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Dialogic Learning in Moral Education: From Vygotsky's ZPD to ZCD

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Abstract

This paper explores Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in the Moral Education (ME) classroom with the objectives of encouraging all students to reach a higher level of development. Small groups of students in different demographic setting were involved in a participant action research (PAR) project. Using the Malaysian ME classroom as a case study, various examples of group conversations based on moral dilemmas provided by PAR participants themselves are discussed. The focus is on the dialogic learning process that illustrates ways that collaborative processes precede individual student's ZPD and the divergent views of each individual which focuses on group decisions and understanding. The ZCD is seen critically with the possibility of an extension into a zone of collaborative development (ZCD).

Keywords: dialogic learning, moral education, zone of proximal development, zone of collaborative development

Introduction

Learning is part of human nature where individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and values to behave according to the needs of the society then and there. This process requires the need to synthesis different types of information. According to Schacter, Gilbert and Wegner (2011), learning may be reflected as a process rather than a collection of facts and procedural knowledge and learning is experiential. Experiential Learning Theory focuses on a holistic model of learning process (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002). The focus of the theory is experience where knowledge is constructed through the transformative reflection on one's experience. Learning can take many forms and functions. Learning can be formal or informal. However, both formal and informal learning should not be seen as separate entities, but as parts of a continuum. Whatever the process and product refers to, there is a final consent on transfer of knowledge, skills or values from one side to another or even mutual. Learning does not take place in vacuum thus the need for dialogue in written or spoken form.

Dialogic Learning

Dialogical learning has been in existence for as long as man can remember and frequently mentioned in current day's discussion. In institutions of learning, Socratic dialogues are famous to be utilised by educators to get students involved actively in topics which they are teaching. In ancient Hindu scriptures of Mahabharata, the warrior, Arjuna was dialoging with Lord Krishna on life and much has been learnt based on the ancient wisdom related by Lord Krishna. Sen (2005) agrees that Indians by nature have a habit of asking questions. In ancient China, most of the philosophical ideas of Confucius about values in life were introduced through dialoging with his fellow students and members of the ruling nation. Dialogic learning is a theory of learning and teaching. Learning takes place through actions of curiosity, dialoging and reaching to consensus. Engaging in meaningful conversation and discussion increases the participants' thinking and learning skills. By asking questions, providing answers and reflecting on both, participants connect ideas, challenge their own and others assumptions, absorb and reflect on the dialogue process and knowledge shared. Learning to conduct dialogues or to speak has the reciprocal effect of speaking to learn and conducting dialogue in real-life. Dialogical learning is a type of learning based on communication, agreements and disagreement that different individuals



provide based on their own valid premises within an argument. An argument can be valid if the truth of its premises is consistence in process and conclusion and every step it's being argued. It enables individuals to think at a higher sphere and develop their thinking ability. They are able to conduct a dialogue intellectually and make their own dialogical learning in future similar situations. This takes us to the works of one of Lev Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development which focuses on the dialogic learning process.

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian scientist and also educator believed strongly in the processes of dialoging which allows individuals to process information and make them aware of issues that are discussed. During Vygotsky's time, citizens of Russia and around the world were reconstructing and renewing their society. It was during this post-revolutionary period that Vygotsky began his quest for a new psychology that brought together a unified notion of how students learn and develop (Vygotsky, 1978). Language and action, for Vygotsky, were tools of mediation for learning. Speaking reorganises students' thinking, and their language comes to them as a cultural heritage through their interactions with others. According to Vygotsky, what a child or individual learns today with the help of peers or the more experienced one (Flecha, 2000) would be able to be utilised by that child or individual in other similar instances. Those interactions and dialoging create Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). This, according to Vygotsky encourages individuals to reach higher levels of development. Hargrave & Senechal (2000) agrees with Vygotsky that children in a dialogic-learning condition show significantly larger gains in vocabulary than children in a less dialogic learning environment. However, in my own research experience, I found that the ZPD that Vygotsky recommended does not comply completely to the Malaysian scenario. Students can learn from others but they need to reflect upon their own communal obligation when deciding on a moral solution. Thus I adapted ZPD and introduced Zone of Collaborative Development (ZCD).

