated the camera, and framed images to create new meanings (see Beaty, 2005, for further details). Many of these actions had the effect of unseating and critiquing authority as they asserted a temporary power over events through symbolic manipulation. Their actions, which were structured by the camera and assignment, were joyful and culminated in a video with a cryptic message regarding authority that these and other students in the school were unable to talk about. They could not openly speak about their conflicts with authority, but the video project gave them an opportunity to use the structures of the school to achieve their own purposes: Wicket and Jerome continually objectified aspects of their school through their use of the camera and in the process overcame the agency|structure dialect momentarily with an implicit critique of authority. The product of their activity contained complex symbolic manipulation as well as indications of resolving a dichotomy, but their critique could not become explicit because school and Native culture does not allow for authority to be questioned, thus the project facilitated development even as the structure partly prevented it.

Overcoming authority

Many similar though less focused cases could be discussed that offer some critique of school and social authority, but the second case follows a student over two semesters and, in so doing, suggests clearer indications about this youth's psychological development. Spike (who was a fan of Spike Lee) was a 17-year-old, Latino youth living in Central Los Angeles. He had the opportunity to participate in the New Media program as its three teachers battled institutional barriers, a lack of preparation, and the most disconnected students I have ever observed, to create a workable program. In his first semester, Spike was eager to work on his movie: He bought props and enlisted the help of actors, camera operators, and light and sound assistants, who each submitted willingly to his direction. He was also the only student in this class to volunteer for the research project, displaying an eagerness to share his work. Then there was an incident: Another movie involved a prop gun that got the attention of school security, and because the self-written movies were so full of issues that embarrassed the teachers (crime, drugs, and teenage pregnancies), the teachers stopped all productions. When I interviewed Spike and asked to copy the rest of his work, he admitted that he had destroyed the tape. He also told me that the purpose of his project was to prove to his teachers that he could complete the movie without writing a script, but in the end they would not let him complete it.

The next academic year (which started a month later due to Los Angeles' version of year-round school), Spike was back in New Media with a different teacher, but he was no longer enthusiastic. The teachers had decided on several changes to address their

challenges. One had quit teaching New Media. Another had decided to read scripts and analyze professional productions with students, thus avoiding the messiness of student productions. The one remaining instructor decided to seek out and adopt more mainstream video-production activities. He had students complete open-book quizzes in relation to a textbook and record and edit a series of short assignments: an “action-reaction” scene, a commercial, a public service announcement, a demonstration video, and a news story. The teacher spent the first part of the semester trying to get rid of students because more than 40 had been arbitrarily enrolled. He then struggled to have students work and to engage them in meaningful discussion of their video projects. Spike typically sat apart from the rest of the students and never participated in class discussions. When other students were instructed to work, he was observed sneaking in and out of the classroom a few times, going at least once to the weight-lifting room next door. He did not look at a textbook and completed only two projects that semester.

Spike's work on the final project, officially a “news story,” indicated some recovery of his motivation. Under pressure from the teacher, other students interviewed members of various sports teams. Spike was a football player and had dreams of becoming a professional football player as well as a movie director, and this project interested him. Two students in the class were involved in recording games for the football team, so officially the three of them worked together to edit hours' worth of video into a “news story.” The teacher directed them to log the video, and while the teacher was paying attention, they went through the motions of watching video and creating a log of what it contained. Spike continued to sit apart from the other students, and the two students who recorded the video joined him to watch parts. The log was faked, and eventually Spike moved to a computer where he somewhat randomly selected excerpts to import. In the end, the video was set to music and artistically arranged into a project entitled “Final 4” that included special effects. It was not a news story but more of a music video featuring football. The students regarded it as Spike's project, and he was proud of it. It was artistically done and demonstrated skill with the editing software, though there had never been any formal instruction in editing.

Spike's motivation was clearly an issue, but the case suggests more than damage to motivation arising from structural changes. Spike was a young, Latino man, assigned to the lowest track in a huge school. The class met in a room that warehoused various types of equipment and the promise to transform it into a studio was never fulfilled. The three white, male teachers and the support of the reform program gradually abandoned the academy until it was finally transformed into a vocational program the following year. In short, there were few reasons for any of these students or teachers to be motivated. Students routinely were observed to sit and do nothing during a two-hour block period. Yet Spike made decisions. He participated when and how he wanted, using remarkable resources in leadership and displaying an ability to get things done. He rejected tools such as scripts and logs, but he did not need them and effectively used the tools he chose to use. The program structure offered few affordances for activity he found meaningful, but Spike sought out and transformed activities when he could, using the structure to fulfill his wishes and rejecting it when it could not. He seemed to repeatedly overcome the agency|structure dialectic in small ways.

