

Activity and consciousness: reflections on the teaching work from a cultural-historical perspective

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Paula Maria Ferreira de Faria¹, Ana Carolina Lopes Venâncio², Juliana Corrêa Schwarz³, Denise de Camargo⁴

Abstract: The purpose of this theoretical article is to reflect on how teaching can be understood as a work activity under the referential of Cultural-Historical Psychology. From this perspective, we emphasize the concepts of activity and consciousness; a brief discussion on the psychological function of the teaching work is also presented. We argue that teachers' awareness of their work activity is a relevant tool that transforms teaching practices and strengthens their power to act in the situated context of the classroom. We conclude that Cultural-Historical Psychology brings significant contributions to the understanding of teaching activity, being configured as an approach that values the creative and critical character of teaching as a conscious, intentional, accessible, and transforming action of work and life relations for the teacher.

Keywords: teaching, Cultural-Historical Psychology, work, activity, consciousness.

Atividade e consciência: reflexões sobre o trabalho docente na perspectiva histórico-cultural

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo, de caráter teórico, é refletir como a docência pode ser compreendida enquanto atividade de trabalho sob os referenciais da Psicologia Histórico-Cultural. Nessa perspectiva, enfatizam-se os conceitos de atividade e consciência; apresenta-se também uma breve discussão sobre a função psicológica do trabalho docente. Argumenta-se que a consciência do professor acerca de sua atividade de trabalho configura um importante instrumento que transforma as práticas docentes e reforça seu poder de agir no contexto situado da sala de aula. Conclui-se que a Psicologia Histórico-Cultural aporta significativas contribuições para a compreensão da atividade docente, configurando-se como uma abordagem que valoriza o caráter criativo e crítico da docência como ação consciente intencional, livre e transformadora das relações de trabalho e de vida para o professor.

Palavras-chave: Ensino, psicologia histórico-cultural, trabalho, atividade, consciência.

¹Coordenadora e docente do Curso de Psicologia (Faculdade Herrero). Doutora e mestre em Educação (UFPR); psicóloga e pedagoga. E-mail: paula.pmff@gmail.com.

²Docente da Prefeitura Municipal de Curitiba e do Hospital Pequeno Príncipe. Doutora e mestre em Educação (UFPR); pedagoga. E-mail: anavenancio2704@gmail.com.

³Docente do Centro Universitário Opet (UniOpet). Doutoranda e mestre em Educação (UFPR); psicóloga. E-mail: julischwarz13@gmail.com.

⁴ Professora sênior do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação (PPGE) – UFPR; docente do Mestrado em Psicologia (UTP). Doutora e Mestre em Psicologia (PUC-SP). E-mail: denicamargo@gmail.com.

Introduction

This text presents reflections on how teaching can be understood as a work activity under the referential of Cultural-Historical Psychology. The teaching activity is a planned, intentional act, theoretically grounded by visions of the world, society, and the human being, an act that brings together practical and emotional, objective and subjective aspects. In the discussion, we emphasize the concepts of activity and consciousness, which subsidize a brief discussion on the psychological function of the teaching work. Such work produces individual and collective meanings that guide and structure the organization of the teaching work in historically and culturally situated contexts.

The premise of school inclusion is defended by highlighting the importance of the teacher's awareness of their work activity as an instrument that transforms teaching practices and reinforces their power to act in the situated context of the classroom – that is, good teaching is aimed at all students. This is because, in the Vygotskian understanding, everyone can learn if there is mediation, especially when it is offered qualitatively and intentionally planned to motivate and sustain the action of teaching and the act of learning. In addition, teaching and learning are related activities, with teaching being essential for human formation and participation in social life.

The objective of this theoretical article is to reflect on how teaching can be understood as a work activity under the referential of Cultural-Historical Psychology. To do so, we initially present the methodology; then, the theoretical foundations of analysis are defined, composed of topics that deal with work, activity, and consciousness for Cultural-Historical Psychology, the exercise of teaching from the perspective of Cultural-Historical Psychology, and as a reflexive activity. To conclude the discussion, we present some notes to reflect on the meaning of teaching and the psychological function of work. Our final considerations suggest the importance of the teacher's awareness of their work activity as an instrument that transforms teaching practices and reinforces their power to act in the situated context of the classroom.