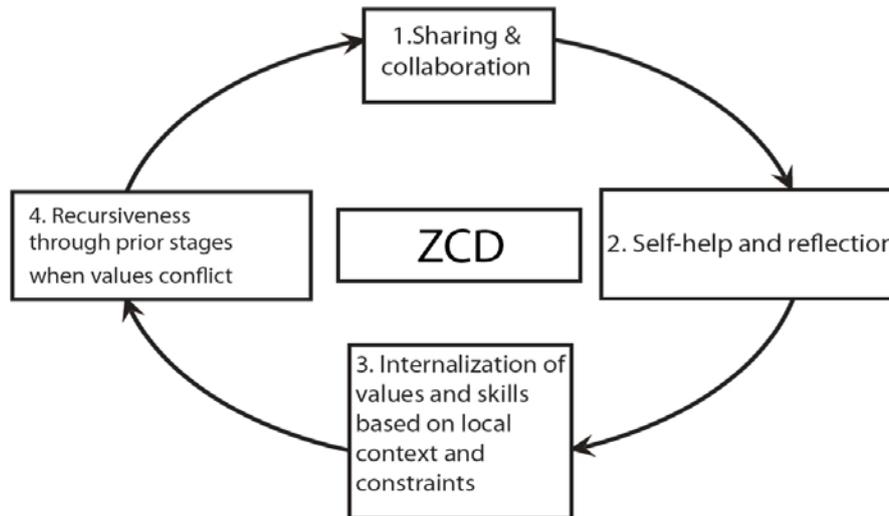


Figure 1: Process in Zone of Collaborative Development (ZCD).

ZCD was developed with a few reasons. Firstly, dialogic learning in Malaysian is located in a collaborative environment which is usually within the four walls of the classroom. Secondly, the backgrounds of students in Malaysian classroom are diverse. They come from a multicultural background with different religion and cultural identities. Thus during their dialogic processes, ZCD encourages the students to use their cultural backgrounds and differences to express themselves during the learning. ZCD also encourages students to learn from each other's cultures and experiences because of the equality in power sharing implicit in the process of collaboration. Thirdly, since the moral dilemmas are emerging from the students (refer to methodology); the dilemmas might cover a vast area of issues that students would be looking into a collaborative manner. ZCD has the potential to encourage students to be responsible for their own dilemmas and that of their peers. They would be able to use their own knowledge within the focus group or class discussion and develop a shared moral language. As Schacter, Gilbert and Wegner (2011), state that learning could be reflected as a process rather than a collection of facts and procedural knowledge and learning is experiential. Thus ZCD allows for all those stages and processes to take place.

Moral Education

Moral Education has been in existence in Malaysia since 1983 as a core subject taught to the non- Muslim



cohort in primary and secondary schools. The focus of the subject is to inculcate universal values among students and ensure that they are morally and socially responsible for their thoughts, feelings and actions in a multicultural society. (Moral Education Syllabus, MOE, 2010). Students are also taught certain skills to ensure that the values that they learn are applied accordingly in their daily lives. While non-Muslim students study Moral Education, Muslim students study Islamic Education. Though it is almost three decades that Moral Education has been in existence in Malaysia, there are many setbacks about the subject in the way it is being implemented in schools. Syllabus, teachers teaching the subject, the assessment method and how effective it is as a humanistic subject has always been questioned and evaluated. The worst case scenario is the proposal to abolish the subject with the notion that it does not provide any economical value to the already burdened school system of subjects, exams and grading. However, with the implementation of School Base Assessment in primary schools starting from Year 1 in 2011 and Form 1 in 2012, there is great hope that Moral Education will regain its dignity and pride to stand alone as a subject that is in line with the National Education Philosophy which focuses on the holistic development of a student.

Moral Education is ideal and effective if taught using an eclectic approach and focus on the active learning approach. Some of the common approaches used in Moral Education include cognitive development approach, value analysis, value inculcation, social action, cooperative learning and many more of which the central idea is in dialogic learning. All these are basically active learning approaches which put the students as the centre of learning and encourage the need to make the lessons as authentic as possible. One of the basic complaints about Moral Education is that students are forced to memorise values and definitions of values which is regurgitated during the SPM examinations and does not really reflect the values that students have or practice. This can be resolved by encouraging students to use their own real-life dilemmas in learning Moral Education (Vishalache, 2012) using dialogic learning approach.

Methodology

This research was undertaken in three different types of secondary school in Malaysia. Students were from an all girls school, an all boys school and a co-educational school. The reason for choosing such a method is to also analyse if there is any difference in dialogic learning among different genders in different learning environment, which did not show much variance. The participants were 22 young adolescents between the age of 16-17 years and come from nuclear and extended family settings. They showed great competency in communication with one another and the researcher. The participants were from Chinese, Indian, Punjabi and mixed parentage families. They belong to different faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism and Taoism.