Spike engaged in the activity of video production only when he could directly or indirectly contest some part of the school structure: The first teacher had insisted that scripts be written, but Spike somehow convinced him to begin without a script. The last project was

assigned as a news report, but he went through the motions of following directions while creating art. Spike did not submit to school authority and thus demonstrated an intense desire and ability (arising from higher mental functioning) to exert his own agency, participating in school when and only when his purposes were met. Thus the purpose of this “learning” activity was infused with his own rebellion, and he overcame the agency|structure contradiction to some degree in finding ways to participate but sabotaged his chances to learn more or to achieve the type of recognition he will need to get his “credentials.”

In both of these cases, youth chose to make their resistance to authority part of the purpose of their activity, negotiating what served their purposes and the requirements that their schools demanded. The activity structures of video production as presented afforded the possibility of resistance becoming part of the overall purpose. Wicket and Jerome reflected their experience of being dominated by authority after playing with it throughout their video work, and Spike was openly defiant but made the choice to appear to cooperate. Authority became the site and stimulus for their actions, yet these students did not simply react: They selected actions that were not reflexive or taught. They accepted the structures and changed them to the extent they could.

Their development, however, was also limited by the structure: Wicket and Jerome could not express their critique in words because the demands of what it meant to be respectful did not allow it—they could not openly discuss their thoughts about institutional authority and managed only an implicit critique through connected images and a few explicit but abstract observations. Their symbolic manipulation was limited to abstract expressions. Spike, on the other hand, missed the opportunity to learn and accomplish more after having his production aborted and being offered classroom exercises instead. Thus the social structure of schools—the norms, rules, and assignments—prevented student progress that seemed materially possible. Furthermore, both groups of students have quietly commented on how they experience school—as a place to be enslaved, punished, and controlled rather than to learn and develop.

Agency in peer interactions

Peer interactions were a second context in which noticeable contradictions surfaced within video production activities that are an important part of understanding the agency|structure unity. The contradictions relate to what Edwards (2007; 2011) describes as “relational agency.” Accordingly, relational agency is about work done with others to expand an activity’s object and to bring one’s own understandings in line with those of others (Edwards, 2011, p. 34). Part of her emphasis is on the effort of professionals to go beyond their disciplinary boundaries in defining the purpose of an activity but could equally describe negotiations among peers. It also emphasizes the skills involved in listening to and valuing expertise that is not one’s own. Youth have not yet developed a disciplinary specialty, but they clearly bring different experiences and knowledge to activities. Some projects became vehicles for students to bring their expertise in music, skateboarding, martial arts, and other areas into the school. The analysis that follows, however, is less concerned with the skills youth have or develop than with their conceptions of agency. Peer interactions seemed to evoke the agency|structure dialectic in a way that connected to another dialectic unity that is prevalent under capitalism: individual|social. My purpose is not to distinguish a different type of agency but to reveal processes that are common to diverse contexts. Thus, my guiding questions are:

- To what extent do youth display similar indications of fulfillment and motivation when agency is expressed within peer interactions (or the reverse when they are not)?
- How do cultural and school structures support and impede the development of agency within peer interactions?

Collaboration

Authority relates to the structure that is imposed within a hierarchical social context. Collaboration, on the other hand, can have a clear hierarchy or be relatively egalitarian, but either way, it emerges in response to a social-material structure. Some sort of collaboration in the form of students working together on a project was required in all video production programs, but the structure varied both in what was imposed and in the routines established by the students. Wicket and Jerome, from above, collaborated on mostly equal terms, competing for use of the camera sometimes and arguing over how to proceed, but they were equals in most regards and were friends. Spike, on the other hand, owned his projects, and no one contested it. For both cases, the collaborative structure came from the students. These programs left it open as to how the collaborators should relate without teacher involvement. The Documentary Workshop required participants to assume specific roles but also to rotate positions and to share in research and editing. A teacher was almost always involved in production activity, which guaranteed distribution of the work. The Television Production program, by contrast, required that students have an assigned role for each project (as is typical of the industry), that these be documented, and that decisions be made and coordinated without the teacher's participation. In the advanced course, the teacher was much more involved, but the assignment of positions was more rigid: Students auditioned for relatively permanent positions in the daily news program.

