

Meredith Whittaker

Building Relationships with Theory: Signs and Tools in Everyday Life

A new researcher edges toward theory by navigating the DC metro system.

You know how it goes. You meet in college. It's love at first sight. Across the crowded lecture hall, as the PowerPoint slides roll on endlessly, you feel an instant connection. Or, perhaps, it's more of a gradual buildup. Say, for example, your paths constantly collide in the dusty stacks of the library until, finally, you decide it's time to get to know one another a little better. At first, the budding relationship seems perfect. Everyone keeps telling you that you've found "the one." You must admit you've never met a more brilliant mind, a more rebellious spirit. You find yourself thinking about, even writing about this new love, late into the night. But, inevitably, as time passes and the "real world" looms ahead, you begin to drift apart. Slowly, the relationship disintegrates. There are no disagreements, really, just a mutual acknowledgement that there is little holding you together anymore. Looking back, you ask yourself how strong the relationship was to begin with, given how painless the ending was. Sometimes, you wonder if you ever really knew each other at all.

For some time now, both as a teacher and a wannabe academic, I must admit that I've struggled to sustain meaningful relationships—that is, relationships with *ideas*, with *theory*—that actually endure and grow. Quite often, these relationships have resembled little more than college flings, just the sort that I have described above. Brief. One-sided. Casual. Even forgettable. For me and many others like me, teacher education has served us, in large part, as a place of introductions, of "meeting" new theorists and encountering new ideas. (So nice to meet you, Mr. Vygotsky. Oh, Ms. Delpit, I've heard so much about you. Mr. Graves, I do believe we have a lot in common.) Yes, sparks fly and we jump into what promise to be exciting new commitments. However, in the face of external pressures and conflicting theories of learning that we encounter daily in the "real world," keeping these commit-

ments can prove difficult, particularly for novice teachers (Long et al., 2006).

It is easy to attribute these failed relationships to the so-called "divide" that exists between theory and practice. However, if we agree with Bernard's (2006) assertion that theories are simply "good ideas [or stories] about how things work" (p. 64), this divide crumbles a bit with the acknowledgment that *all* teachers are theorists, at least to some extent, because all teachers tell stories to make sense of our experiences in classrooms. Theory is not just for study and debate—it is what we do every day. If we are theorizing all the time anyway, it then seems only prudent to ask: How can we tell better, more complex stories about children's learning? And, perhaps most important, who might help us to tell these stories? In his landmark study of teachers, Lortie (2002) found that teachers tend to return to the familiar stories of teaching and learning—the stories that we learned firsthand as students and student teachers—to make sense of our classroom experiences. Put simply, it seems that we are telling many of the same stories about children's learning again and again in schools.

We can tell new and different stories. To do this, I believe we must begin to position ourselves in new ways and in more productive relationships with theory. For me, a connection to a real-world example was critical in repositioning myself in relationship to Vygotsky and his theory of learning. Believe it or not, it took a Metro map in Washington, D.C. to help me make better sense of Vygotsky's theory, originally written in Russian in 1812. Focusing on Vygotsky's (1978) concepts of *tools* and *signs*, I hope to illustrate through the example of the Metro map (see Figure 1) how a tool was transformed into a sign and what the implications of this transformation might be in terms of learning and identity. In the process, I also hope to make visible how distant theory can be brought closer and how authoritative relationships with theory can be experienced more as partnerships.