The research was based on a participant action research (PAR) framework (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Participants presented their own real-life moral dilemmas and a semi-guided discussion took place. Participants were free to debate, argue and discuss the moral dilemmas presented to resolve the issues that arose. Data were gathered through focus group transcripts, interviews, students and researcher's journals and a modified form of participant observation. Participants constructed their own working agreement (WA) and had the opportunity to renegotiate the original regulation they themselves constructed with the help of the researcher. Throughout the research, there was plenty of dialogues and discussions taking place. Participants were provided with informed consent forms and had to also obtain consent from their parents. This is in line with the ethics of research conducted among students of under age.

Discussion

For the purpose of this paper, a dilemma is shared and the process is analysed to relate to the dialogic learning that is taking place. To ensure that no participants are disclosed in any way, schools were given pseudonyms and participants chose to have alphabets as their names. In the real-life dilemmas discussion process, students started off with some ice-breaking sessions with the researcher to ensure the building of trust in later stages. Next was the construction of the dilemmas in which the researcher encouraged the participants to construct their own or one that is of concern to them but belongs to someone else. They then went on to discuss the dilemmas and find solutions based on their own funds of knowledge and probing questions from the researcher. There were reflective sessions in between the cycles of discussion and a final reflective session for the series of discussion sessions. Here is an example of a dilemma shared by the students in the all girls school. It is a clash between respecting the authority in school and how students feel that respect should be two-way.

Dilemma I: Respect versus authority



My Science teacher is my worst nightmare. She torments the minds of her students as half of us can't seem to understand what she talks about. She doesn't care about class discipline, or respects us as students. Half of the girls would be sleepy, half 'dead' or doing their homework during Science as they want to make the best out of time. It's not that we don't want to study... we want to... basically I love Science but this teacher makes me despise the subject. I've tried to listen to her and pay attention to her teachings, but I can't. Many students have tried talking to the teacher and politely voiced concerns about her teaching. But she doesn't seem to bother. She believes that passing the examination is good enough. But we want to excel and make use of the Science that we learn. I wish we could talk this out with her. (Dilemma 4# Kekwah)

Listening is one of the most valued qualities of an educator – but is all too often lacking (Taylor, 1996). According to Shapiro (2008), “when you listen to the feelings of others in a respectful way, people will like you better and treat you better too” (p.7). The student in the above conflict feels that the lack of mutual respect between teacher and students is the cause of the conflict above. They want to be listened to and be respected in mutual ways. Here is an excerpt based on the conflict above which details why the participants are having conflict with the Science teacher:

- E: When we ask her, she writes concepts like “ $F=Ma$ ”, that's it...what it represents also we don't know. Instead of clearing our minds, she confuses us.
- F: She always says, “You're all intelligent students so you should find things out for yourselves”.
- A: Because of her, Science has become a boring, rote learning subject. We don't go to labs to do experiments. We do badly in our examination and get scolded at home.
- C: She always says that Science is not a girls' subject. Even if we get minimal grades, she says it's good enough.
- E: But that's not fair because some of us love Science and want to excel in that subject.
- F: I feel there's no girl or guy subjects so the teacher shouldn't put such ideas into our heads. (Kekwah)

[Non-verbal communication (Nvc): Several participants were giving piercing looks and nodding their heads every now and then; evidence from video recording (efvr)]

In my own observational journal, I have written how the students were using body gestures such as nodding of head and *main mata* (making eye contact) to each other when they were discussing this dilemma and agreeing with each other that by just presenting content in the Science subject, the teacher concerned was not respecting them as students in the classroom. In the second PAR cycle of discussions for this particular moral conflict, students shared much in common as they all had the same Science teacher and faced the same problems as their friends. But the real-life dilemma became more complex when some participants saw different perspectives of the teacher and of themselves which I will elaborate on further as I continue. Below is an excerpt from the second PAR cycle which shows their concern for the seriousness of the conflict and how they felt about the teacher and the need for mutual respect:

- C: Teacher goes on teaching even if students are sleeping in class. At times we feel she doesn't even realise if we exist or not.
- E: We wish she showed us more *TLC*.
- I: What is *TLC*?
- E: Tender love and care.
- G: If the teacher really cares, we won't have to go for tuition and we can clarify things with her. (Kekwah)



[Nvc: Two participants exchanged quiet glances with each other while the rest of the group made long sighs and gave sad looks as their friends were talking; efvr]