Methodology

This theoretical article uses the qualitative approach under the narrative review methodology to reflect on the teaching work from the perspective of Cultural-Historical Psychology. Narrative reviews are a typology of literature review that involves the

analysis of literature and the critical interpretation of the researcher (BOTELHO; CUNHA; MACEDO, 2011), with the aim of “describe and discuss the state of the science of a specific topic or theme from a theoretical and contextual point of view” (ROTHER, 2007, p. vii). The narrative review’s broader character allows the development of the themes’ study through theoretical analysis and contextual interpretation of the existing scientific production. In addition, the narrative review contributes to identifying knowledge gaps and serves as conceptual support for further research (BRUM et al., 2015).

Notably, the qualitative approach is directly related to the understanding of humanity and the world under the referential of Cultural-Historical Psychology, which considers that human action is, at the same time, the producer and the result of multiple determinations which are culturally and historically situated. From this perspective, the theoretical body is closely articulated to the methods and procedures adopted, including the determinations of the phenomenon studied and the researcher (AGUIAR, 2007; GRASS, 2017). Thus, in line with the cultural-historical foundation, this article presents contributions to understanding the current scenario of school inclusion in Brazil. We hope to lead to critical reflection on the epistemological conceptions that underlie school practices aimed at inclusion in contemporary Brazilian schools.

Work, Activity, and Consciousness for Cultural-Historical Psychology

From a cultural-historical perspective of the teacher's work activity, we consider that the school's daily life constantly affects - and is affected by - the social uniqueness of each teacher. In this continuous construction, concrete elements - related to the curriculum, the school community, the learning objectives, the school agents, etc. - and subjective elements - school values, teacher's emotions, shared experiences in the classroom, etc. - are mixed and merged, constituting what can be called teaching work. Such an understanding "transforms activity, apparently passive and submissive, into inventive and creative activity" (CLOT, 2010, p. 107, our translation).

Work is a directed activity that acquires an essential psychological function for the individual; when performing tasks, each professional implies some of themselves and simultaneously inserts themselves in a collective whose purpose is socially shared by the whole group. In this sense, "work is demarcation with itself, inscription in another history: a collective history crystallized in social genres in general sufficiently equivocal and

discordant that each one must 'make its contribution' and 'come out of itself'" (CLOT, 2007, p. 74, our translation).

Work performance involves the worker's power to act and the configuration of meanings of their work, which allows subjects to continue developing healthily in this context. When this is not possible, and action on one's own work is prevented, psychological development is consequently paralyzed. Therefore, the psychological function of work consists in signifying and re-signifying the activity in a transformation process. In this way, far from being just a social task, work is a permanently dynamic activity that allows the development of each worker. This is why work is both a subjective fact and a social fact in the living history of each individual (CLOT, 2007, 2015).

Work socially concretizes the objective and subjective experiences of each profession, and it is only in everyday life that the work activity shows what it is. Thus, to understand the dynamics of the craft, it is fundamental to consider the particular context of each work situation. The activity of work is always alive; nomadic, it changes and is constantly re-signified: "The craft is not entirely in the activity, nor in the task, nor the collective. Alive, it transits through everything. Dead at one point, it may rise again at another" (CLOT, 2013, p. 10, our translation).

This movement that characterizes the craft - the constant migration between subject, collective, and object of work - alerts us to the complexity of the situations that permeate daily life and involve the execution of work. Work itself is not only composed of aspects external to the individual but also of the personal appropriation of the activity. When performing work, each individual also imprints the marks of their subjectivity, of how they learn, appropriate and attribute meaning to their work, daily life, and reality itself.

In this sense, work is not just the end product of an activity - what has actually been accomplished. It also encompasses a wide range of possibilities, desires, and intentions that, although not realized, do not cease to exist and affect the activity performed. Thus, it is necessary to consider the reality of the activity in addition to the actual activity. In this way, the activity performed is only part of the actual training; as Vygotsky (2013, p. 48, our translation) states, "the behavior that was performed is an insignificant part of the possible behaviors. Every man's minute of man is full of unrealized possibilities."