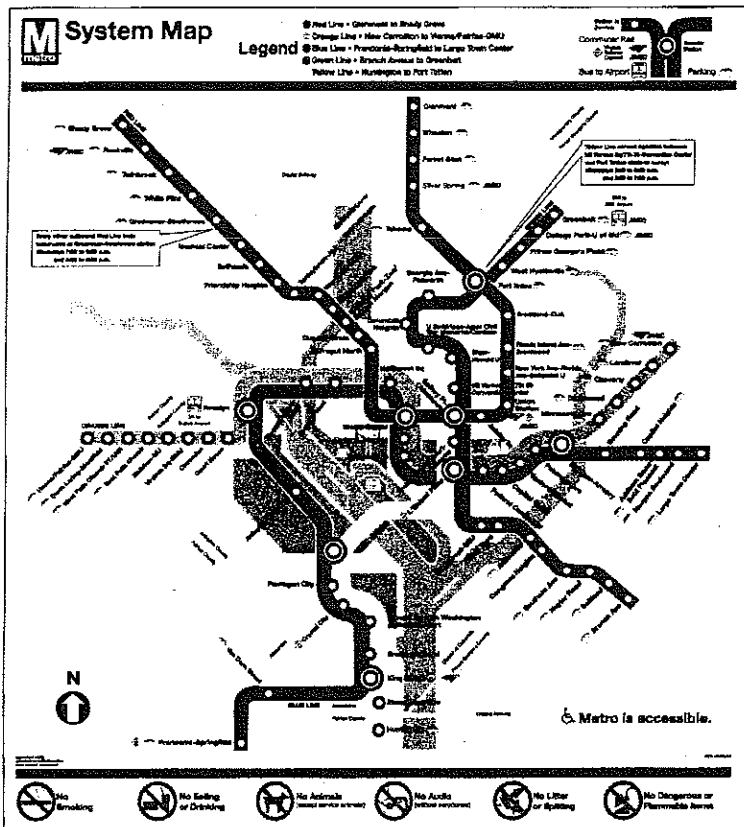


Figure 1. The D.C. Metro map that helped clarify Vygotsky's concepts of tools and signs (<http://wmata.com/metroraillsystemmap.cfm>). Used with permission of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

GETTING "CLOSER" TO "THEORY"

During my initial reading of Vygotsky's *Mind in Society* (1978), there was one thing that became quite clear to me: humans are a lot smarter than apes. Given the behaviorist training I'd received as a special education major, this came as a great relief. However, it was obvious that there was much more to it than that. Still, it was not until my second and third readings that I came to another key understanding: that is, for Vygotsky, learning is not merely a matter of children "growing up" and maturing. Rather, it is about how we come to see (and act upon) the world in terms of tools and signs. Unlike those apes, we are able to make sophisticated meaning about the world through our use of tools and signs. Luckily, we're not just stuck with sticks and stones in our meaning-making endeavors. Over time, we have come to develop much more sophisticated tools than our furry friends, language being the ultimate tool (although I'm sure the iPhone and the Internet are

not far behind in this department). Not only do we have fabulous tools, we also have the capacity to imagine beyond our immediate context. In other words, we are not limited to making meaning with the physical tools at hand; rather, we are endowed with the unique ability to hold the world in "sign."

Tools and signs are different (but often connected) ways of making meaning. For me, understanding this difference has been a struggle—one that has turned into an ongoing "conversation" between the Russian and me. The conversation began this way:

Vygotsky: [Well, Meredith, since you asked . . .] "[a] most essential difference between sign and tool, and the basis for the real divergence of the two lines, is the different ways they orient human behavior. The tool's function is to serve as the conductor of human influence on the object of activity; it is externally oriented; it must lead to change in objects. It is a means by which human external activity is aimed at mastering, and triumphing over, nature." (p. 55)

Admittedly, few "sparks" were flying between us at this point. Staying in the conversation would clearly require a bit of translating work (and I don't mean from Russian to English!). Specifically, it meant a move out of Vygotsky's laboratory and into the "real world" to think about my own use of tools. A relevant case in point occurred as I reflected on the great triumph of having recently mastered the subway system in Washington, D.C. (a huge accomplishment for a Midwesterner like me who actually struggled with learning to drive). I came to understand how my use of various tools—tools that included printed directions from a website, subway signs, and the arrival/departing screens at each station—had allowed me to act on the world to do something I needed to do (i.e., an "external orientation"). In other words, learning had not occurred in isolation or through determined thought; rather, it was very much tied to my sociocultural world where, in the context of a specific activity, tools became resources for my thinking.

At this point, my “conversation” with Vygotsky was ready to get a bit deeper:

Vygotsky: [Now, Meredith, listen carefully.] *“The sign, on the other hand, changes nothing in the object of a psychological operation. It is a means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself; the sign is internally oriented. These activities are so different from each other that the nature of the means they use cannot be the same in both cases.”* (p. 55)

In my case, I not only acted on my physical world by using tools to ride the subway, but I was actually changed in the process. In the section that follows, I describe how the Metro map (Figure 1) became a sign for me. While at first the map merely served as a means to help me find my way in a strange new city, over time, it also became a means by which I was able to imagine myself in the world in a new way (i.e., an “internal orientation”). This is learning at its deepest level, as I hope to illustrate here. Yes, Lev, it is now my turn to share in this conversation. . . .

SEEING THE WORLD TOGETHER IN SIGN

In Washington D.C., it is common knowledge that the Metro system is so easy to figure out that even kindergartners can quickly master it. At least this is what my sister, the savvy Metro rider and daily commuter, informed me upon my arrival to the city. Despite her efforts to encourage my independence, I disappointed her by making little effort to learn this system myself during my initial treks throughout the city. I could always count on my sister to tug my arm when it was time to get off at our stop, shove the Metro card into my hand to exit our station, and push me through the crowds. From time to time, she would chide me for my unwillingness to trade in my laid-back Midwestern sensibilities and good manners for the faster-paced East Coast aggressiveness. I steadfastly refused to race across platforms for departing trains or elbow my way through compartments for empty seats. And, of course, she never missed an opportunity to roll her eyes at me and sigh in exasperation whenever she caught me standing on the left side of the escalator “like a tourist” (no doubt blocking the way for hurried commuters intending to charge down the steps on their way to someplace important).