At this stage of the PAR cycle, I observed the students relating to each other in how they felt about the dilemma - they went on and on to express their feelings about a teacher whom they wished would give them mutual respect. In this cycle, there were two participants who just exchanged glances between themselves without contributing much to the discussion and I had noted that. By the end of this cycle, some students expressed how they felt about sharing with their friends during the PAR cycle. The journal extract below explains how relieved one participant was when she found that her dilemma with the Science teacher was not just her conflict alone:

Since the start of this year, I have been stressed every time I go for Science because the teacher seems to be in her own world. I can't understand what is being taught. I have tried telling her but it was no use. Now I am relieved because some of my friends too have the same problem. I hope we can do something about it. (*Kekwah*)

In ZCD, learning and development does not always occur smoothly. What is implemented in collaboration is later reflected upon by individuals who are able to self-help and internalise the values or skills learnt. In the above situation, the student is in the interpersonal process of collaborating with her peers. That was the end of PAR cycle two at which point I asked the students to go back home and reflect upon their discussion. In the following PAR cycle, students had just finished that particular Science teacher's lesson before they came to see me. They had more to say in this session:

H: She says we are smart students so we should find things out on our own.

A: She says Science is not a girl's subject so if we get minimal grades its good enough.

B: But that's not fair because some of us want to excel in Science. (*Kekwah*)

[Nvc: The two participants who were changing quiet glances at each other in the previous PAR cycle kept quiet, while the rest of the group got louder with their voices, head-nodding in agreement and piercing eyes with lots of hand and body movements; efvr]

At this stage, the participants (except for the quiet duo) were all getting very emotional about their Science teacher. They appeared to be unable to rationalise anything that the Science teacher does and feel that she is to be blamed for their boredom in class, their sleeping in class and their minimal grades.

The two students who remained quiet, just observing their friends complaining throughout this and the previous cycle appeared to be disagreeing with the rest of the group. Based on video evidence, they were communicating with each other through body language - specifically, looking at each other and shaking their heads from left to right (as a sign of disagreement with the other members of the group). However, they were neither agreeing nor disagreeing with their friends verbally. From their body gestures (hardly any nodding but looking doubtful when other participants kept complaining about the Science teacher), I realised that they might have something to share with the group. So I questioned them specifically and here is part of their response discussion which indicates that they are the capable peers in this conflict:

F: Maybe we should not sleep in class anymore but we need to get the message across to her about how we feel in class.

D: We can talk to her as a class or send our class monitor as the representative. There are a few alternatives so we can try different ways and see which brings the best outcome.

F: We've got to be patient with her too... poor old teacher. (*Kekwah*)

[Nvc: Two participants who had previously been silent spoke softly but looked at each other every now and then. As for the rest of the group, they kept quiet and started to look less aggressive. Some were even looking down and reflecting on their own actions; efvr]

The above excerpt shows the input of the capable duo who were quiet in the earlier PAR cycle but who, after encouragement to talk, gave a different viewpoint on the whole dilemma. After these two participants gave their



views, the rest of the group were not so emotional but started to complain less and reflected on the issue. Some even agreed with the first quiet duo as shown in the excerpt below:

A: Maybe F is right. Maybe we don't understand the teacher.

H: We might have to think of her too. (*Kekwah*)

[Nvc: The two quiet participants who gave their views earlier smiled and nodded, and the rest of the group were slowly nodding their heads; efvr]

After listening to the capable duo, the students were at their self-help and reflection stage. They were analysing the conflict within themselves too. We had to stop our session at this point and they filled in their conflict resolution journals. What happened within the next two weeks was the transformation from moral thinking and moral feelings to moral action. In the next PAR cycle which was the reflective session for the Science teacher dilemma, my participants shared with me that they had spoken to the teacher concerned. She was shocked when they expressed that they cared and respected her but felt they needed it to be both ways. The teacher was not angry with them but welcomed more such open dialogue with the class so that they can progress together. She apologised for being insensitive to their behaviours in class. She did remind them that she was going to be stricter but the group did not mind as long as she understood and respected them. It was a mature act on part of both students and teacher and it reflects how ME comes to life using real-life moral dilemma discussion (Re-LiMDD). As for ZCD, the students had collaborated, got the help from the, at first silent, capable duo, internalised what was discussed and used the skills to resolve the dilemma amicably with their Science teacher.