The reality of the activity includes what was not done; what was tried but not possible; the failures and the ideals; what is done to accomplish a task or to avoid it, and

what needs to be redone (CLOT, 2007). Therefore, the reality of the activity must be known and appropriated by the workers. However, only the worker themselves can unveil this reality since only they (and not an external specialist) are inserted in fact and knows the nuances of daily life that tone the work situation they experience.

It is necessary to consider the concrete materiality in which relations occur, and work activity is developed to understand work in the context of its everyday life – since it is from the realization (or the impediment) of these activities that the worker is implied or not in the process, being affected (and affecting others) in this development (FARIA; CAMARGO; BULGACOV, 2021). In the school setting, teaching work is regulated by several institutional elements; beyond these aspects is the teacher's subjectivity - their interests, inclinations, expectations, desires, and emotions concerning the students, the content, the school community, and the craft itself. It is in this complex amalgam of objective and subjective factors situated in a particular historical space and time that the teaching work is inserted.

In this context, the activity performed, and the teacher's actions constitute only one element that constitutes their practice. Emotions, needs, and choices are all elements that make up the actual activity. One can then reflect on the teaching activity: what do the teacher's practices reveal about their intentionality - and what would they not like to accomplish? How do their emotions resonate with their ways of teaching and with the learning processes of all students? (FARIA; CAMARGO; BULGACOV, 2021).

The teaching work takes place on this fine line: between the activity performed and the reality of the activity, between what one wants and has to do, and between what one knows is necessary and what is possible to be done. Considering the reality that daily life imposes and delimits - which is also dialectically constructed by the teacher - the work activity reveals its subjective dimension and how its subjectivity is mobilized for and through action.

Between what is prescribed and what is done, between the intentions and what is put into practice, the teaching work is sustained in and by the school's everyday life. The accomplished activity is just one - to speak in accordance with Vygotsky (2013), the winning reaction among the myriad of possibilities offered to reality. All these realized, desired, or thwarted possibilities are part of the activity and are inserted, concretely or subjectively, in the work situations. Thus, "work is the place where the painful and decisive experience of reality unfolds for the subject, [...] and it is this subjective experience that gives the psychodynamics of work its object" (CLOT, 2007, p. 59, our

translation). Therefore, the work activity also expresses the subjective implications of each worker, inserted in the concrete context of their daily life - which makes it essential to understand the teaching work and consider each teacher's subjectivity and the meanings they attribute to the work they do.

Teaching from the Perspective of Cultural-Historical Psychology

Each school community is a unique universe with its own specificities that outline specific ways of proposing and carrying out teaching and experiencing the act of learning. The school is a social space for collective learning that encompasses all those who pass through the school community - not just the students. In the teaching exercise, the teacher revisits and reinvents their practice according to individual and group needs and desires. In this line of thought, teaching is a profession constantly in movement and interaction – an encounter between people who, together, expand their knowledge. The act of knowing is an eminently human action with a social and political nature, and that takes place in the collective with the use of tools and signs in transforming oneself and the world.

Therefore, teaching is a planned activity intentionally produced and guided by goals. This activity has theoretical foundations and involves using diversified and differentiated methods and resources given the diversity of learning styles and profiles of the students that populate the classrooms. Likewise, beyond the practical aspects, an emotional dimension under the understanding that cognition and affectivity are inseparable. Camargo and Bulgacov (2016) highlight the fact that "in every human activity, social practices are marked by emotions and feelings. Emotions constitute, take shape, and express themselves in the activities, relations, discourses, and products of the activities of concrete subjects" (p. 215, our translation). This reflection encourages us to understand teaching as an activity that creates bonds between people and between those who teach and learn with the object of knowledge. Hence the importance of education being connected to daily life, to the context of those who teach and learn together, to create positive meanings and maintain the activity even in the face of adversity and challenges.