This more hierarchical structure caused problems for a number of students, who became completely passive in productions and frequently ceased participation because other students had planned, shot, and edited the projects. For the advanced course, noticeable sexism existed in the roles students took in the news program: Only male students were involved in the technical positions, whilst female students were writers and all but one of the "talent," including news anchors and reporters. There were hints of racism as well, with European-American students dominating positions of power such as director and producer, even though there was not a racial/ethnic majority in the school or classroom. Most students had no creative input, mirroring the way television production is done in the professional world but limiting the opportunities for students to develop an array of skills.

Valic was a student for whom the tensions around collaboration became the most apparent. He was in a beginning Television Production course, and he did not have any close friends in the class, so when it came time to work on the two creative projects, he worked with different students each time, despite there being fewer than twenty students in the class. On the first project, they were assigned a commercial. They produced more of a public service announcement (another standard assignment) than a true commercial, but the teacher accepted their proposal (which contained the roles students would have). Valic was the camera operator and recorded the whole project himself. His sister was the talent,

pretending to “drink and drive” while he creatively shot from both inside and outside the car. They simulated an accident rather effectively, given the material limitations of not having a car to wreck. The problem arose when it came time to edit: The other three students sat at a computer while he paced up and down behind them, clearly frustrated because there was nothing left for him to do, and the other three students made no effort to bring him into the process, rejecting his suggestions and frequently speaking in Spanish despite Valic not knowing Spanish. Valic had invested himself in the project but was prevented from further work and the opportunity to manipulate the images and did not know how to let go or insert himself. The teacher did not get involved, and eventually Valic withdrew in frustration. On the second project, Valic was involved only in the editing and remained considerably less involved.

This part of the story reveals how limiting a student’s participation can lower motivation, literally pushing students out of the school if they wanted to develop further, which is what Valic did. The teacher willingly loaned him a camera to take home at least twice, and Valic was eager to share this work with me. The tape he provided showed meaningful exploration of his environment and of camera work. He recorded friends as they sat around talking and as they walked around town. He tried out special effects and used the camera to change his interactions with people around him: The camera was instrumental in Valic and his friends talking with a drummer who was performing on the street and who then allowed them to have a turn playing. Valic also placed the camera on his bicycle and recorded a ride to capture the experience. To my knowledge, this was the only student to borrow a camera for such “play,” and the willingness of the teacher to allow it was important for Valic. The part that was missing was any structure with which he could have edited some of this work into something more meaningful, not having the resources to get his own camera and computer, and I was the only audience other than a couple friends to validate this work. His frustration about being shut out of his first project and his willingness to take a more inconsequential role in his second project was partly compensated for by turning elsewhere. His actions with the camera outside of school lacked a clear purpose beyond play, yet this play afforded him the opportunity to advance his video production skills, whereas the constraints in school prevented him from exploring different camera uses. In effect, he was pushed out of school to develop his uses of the camera as a tool for symbolic manipulation.

Part of the problem with collaboration becomes clear in the individualistic nature of school. Group projects often become problematic in schools because someone does more work than someone else, and students will argue with teachers in the effort to get a better grade than their coworkers. Culture, in addition to how teachers became involved, may play an important role in these tensions: It was only in the Television Production program that collaboration seemed to cause serious problems in work, and this was the only program that was dominated by European-Americans. In the New Media program, for instance, the mostly Latino students tended to work with many fewer tensions. One group in particular, the group identified as the “good” one by the teacher, seemed to work quite seamlessly together, sharing the various tasks as the moment demanded. No one seemed to have a sense of ownership of their work, and they collaborated without noticeable difficulty. The one exception was in the fact that one member came into conflict with the group and was entirely ostracized afterwards. This problem seemed to have nothing to do with the work, however, and the students pretended that there was no problem when talking to me; the ostracized student simply disappeared when I began talking with them

about their work and they refrained from talking about her role. In the same program but another class, Spike clearly owned the projects on which he collaborated, but this was not a problem; the others accepted it without noticeable tension. Similarly, the Native American youth did not have problems with collaboration, even though groups worked with and without close involvement of college interns. Wicket and Jerome openly joked with each other whenever an imbalance was perceived. Even in the editing process, they maintained their good-natured competition by one controlling the importing process from the camera and the other from the computer. The fact that none of these students were from what is traditionally considered Western Culture may be important, but the school and program differences make this purely speculative.