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I remember my first Metro ride quite vividly. It was from Reagan Airport in Northern Virginia to Silver Spring, Maryland, where my sister lived at the time. As we slid into our orange-peel-colored seat, I embarrassed her by wondering aloud where the strips were for us to signal to the bus driver—ahem, train operator—that it was our stop. My sister pointed to the large, colorful Metro map by the doors. “You don’t press anything. They just stop at all the places on the map.” I may not have been holding an armload of souvenirs from the Smithsonian or fumbling through a travel book, but I couldn’t seem to shake the feeling of being a tourist in the big city.

Eventually, I did begin to make my way around the city without my sister’s help. Before each trip, I’d carefully plan what I needed to do. The Metro’s website spat out step-by-step directions, which were quite helpful (e.g., take the blue line going toward Springfield, depart at Metro Center, transfer to the red line). My sister told me how to buy my fare card and how to add enough money for each trip. Flashing lights to signal oncoming trains, screens announcing departing and approaching trains, and signs directing folks to various exits were helpful in guiding me along my way. But the Metro map was the ultimate security blanket. There was a large map by

the doors of each compartment of the train, and I usually studied a version of it on the Internet at home before each of my trips. The most important thing was to know the end-points of each line (e.g., the red line began at Shady Grove and

ended at Glenmont) or else you might wind up on a train going in the wrong direction. The map also came in handy for counting how many stops there would be until your next transfer and until you reached your destination. After riding the train every day to work, there finally came a time when I rarely needed to glance at the map.

As time went on, the colors on the map took on other important meanings:

- Green line meant going to the BWI airport and visiting my family.
- Yellow line meant going home from work.
- Orange line was for going to the veterinarian.
- Blue line was for touristy things.

And so on.

Specific stops also became important because of memories I associated with them:

- Gallery Place/Chinatown meant seeing a Wizards game or going to where my sister works.
- Pentagon meant sadness, quiet, and fear in the weeks following September 11th.
- Pentagon City meant waiting for my ride to school every morning.
- George Washington University meant going to see the doctor.
- Springfield meant shopping at the mall.

And so many more.

Recently, I bought my sister an official Metro map poster that hangs in a frame on a wall in our new apartment in Columbus, Ohio. For her, it represents a nostalgic yearning to go back to a different time and place; for both of us, it is a reminder of our first apartment, our first jobs, and our first experiences of getting around from one place to another (after years of relying on others for rides). It is a reminder of finally striking out on our own, of tasting independence.

So, the map was perhaps initially a tool, along with the lights, directions, and subway itself—all of which were means to act on the world, means of getting to where I needed to go. But, somewhere along the way, I think it also became a sign. It changed me as I became a self-sufficient commuter, and I changed it as I imbued it with meaning born of my own experiences, my own perspective. Now, it hangs on the wall as a reminder of what was and, possibly, what may still lie ahead.

A LASTING "CONNECTION"

Like the Metro map, it occurs to me that school is a place of destinations. Certainly, there are end-points we must reach. And there are plenty of tools—in the form of curriculum guides, pacing guides, mandated texts, and scripted lessons—to “help” us get there. Along the way, what are the experiences that are transformed into signs? What experiences become “read” by students and by us as new ways of being in the world? How are these experiences read (or not read) as signs of our competence and belonging? What experiences become “shared signs” that connect us to others? And, as teachers, how are we helping students to

read all the signs (and potential signs) that fill our classrooms?

In schools, there are no red lines or green lines to show us the way, no blue lines or yellow lines to take us again and again to the places we want to go and, in the process, to become our own. In schools, there are mostly words and work that serve to take us to our destinations. They become signs only when we learn to treat them as such.

As a teacher, I often “read” children’s work and words quite narrowly. Yes, I was interested in what children said and did, but I usually interpreted this only in terms of whether they’d reached that final destination or not. How often did I miss the “green lines” that might have connected us to familiar places in our lives that matter? How often did we board the “blue lines” that may have taken us to new places? When did I derail the “orange lines” that might have signified our responsibility to each other, or the “yellow lines” that might have signified our own respective journeys between home and school? What happens when those lines begin to disappear from our maps?

I have only just begun to realize the importance of “reading” the words and work of students and teachers in different ways—ways that signify our connections to others and to the world, ways that might signify our growing competence in the world. In the process, I am learning to see the classroom anew, not merely as a place of destinations but as a place of experiences that, over time, can serve as signs that change us. As a teacher-theorist, I have new questions and new stories to tell. So thank you, Vygotsky. I think this may be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

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Meredith Whittaker is a PhD student in Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University in Columbus, OH.