Education is everyone's right. Thus, from a Cultural-Historical Psychology perspective, teaching is an important activity to humanize and promote human development because learning instigates development. However, effective teaching depends on a few considerations: respect for the context, the environment, and the

resources to create motivating and problematizing learning situations about daily life issues. Also, teaching should bring a relation between curricular content and life in a horizontal relational movement of mutual support, fostering the creativity and autonomy of each one in a collective process that respects the social, historical, and cultural aspects of human existence. Finally, the central objective of good teaching is to develop the higher functions, which are formed neither in biology nor in the history of pure phylogenesis - but in the sociogenesis of higher forms of behavior, that is, by the qualified mediation promoted in school (VYGOTSKY, 1997).

From this essentially social view of learning and development, Vygotsky (1997) assigned the responsibility of providing adequate conditions for everyone's learning to the school staff. In his studies on defectology, Vygotsky argued that each organic and psychological structure represented a peculiar type of unique development. In this way, the author defended that failure to learn would be due to the conditions in which the teaching relationship is produced and demystified the idea that school failure should be attributed to individual subjects, students, or teachers simplistically and unfairly. Vygotsky (1997) enunciated, therefore, the need for teachers to be aware of the conception of society, the human being, development, and learning they assume in organizing their pedagogical work. In this perspective, teachers should criticize the traditional, mechanical, and meaningless teaching that meets bureaucratic goals and aims at the transmission of a content-based curriculum that is not internalized because it is devoid of the lives of the learners who need not only discipline but also to be affected by what is presented to them.

Vygotsky (1997) proposed a creative work of reordering the education systems to affect the students, whose central point is the articulation of school with life, starting from the needs and desires of the learners. He thus advocated for a practical orientation to learning, where tasks were planned in such a way as to generate their ways of working that responded to uniqueness within an active direction where participation and autonomy were encouraged. Since practices have an inter-relational character and are overlapped in the social sphere, in the process of interconnection that creates logic about human actions and behavior, teaching is faced with recursiveness and crystallized practices. However, teaching also has room for the creativity that characterizes educators in exercising their craft – creativity that confers the possibility of transforming and improving the actions and operations in progress, even under institutionalization.

In a post-pandemic scenario where weaknesses in teaching and the need to reinvent the ways of teaching and learning have been revealed, it is urgent to redirect the focus of teaching from the individual to the social, from competition to collaboration, from passivity to participation, from the isolated to the group, from meritocracies to a vision of mutual help, of sharing. Such a change is possible because of the social and negotiated character of the teaching, in the face of the explicit and the tacit that exists in life and in classroom relations, which reflect community life and the world's problems. The pedagogical work constitutes a group action mediated by the relationships among its agents (DAMIANI, 2008). Thus, it is revealed that teachers, in the exercise of their function, in the exchange among professionals, and in the interaction with students, affect and are affected by the emotional climate established, by the bonds signed through the relationships based, created, and sustained through the mediations performed.

The subjective dimension of the pedagogical process imprints marks on conduct, forming affective-volitional tendencies in the interaction sustained in the school environment. In this context, the affects/emotions/feelings are confirmed, named, and signified favorably or unfavorably (CAMARGO; BULGACOV, 2016). The school is, therefore, an environment of encounters between people who learn from each other, in which affection and emotion are essential dimensions for good teaching that aims not only at access to knowledge but humanization through the development of consciousness. As a reflective practice, an intentional action that is guided by objectives and has as its central goal the promotion of learning for all and the humanization of subjects, teaching is an activity that must be constantly discussed, reviewed, taken up again, and actively reinvented. Not only through theorizing but through the exchange of experiences among teachers, through the negotiation of shared meanings, the problematization of situations that need to be reflected on in the group, in the collective and collaborative search for strategies, consolidating a mutual aid system that provides the strengthening of bonds and reinforces inclusive principles and values (CAMARGO; BULGACOV, 2016; FARIA; CAMARGO; BULGACOV, 2021).