The professional models of having assigned roles were structures imposed to varying extents in two of the five programs, but only in the Television Production program did a clear hierarchy accompany the roles. This is how the profession works because it has an individualistic, hierarchical, and competitive approach that is prevalent in capitalism. Each individual does her or his piece, and creativity is a right to be earned as one moves up through the hierarchy, but everyone works toward a common goal: Their technical best will make the production better and serve their personal interests of getting more and better jobs. In education, by contrast, we usually grade and reward individual work, which is at odds with a collaborative process because students will generally look better if their peers do poorly. Both worlds stress individualism, hierarchy, and competition, but while working on a video project or any other true collaboration, the collaborators are usually not rewarded for competition with one another—the competition is in the effort to get the job in the professional world. These collaborators, however, are not entitled to a sense of ownership in the same way that they may on an independent project, unless they are the producer or director. The other workers experience classic Marxian alienation. There is a compartmentalization in professional videography that is not concerned with human development, and the use of a professional model in a school brings that contradiction to the foreground because schools should be about developing each student to their fullest potential. The tensions around collaborations illustrate a clear difficulty with hierarchy and specialization.

Individualism also dominates in psychology, leading usually to an individualistic understanding of agency, but agency can just as easily be a collective process in which the collective action reflects a collective voice. The students who come from non-Western cultures did not demonstrate the same tensions in their collaboration that several students expressed in the Television Production program. The students in all the other programs teased one another, competed, and argued, but they seemed relatively comfortable with collaboration when it existed. Their comfort with the collective process as opposed to Valic's frustration suggests that his experience of agency was different. Having a clear and imposed hierarchy in the advanced course's news program removed the observable conflict, but it also allowed/led to several students to be tangential to the program and for consistent differences in participation based on gender and ethnicity to emerge, which was not a pattern in other programs. The differences in collaboration suggest differences in what it means to exert agency, and the more collective tendencies, which may interfere with some students' ability to succeed in traditional school, may help students when it comes to negotiating and completing work in collaborative projects, facilitating development in these contexts. Agency seems to be experienced differently depending on

how cultural-historical processes shape a person's views and experiences of it. Ideally schools could recognize and nurture multiple conceptions of agency.

Connecting with agency

The individualism of schools and Western society more generally poses an additional conflict: While most of the emphasis in schools is on students working alone to master and complete tasks, a youth culture exists that seems to value extended time spent socializing in addition to challenging the dominant culture through music, fashion, and behaviors that run counter to it. This contradiction between distinguishing oneself as an individual and creating meaningful ties with peers poses potential problems for students who feel they must make a choice between having friends and being a "good student." This contradiction is at least partially about how to develop as an individual and how to develop relationships, which is a contradiction that exists even among psychologists: Erik Erikson is well known for stressing a need for adolescents to form identities before they can be intimate, while Harry Stack Sullivan argued for the need for intimacy first (Steinberg, 2001). Both these approaches view the processes of identity formation and developing the capacity for intimacy as separate, but I propose that these develop as two sides of a dialectic unity. Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004) describe how the self is entirely social, working to resolve the individual|social dialectic at a theoretical level, but in the actions of many youth, a tension between being an individual whilst also being a member of a group is revealed that, I argue, is about finding ways to express agency. Can one express agency when it is understood as an entirely individual process and truly be a part of the community that imposes structure—the apparent obstacle to agency?

The individual|social dialectic was a source of tension most noticeably during peer interactions. In the Video Club, the differences in how two videographers interacted were particularly striking. The Club was an informal, after-school group with no specific requirements that a teacher and I put together so that I could begin exploring the use of video. During their practice sessions, Leonard routinely challenged people as he focused the camera on them, and Brad would routinely find sources of agreement. In one interaction, Leonard had just challenged every statement made by another student, Josh, dismissing him with the statement, "So you being greedy. I'm going to leave you alone. You a greedy little person," and then turned the camera to Brad. He started by asking him, "So what's up with you? What are you?" Josh answered for Brad, saying that he was a freshman like himself, which was important because Leonard was a junior. In this way, Josh was seeking an ally, and Brad's hesitation suggested he was preparing for an attack. Leonard asked, "You a freshman also? Do you plan to stay in this school?" Brad answered, "Yeah, I got no choice." Leonard asked, "What do you mean you got no choice? You got a choice. Everybody got choices." The conversation proceeded to a debate about when they were allowed to transfer to another school and the competition that had dominated a moment ago was gone because Brad had managed to redirect the conversation away from their differences and towards their commonalities.