During the initial cycles of my PAR research, the two capable peers who helped the group see alternatives within the conflict did not speak up. As the researcher I encouraged them to share what their stand was. This was based on my observation of their body language and in the video evidence (especially their facial expressions which showed anger and doubt) which indicated disagreement when the other members of the group kept complaining about the Science teacher. However, because they saw and were able to present a different perspective from the rest of the group, they seemed to be the more capable peers who, in ZCD terms, could start the others thinking and looking at the teacher from different perspectives.

According to Shapiro (2008), facial expression is an important way to communicate feelings with others. If an individual gives angry or mean looks to people who care about them or to people who are trying to help them, it is as bad as yelling at them. I noticed during the discussion session that these two *Kekwah* participants were passing such expressions to each other and other members of the group. When I later spoke to these two participants, they told me that the Science teacher was a nice person but because she could not deliver proficiently in English, she always kept to herself. Since 2003, subjects like Mathematics and Science have been taught in English in Malaysia, and teachers trained in Malay Language found this policy hard to cope with.

When my group and some of their other classmates had a discussion with the teacher, she was happy that the students cared and respected her. She understood the problems of the students and hoped to work with them. The other members of my group also saw the actual problem that their Science teacher faced and later developed empathy for her. It is worth noting that what started as a group collaboration ended with the individual members reflecting upon the issue, and what is even more meaningful is the decision that they took upon themselves - to meet up and discuss the issue with the teacher. Feeling was involved in the identification of dilemma with the Science teacher, thinking was required for discussing the appropriateness of possible decisions, and action taken in the reflective decisions which led to real moral action taken and reflected upon again at another time. This, then, is an example of moral thinking, moral feeling (capable peers explaining to other group members what the teacher might be going through and building a sense of empathy within the group) and moral action (meeting and discussing with the teacher what they felt and later reflecting during the PAR reflective cycle) come alive.

The *Kekwah* participants were engaged in a social constructivism type of decision-making (Cottone, 2001). According to Cottone, this type of decision making involves interaction with other individuals. The interactive process between the *Kekwah* participants that involved voicing issues, negotiating and reaching consensus led them to take the moral action which they reflected in the reflective session. It is all part of dialogic learning (Schacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011).

With the ZCD, the students' experiences expand and they are able to resolve more complex dilemmas but still within the relational perspective. This is one gap that I see consistently between my research and the current ME syllabus for secondary schools. The key difference between the present ME syllabus and the findings of my research is that the syllabus states values and learning areas in a non-relational manner far from the students'



experiential daily lives. Through the use of discussion, dialogic learning takes place and supersedes just the cognitive aspect and goes on to the action that Moral Education is also focussed upon.

Conclusion

The concept of dialogic learning is not a new one. In the discussion above, it shows that given the appropriate learning environment, students are able to use dialogic learning strategies to go on to resolve dilemmas that they face. They made the Moral Education philosophy come alive and are able to transform their own learning and experiences. It goes on to the theory of dialogic action (Freire, 2007) and the dialogic inquiry approach (Wells, 1999). From the research conducted and the discussions so far, it can be concluded that in dialogic learning, everyone is part of the learning group or community and each have a role in making a useful contribution. ZCD allows for such situations to take place. Within the dialogic learning process, the learning group has respect for each participant's experience in the dialogue. The working group constructed in the early stages encourages stages of give and take and negotiations to take place. True learning takes place as students use the dialogic learning as a stepping stone to further proceed to dialogic action and it is transformation in nature.

In dialogic learning, it becomes meaningful for the participants. As one participant mentioned, "If I learnt Moral Education as what I have done here, I would have solved many of my daily moral problems". Learning in dialogic learning is part of building personal and social identity as well as character in society. It provides the possibility to discuss, decide, create and transform lives of students from little things around them to world issues that are challenging. Dialogic learning creates true, deep learning which is respectful of the "other". When students undertake such learning process they tend to see both sides of a coin and are able to decide in a mature manner. As Vygotsky spoke of learning that is more than just passively receiving information and responding to it. It includes the ideas generated in the process of dialectical discovery and is closely tied to the sociocultural context (Wink & Putney, 2002). In dialogic learning, differences in viewpoints are a source of richness and all opinions are considered and are valid in knowledge-building. In ZCD, the four processes of sharing and collaboration, self-help and reflection, internalisation of values and skill based on local context and constraints and recursiveness through prior stages when values conflict not only encourages moral decision making when faced with moral dilemmas but is applicable to all other conflicting situations. The dialogic learning process provides the path way for such a transformation in education to take place. However mishaps like control by authority or extrovert domineering characters should be resolved during the construction of working agreement so that equality in power sharing exist.

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