Teaching is configured, therefore, beyond its institutionalized structure, in the internal dynamics of school communities, facing contingencies, the unforeseen. In this sense, it is essential to understand the implicit and explicit reasons for teaching activities, the dimensions that shape it, and the structural conditions that promote it for the teacher who wants to perform a job that offers, beyond subsistence, social and psychological fulfillment, concretizing their power to act.

Reflective activity in teaching

The teacher is usually regarded as a professional who is expected to be perfect, not make mistakes, and, in many cases, they impose this ideal upon themselves. Looking at one's mistakes, difficulties, and imperfections can be painful and generate intense self-criticism. In addition, talking about one's teaching activity with others can expose vulnerabilities and fear of judgment. Therefore, reflection on the teaching activity is necessary and needs to occur within the school community through a cooperative relationship among the professionals who work there. The reflective activity is a dialogical process that begins with the recognition and sharing of one's own emotions when facing a good or bad performance in the classroom and continues by seeking to reflect on strengths and improvements throughout the teaching-learning process, comparing what was proposed in the lesson plan and what was effectively applied (ZARETSKY YV, 2020).

Reflective activity is a process by which the individual evaluates their own experiences, seeking to understand their meaning, and is understood as a tool for self-regulating activity. It is expressed through understanding one's own thought process, which makes reflection an instrument that leads to change. It is also the ability to perceive and restructure the teaching-learning activity (KHOLMOGOROVA; ZARETSKY, 2011), which is essential for the active and conscious work of the teacher. Through reflection, the teacher develops a vital process to enable their continuous learning, as well as that of their students. Reflection, in this sense, occurs through the perception and understanding of successful and unsuccessful actions, the motives and meanings of such activities, and what available resources the individual employs to deal with daily challenges (ZARETSKY V. K.; ZARETSKY, Y. V., 2015). It is a process that enables contact with oneself and forming one's identity (KHOLMOGOROVA et al., 2019).

According to Zaretsky (2020), the concept of reflection is analogous to what Vygotsky discusses about collaboration and conscious appropriation of activity. According to Vygotsky (2001), collaboration happens through understanding and appropriating the modes of action of someone more capable in an interactive environment. It happens, for example, when the teacher presents a culturally determined knowledge and way of acting to the student, and the student consciously appropriates the activity (ZARETSKY, 2007). An activity that used to occur with the teacher's help must

be understood and reorganized by the student to operate consciously and independently. In this process, teachers and students convert what has unfolded in the relationship into internal activity.

Zaretsky (2020) argues that "awareness concerning joint activities means the ability to reflect" (p. 58, our translation). In this sense, reflection is mediated by language. Teachers, students, and the entire school community reflect on their experiences and thoughts by dialoguing during the teaching-learning activity in a collaborative posture. Poznyakova (2013) argues that collaboration should happen in the sense of reorganizing thinking: teacher and student are active subjects of the teaching-learning activity, and it is also up to the teacher to organize reflection in a subject-subject relationship. According to Kholmogorova and Zaretsky (2011), one of the most critical skills of the teacher is to recognize and activate the resources that the student already possesses and the attributes that the student is still in the process of acquiring. Nevertheless, teachers must first be aware of their resources and shortcomings.

Zaretsky and Ageeva (2021) point out the conditions for a reflective activity to be effective: the recognition that the teacher and students are active subjects in the teaching-learning process; collaboration; establishment of an affective relationship; mutual understanding about the meaning of the activity; acting within current possibilities and future potentialities; stimulating reflection; understanding that the difficulties and mistakes in the teaching-learning process are resources for development; and understanding and acting on the cause of problems related to the process.

Therefore, reflective activity in teaching involves the critical analysis of one's own actions and thoughts, aiming to better understand the teaching-learning process and human development. It includes becoming aware of one's emotional state during the activity; recognizing the facilities, talents, mistakes, and shortcomings in the teaching-learning process and their causes; collaboration between peers, teachers, and students, teachers and coordinators or principals; and establishing different modes of action that can improve the teaching-learning process and serve as coping measures in the face of challenges.