Leonard had begun with a difference: He was two years ahead of both Brad and Josh, and with Josh, he had aggressively found a flaw in everything said—a pattern that was consistent in his videos—but Brad made a statement that placed them all in the same position—as subject to the authority of school, and this changed the dynamics of the conversation. Both students were using their words to change events but with different effects. This was analyzed as a difference in *solidarity*: Brad routinely seemed to find

ways of increasing solidarity while Leonard continually introduced differences or disagreements to the point of being aggressive. In another shot, Leonard zoomed in on a girl and teased her about having a large nose, changing her apparent pleasure at the attention to seeming humiliation. The differences between Leonard and Brad in interaction styles—to create commonalities as opposed to creating differences in relationships—led to distinctly different uses of the camera and suggested different ways of relating to school. Events in other video production programs provided similar examples, but efforts to systematically apply *solidarity levels* as a code found mostly ambiguity. When there is clarity, youth tend to emphasize differences, and it usually involves teasing.

Teasing seemed to be the most common type of interaction between youth when they were not more clearly focused on the video production, and most often, it emphasized some characteristic or circumstance for the individual who was the target. Students were teased for being punished, for characteristics such as being one of “the blonds” or behaviors like laughing too loudly, for liking someone, by pretending that they were something they were not or liked somebody they did not, and for a range of other issues. The teasing frequently asserts individual differences, regardless of the culture within which it occurred. The problem identifying these acts in relation to *solidarity* is that, despite recent public attention to bullying, teasing frequently seems to bring the people closer together. There is a great variety in how teasing is done, needing an extensive taxonomy for a better understanding, but the fact that people can connect with or reject others—flirt with someone or bully them—using very similar methods of highlighting differences suggests that differences are central to relationships. Teasing may resolve problems inherent in efforts to share agency or to belong to the same group, and in this way reveals the conflict within the individual|social unity.

Tensions around the individual|social dialectic are frequently about agency: When working by oneself (noting that these actions are still social), asserting one's will does not impact relationships—at least until the video is shared—but when face to face with others, attempting to change events in even small ways can be difficult or forbidden. People can always play their part in social scripts, but this often exhibits a lack of agency. Students, for example, are not permitted to begin asking questions on topics that teachers have not sanctioned, and frequently students will be reprimanded for being off topic. When there is no authority present, the problem is resolved differently but remains: A new topic of conversation initiated in the middle of an on-going discussion is often perceived as rude and can lead to different levels of rejection. Cultural norms always limit actions, sometimes causing discomfort and confusion when norms are not shared. Finding ways of acting with agency but without disrupting social structures is part of negotiating the agency|structure tension even as it provokes the individual|social dialectic.

The tension around exercising agency within social situations became central for one student in the Television Production program: Luke demonstrated this contradiction most clearly because he did not belong to the community or any of its sub-communities. Students routinely remarked on his oddness, both to his face and behind his back, and when a student asked one day, “What is wrong with him?” the teacher simply answered that he had been home-schooled, explicitly marking his lack of belonging. The school year, in fact, started as his first in many to attend a public school, and whether or not home-schooling was responsible for his difficulties with his peers, it was clearly related to his lack of connections with his classmates. It also led to a strange arrangement: Halfway through the year, Luke decided to withdraw from school, but because the Television

Production program was part of a regional program, he was allowed to stay enrolled even while withdrawing from his other classes. Furthermore he was permitted to enroll in the advanced course that did the daily news show while finishing the beginning course. He became central in my observations both because I was seeing him for two class periods during each of my visits and because he was eager to talk to adults.

Luke was European-American and the oldest of a large family that was very involved in Church. Observations across the academic year revealed a struggle in how to act with his peers: He remarked often that he was a screenwriter and maintained a steady effort at witty commentary that demonstrated both critical thinking and a strong sense of who he was, but his peers usually ignored him or mocked him. In his school work, Luke took initiative and was original, but in the social life of the classroom, he was isolated, the target of jokes, and unable to have his peers listen to him. He was exerting agency but with little success, emphasizing the need for skills in relational agency that Edwards (2011) discussed. In his video work, he found only a small role on the first project because he had chosen to work with two students who dominated the small class as the only seniors and who ignored his efforts to be a self-described “creative consultant.” In his second project, he worked with Valic, who was discussed above, and a young woman who also struggled with finding a place in the peer social structure because she had recently moved into the district and seemed to struggle with her ethnic identity. None of these students had a clear position in the local social structure.

For the second project, Luke initially wanted to write a screenplay and do a big production satirizing *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. He explained to me later that it was hard for him to “think small as a screenwriter” and had therefore chosen something easier, but I also observed one of the seniors sharply criticizing his ideas just before their decision to change plans. The idea they pursued in the end had clear advantages for Luke. They decided to do a documentary of the news program, and because Luke was the only one who could be present during the class period in which it was produced, he became the camera operator, director, and general leader of the project. He claimed to have been responsible for most of the editing, but they were not able to get sufficient use of the computers to edit it well. Three days’ worth of improvised recordings were quickly edited into a rather poor documentary, which had greater potential. Luke’s camera work revealed the tension he experienced as well as hints of beginning to overcome the tensions.

We did not talk about the project until the following fall when he was attending the local community college, but he asserted that the project had been about “having fun” and that the class was close. To some degree, he was correct about the students being close—many of them had strong ties and the news program became an important part of many students’ identities within the school—but Luke was at best peripheral to the social life of the class. To begin with, he never found an official position in the news program after joining the advanced class and spent most of his time watching as everyone else busily set up cameras and lights, finished scripts, and prepared guests for live interviews. Luke’s unedited videos showed that his desire “to be a fly on the wall” gave him purpose: He spent most of the time acting as he normally did in class, observing the activity around him, except that now he was holding a camera. He conducted interviews in which he told peers to “just talk,” let them create their own questions and advise him about how to do an interview, and accepted whatever topics or actions they chose. But over the three days of recording, he inserted himself more into these interactions, mediating his relations with the camera more

as he went. He found ways to use the camera to make people talk to him and in the end to have them respond to him.

Luke demonstrated agency in his conversations with adults and in activities he carried out, indicating both humor and creativity as he critiqued his world. However, he tended to be passive or ineffective when interacting with his peers and they tended to ignore or mock him. In his work on the video, however, he increasingly asserted himself into the “fun,” getting students to speak to him and respond to his actions. He started by simply pointing the camera at people and letting them perform for him and ended with his jokes becoming part of the banter among the “crew.” Thus his purpose for the project seemed to be not so much about having fun as to be part of the fun—to find ways to assert himself and his ideas with peers. This case demonstrates the connection between higher psychological functioning and agency because agency was initially possible only in areas where more skills had been developed, such as in writing, but was not possible where skills were lacking until he mediated these activities with a video camera. Furthermore, Luke indicated a desire to be part of his peer world *and* to be an individual. The teacher may have recognized some of Luke’s difficulties, but there were no immediate structures to facilitate his integration beyond the teacher’s invitation to join the advanced course. Classroom activities, even within the unusual context of television production course, did not help. Even though this program used collaboration, it was a compartmentalized collaboration that required each individual to perform separate tasks. Luke demonstrated a desire for some sort of belonging, but the struggle to become a social individual is hampered by a society that emphasizes individuality and structures activities only around the premise of individual accomplishments.

Home-schooling takes the individualistic emphasis of schooling to the extreme, often explicitly isolating youth from the unwanted values of diverse people. If education were not viewed as filling people’s heads with information and instead viewed as helping people to become full participants in society, then isolating a child for “education” would seem absurd because society is based on cooperation and collective activities. Luke’s videos reveal that he desires social connections, yet he lacked the skills for how to connect because his education and other experiences neglected this. After early-childhood education, schools—particularly those serving the poor—tend to neglect peer relations and press for obedience, which may lead to the oppositional character that youth cultures frequently assume. Being home-schooled most of his life, Luke had developed ways of acting with agency through a particularly individualistic orientation. He nevertheless was unhappy in school. In his video work, Luke seemed to merge his efforts to overcome the agency|structure and individual|social dichotomies. More often, youth go outside school, sometimes dropping out, to develop. The structures of school and capitalism interfere with adolescents’ quest to simultaneously form intimacy and identity because collective agency is not valued and is frequently impeded by the nature of school assignments and cultural expectations. The activities of school are usually individualistic and inconsequential for activities outside of school.