Meanings of teaching: the psychological function of work

From a cultural-historical perspective, work is not just one activity among others. It is an element that subjectively and concretely impacts each individual's life. Work

assumes the centrality of the subject's adult life, inscribing its active participation in society and leading to redefinitions of its own subjectivity. It takes place in a collective history that assumes the worker's delimited role. Thus, "work is at once the collective activity and the psychic procedure" (CLOT, 2007, p. 79, our translation).

Work activity shapes cultural and historical forms of social insertion and participation, also imprinting its marks on the worker's subjectivity. In this sense, according to Clot (2007), work assumes a double meaning: at the same time that it is aimed at social fulfillment (work in the world of others and things), it also has a particular psychological function for each individual (work for oneself).

In the realm of understanding the relations between work activity and consciousness, Clot (2007) recognizes the significant contribution of Leontiev (1960, 1978), "who allows us to think of subjectivity within an activity, thus preserving the latter from a reductionism that willingly restricts it to the mere operations of action" (CLOT, 2007, p. 158, our translation). For Leontiev (1978), the proper explanation of consciousness lies "in the social conditions and modes of that activity which creates its necessity, that is, in labor activity" (p. 34, our translation).

Consciousness is formed from the individual's social interaction with the world and involves internalizing cultural and linguistic ways of thinking and acting during human activity. In this activity, the individual builds their knowledge and understanding of himself and the world. According to Vygotsky (2013, p. 129, our translation), "Semiotic analysis is the only method suitable for studying the system structure and content of consciousness." Through the understanding of language, that is, understanding the meanings that the individual has of words and the importance he attributes to them, it is possible to understand the interconnected elements of consciousness.

Each worker's subjectivity imprints its marks on the activity - on the actual move and especially on the reality of the activity - and becomes concrete through the senses that the worker attributes to the training itself. However, it is a subjectivity composed not only of the particular characteristics of each individual but one that is shaped in and by work, which always presupposes the collective - again, understood as a resource for personal development. In this way, work assumes collective and subjective dimensions, impacting and promoting the construction of meanings that re-signify each individual's concrete and symbolic reality and activity (CLOT, 2007; CLOT et al., 2006).

Final considerations

From a cultural-historical perspective, reflection and awareness about the teacher's work activity are important. We understand that, beyond productivity and social insertion, work reveals the individual's psychological needs - at work, the subject establishes their belonging and acquires a new identity. Through work, teachers are recognized as group members and identify themselves in their activity, giving new meaning to their experiences. Work is a fundamental human activity, taking on particular meanings that are culturally and historically embedded in the profession. Since subjectivity and activity are inseparable, work only acquires actual function when the worker can find a sense of accomplishment through it - in other words, to intervene in their own craft actively, imprint their marks on the reality of the activity, and exercise their power to act thoroughly and with the world.

Reflective activity is a process by which the individual evaluates their own experiences and understands the meanings related to the profession. This is a tool for self-regulation of the activity, the exchange of experiences between teachers, with a collective and collaborative discussion of their fears and anxieties, presentation of work strategies used, and problematization of situations shared in the exercise of teaching, which are important actions to consolidate the sense of belonging of the group and the sense of community that the school must have to support its workers in the face of the challenges of teaching. By sharing experiences, resources, and strategies, as well as giving new meaning to the teachers' relationship in their work group, the group of teachers gradually stops being segmented into separations according to function and can become a group of mutual support among professionals where the exchange of experiences and the sharing of ideas and emotional and practical resources facilitate teaching and make the professional relationship more fluid and meaningful.

Promoting activities supporting the teacher in the shared process of reflection and awareness about their own activity strengthens the commitment and the feeling of belonging to the group, benefiting professional relationships between teachers, students, and families. In addition, this action reflects how the school community understands and experiences the pedagogical relationship. Teachers develop consciousness about their work and can recognize the social and cultural importance of the activity for human formation, strengthening their power to act on the job. This consciousness is developed by imprinting positive marks on the activity - on the actual training and especially on the reality of the activity.

We conclude that Cultural-Historical Psychology brings significant contributions to the understanding of the teaching activity, configuring itself as an approach that values the creative and critical character of teaching as a conscious, intentional, accessible, and transforming action of work and life relations for the teacher.

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