Conclusion

The actions taken by youth in video production programs were as varied as the contexts in which they happened, yet all the youth were in positions with little power and removed from the “real” activity of the world, which capitalism establishes as the creation of exchange value. Youth are in a similar position as the worker, except that they are not

even a meaningful part of the system that dominates the working class; youth are thus doubly alienated. Youth are approaching adulthood and will soon be expected to assume roles as workers, but youth typically find few legitimate affordances for influencing events in their lives. The youth I studied developed the capacity for symbolic mediation that is an indication of higher mental functioning but had few opportunities to engage higher mental processes in initiating or transforming the events in their lives, and were largely unable to act in ways valued by capitalism. As workers, for the most part they will devote themselves to activity that is more valued, but they are not likely to find more opportunities for agency apart from personal decisions such as selecting a particular job, home, and spouse, which matter but do not influence the structure of communities. Few workers find affordances to influence the *way things are done*, yet their activities are valued as long as they are producing or reproducing. Given this, it is no surprise that youth seek out adult relationships and jobs prematurely.

Agency is intertwined with the development of higher psychological functions, and a deeper understanding of this relationship is necessary if schools and other institutions are truly to facilitate psychological development. Students did more than demonstrate their knowledge of video cameras and editing software when they created video projects. Wicket and Jerome and Valic were discovering how to communicate meaningfully with video cameras as they played with the images they captured. Rather than exercises in how to do a close-up, medium shot and long shot, they began to discover the meanings of these actions through their interactions. Spike and Luke, in different ways, developed their conceptions of who they were as they negotiated their roles in school through their video productions. This became possible because they were engaged with people around them. School structures can become obstacles to youth development by asserting unnecessary forms of authority and affording only individual and inconsequential activities. Youth are thus pushed out of schools to fulfill their developmental potential and social needs elsewhere because there is no space within for them to act on their worlds. Conceptualizing agency solely as a task that involves increasing self-control maintains an individualistic view of agency that places the responsibility entirely on individuals. Conceptions of agency must overcome the inner|outer, individual|social, and psychological|sociological dichotomies if a broader understanding of development as it occurs and how it might occur is to be achieved. Once conceived differently, institutional structures may be altered to promote more diverse forms of agency that in turn might allow individuals and communities to develop. Inviting youth to help shape a better world might help them to transform short-sighted and self-sabotaging actions into ones that further personal and collective development. Finding ways for youth to affect the structure of schooling may help them transform the uncomfortable dichotomy of self versus society into a unity of self in society.

When we find that youth, as part of collective youth cultures, routinely rebel by challenging trivial aspects of society (such as how to wear one's hair) and that they seek out and create space apart from the adult world, then they are communicating their experiences of the activities and places adult society has created for them. Sawchuk similarly discussed how the working class makes use of "crevices [within] legitimate institutional life" for transformative experiences (2006, p. 244), because these are the only spaces where societal structures afford personal meaning. Thus creating spaces within our institutional structures for youth to truly develop will further their progress by helping to bring their most creative activities into our institutions. Youth need places where they can

make a difference to fulfill the development of higher mental functions, and the recognition of and affordances for agency must not be confined to solitary acts of will if we are to truly nurture youth development as a society.

The development of higher psychological functioning—the characteristic that most clearly makes humans different from other species—leads us to change our environments rather than to simply adapt to them. This ability to change the environment is irrevocably tied to our ability to change ourselves (Packer, 2008). Agency is about disengaging from learned associations and habits, redirecting our thoughts through symbolic mediation, selecting actions based on the goals and purposes we have, and creating worlds in which our purposes can more easily be pursued. Changing ourselves and changing our worlds are inseparable if the fullest psychological development is to emerge, and the only way to make this happen is to conceive of changing ourselves and our worlds less as individual activities and more as necessarily involving collective processes. Vygotsky and Luria (1994) emphasized that the important difference between apes and humans was in our ability to mediate and thus free ourselves from conditioned stimuli. Tomasello (2009) goes further by showing that apes cannot cooperate the way humans can, asserting that our ability to cooperate far exceeds that of any other species and represents our greatest evolutionary advancement. Yet a myth of human individuality being the highest form of action persists that prevents societal progress.

Individuality and collective activity are not mutually exclusive, thus if schools were to nurture cooperation rather than individuality, many problems within society might be eased, including youth disengagement. The resolution to the fundamental contradiction in schools of youth needing yet being held back by adult guidance lies partly in the resolution of the individual|social dichotomy. It should not be left up to youth to work it out on their own. Understanding and experiencing agency in truly collaborative contexts and creating contexts in which youth can collectively change their worlds, not just themselves, will make the agentic employment of higher psychological functions possible and allow the nature of secondary school to be transformed. This development could in turn allow society to overcome its contradictions.

References

- Bakhtin, M. (1968). *Rabelais and His World* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Cambridge: [M.I.T.](#) Press.
- Beaty, L. M. (2005). "Give Me Space!" *Situated video production and high school social relations*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York. Available: <http://lbeaty.freeshell.org>.
- Beaty, L. M. (2008). Watching transformation in informant-made videos. In M. Downing & L. Tenney (Eds.), *Video Vision: Changing the culture of social science research*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Costall, A. (1995). Social affordances. *Theory & Psychology*, 5(4), 467-481.
- De Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Edwards, A. (2007). Relational agency in professional practice: A CHAT analysis. *An International Journal of Human Activity Theory*, 1, 1-17.
- Edwards, A. (2011). Building common knowledge at the boundaries between professional practices: Relational agency and relational expertise in systems of distributed expertise. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 50, 33-39.
- Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, 14(1), 133-156.
- Litowitz, B. E. (1997). Just say no: Responsibility and resistance. In M. Cole, Y. Engeström, and O. Vasquez (Eds.), *Mind, Culture, and Activity: Seminal papers from the laboratory of comparative human cognition* (pp. 473-484). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Packer, M. J. (2008). Is Vygotsky relevant? Vygotsky's Marxist psychology. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 15, 8-31.
- Roth, W-M. (2010). ReUniting psychological and sociological perspective in/for science education: A introduction. In W-M. Roth (Ed.), *Re/structuring Science Education: ReUniting psychological and sociological perspectives* (pp.1-12). New York: Springer.
- Roth, W-M. & Lee, Y-J. (2007). "Vygotsky's neglected legacy": Cultural-historical activity theory. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(2), 186-232.
- Sawchuk, P. H. (2006). Activity and power: Everyday life and development of working-class groups. In P. H. Sawchuk, N. Duarte and M. Elhammoumi (Eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Activity: Explorations across education, work, and everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sawchuk, P. H., Duarte, N. & Elhammoumi M. (2006). *Critical Perspectives on Activity: Explorations across education, work, and everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Steinberg, L. (2001). *Adolescence* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Stetsenko, A. (2005). Activity as object-related: Resolving the dichotomy of individual and collective types of activity. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 12(1), 70-88.

- Stetsenko, A. (2010). Standing on the shoulders of giants: A balancing act of dialectically theorizing conceptual understanding on the grounds of Vygotsky's project. In W-M. Roth (Ed.), *Re/structuring science education: ReUniting psychological and sociological perspectives* (pp. 53-72). New York: Springer.
- Stetsenko, A., & Arieviditch, I. (2004). The self in cultural-historical activity theory: Reclaiming the unity of social and individual dimensions of human development. *Theory & Psychology*, 14(4), 475-503.
- Tomasello, M. (2009). *Why We Cooperate*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Vianna, E. (2009). *Collaborative Transformations in Foster Care: Teaching-learning as a developmental tool in a residential program*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner and E. Souberman (Eds.), *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes* (pp. 79-91). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (2004). Dynamics and structure of the adolescent's personality (M. J. Hall, Trans.). In R. W. Rieber and D. K. Robinson (Eds.), *The Essential Vygotsky* (pp. 471-490). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. (Reprinted from *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky, Volume 5: Child psychology*, pp. 167-184, by R. W. Rieber, Ed., 1998, New York: Plenum Press.)
- Vygotsky, L. & Luria, A. (1994). Tool and symbol in child development. In R. van der Veer and J. Valsiner (Eds.), *The Vygotsky Reader* (pp. 99-174). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Worthen, H. & Berry, J. (2006). Our working conditions are our students' learning conditions: A CHAT analysis of teachers' work. P. H. Sawchuk, N. Duarte and M. Elhammoumi (Eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Activity: Explorations across education, work, and everyday life*. (pp. 123-144). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Joseph Glick, Eduardo Vianna, David Kritt, and Niklas Chimirri for comments on this paper that were instrumental to its completion.

About the author

Lara Margaret Beaty is currently based at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. Her research centers on the development of student-school relationships from a mostly cultural-historical perspective and the use of video in social science research.

Contact: Social Science Department, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, 31-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, New York 11101, United States, Email: lbeaty@lagcc.cuny.edu