

Situated Agency and Collective Meaning: Rethinking Development through Vygotskian Praxis. A Critical Inquiry into Collaborative Praxis, Political Engagement and Cultural-Historical Psychology

Professor Nick Papé

Abstract

This article reconsiders Vygotskian psychology through the lens of collaborative praxis, arguing that learning is not only a cognitive process but also a social, ethical and political act. Drawing on cultural-historical traditions and informed by dialectical materialism, the article positions education as a site of collective meaning-making, shaped by struggle, history and shared purpose. It engages with the contributions of key scholars who reassert Vygotsky's revolutionary commitments, highlighting the centrality of agency formed in relation with others and examines the limits of institutional models that reduce learning to measurable outputs. Empirical material drawn from mature learners and digital environments reveals the tension between student experience and institutional control, with collaborative projects offering alternative ways of organising knowledge and participation. Rather than offer solutions, the article calls for renewed attentiveness to memory, care and conflict as generative forces in educational practice. Collaboration is defined not as a method but as a commitment to work with others toward shared intellectual and social responsibility.

Key Words: Collaborative Praxis, Vygotskian theory, cultural-historical psychology, political agency, mature learners, higher education, student participation, educational ethics, digital pedagogy, institutional power.

Introduction: Historical Premises and Political Commitments of Collaborative Praxis

Any attempt to reconsider Vygotsky's contribution to psychology must begin with the historical urgency that shaped his thought. Writing amid the political and social upheavals of post-revolutionary Russia, Vygotsky's ambition was not to build an abstract theory of development but to craft a psychology adequate to the needs of a society in transition. As Blanck (1997) observes, his ideas cannot be separated from the social and political conditions that demanded new forms of education, communication and collective life. The formation of consciousness, in Vygotsky's view, was neither an individual matter nor a purely internal phenomenon. It was a social process mediated by cultural tools, language and signs which carry the weight of historical experience (Vygotsky, 1978).

This positioning rejects any neutral or depoliticised view of psychological development. Stetsenko (2020) has gone as far as to call this the moral and political imperative of cultural-historical theory: to recognise that knowing and acting are not separate endeavours but co-constitutive. She critiques mainstream traditions for their retreat into abstraction, suggesting that both behaviourist and constructivist paradigms often sidestep the social origins of psychological change and the conflicts embedded within them. In her view, theory is not a mirror of reality but a means through which people engage with, contest and attempt to transform the world around them. It cannot stand above the conditions it seeks to describe, nor can researchers remain passive interpreters. Praxis, in this sense, is present from the outset. It is not what follows theory but what gives it its urgency and shape.

This argument finds support in Dafermos's (2022) exploration of crisis as both a concept and a condition within cultural-historical activity research. His contribution is significant for refusing the temptation to treat crisis as a merely episodic or psychological disruption. Instead, drawing on dialectical traditions, he insists that crisis is constitutive of development itself. It marks moments where the contradictions within existing forms of practice are unsustainable, compelling new ways of thinking and acting. For Vygotsky, this was not an abstract proposition. His own theoretical trajectory accepted a recognition that human development occurs through struggle, contradiction and renewal, not despite these conditions but because of them (Dafermos, 2021). The analysis of Vygotsky's use of the crisis concept reveals the extent to which psychology must remain attentive to social contradiction. He revisits the term's etymological and historical roots, linking it to medicine, philosophy and political theory. In doing so, he makes a clear case for dialectics as a way of thinking about rupture, not as failure, but as the generative ground for reorganisation. Vygotsky's criticism of his contemporaries is directed precisely at their unwillingness to account for these contradictions, or worse, to resolve them through reduction to quantifiable metrics. What those traditions lose and recover in cultural-historical theory is an understanding of consciousness as both individual and social, reflective and productive, shaped by history but never wholly determined by it.

This historical and political reading of Vygotsky informs the emergence of collaborative praxis within educational and psychological research. Scholars including Arievidt and Stetsenko (2000) argue that learning is a co-constructed activity, grounded in shared projects and meaningful dialogue. The agent is no longer the isolated subject mastering fixed knowledge, but a participant in historically shaped activity systems where interaction informs meaning. This reframing challenges the neutrality of traditional pedagogies and repositions learners as active contributors to the shaping of knowledge and institutions.

The implications of this shift are not merely theoretical. They touch the daily realities of teaching and learning, especially within systems that increasingly adopt managerial metrics as proxies for educational value. Research on mature learners and working-age students, particularly in digital learning environments, shows how institutional assumptions about independence, engagement and success often obscure the material and emotional labour required to participate (O'Shea, 2016; Merrill, 2015). Digital tools, while offering new modes of access, can also impose regimes of surveillance and intensify expectations without corresponding support. In response, educators informed by Vygotskian praxis begin to reshape their environments, not through wholesale reform, but through local acts of resistance and reconfiguration.

One avenue of such work is the development of co-designed curricula and participatory forms of assessment. Here, learners do not merely adapt to pre-given expectations but contribute to shaping the aims and terms of their learning. This is consistent with Ferholt, *et al.*'s (2020) call to examine how people learn during and from conditions of crisis. Their editorial response to the COVID-19 pandemic invokes Leont'ev's (1981) idea of a 'leading activity': a form of collective practice that organises and gives direction to other developmental processes. They argue that education, if understood in these terms, must prepare learners not only to survive existing crises but to imagine and shape alternative futures. Collaborative praxis therefore insists on participation as a method, as it transforms the research process from an extractive activity into one of joint inquiry and mutual responsibility. As Papé, *et al.* (2025) argue about mature learners, such work demands that researchers relinquish control over meaning-making and open space for contested interpretations. The point is not consensus, but co-presence

facilitating participants bringing different experiences, languages and histories, and it is through dialogue, however difficult, that these differences become resources for thought and action.

The historiographic orientation of this approach is central; rather than treat history as background or context, collaborative praxis treats it as an active site of meaning-making. The question is not only what people do but how inherited narratives inform their practices, remembered exclusions and imagined futures. This is evident in the way that terms like 'support,' 'engagement' or 'inclusion' are mobilised within policy. As Quinn (2010) observes, such terms often carry hidden assumptions about who belongs and who does not. By tracing their history, researchers can begin to unsettle their authority and open space for alternatives grounded in lived experience. Thus, Vygotskian praxis remains unfinished but urgent, as it challenges any separation between knowledge and action, or between learning and struggle. It calls for a methodology that is historically informed, politically accountable and dialogically open. It insists that research is not a neutral activity but a choice to stand with, or apart from, those seeking to remake their world.

Methodology: Situated Praxis, Critical Reflection and Dialogical Knowledge-Making

This article positions itself within a cultural-historical tradition that regards knowledge not as a detached abstraction but as a situated, political and dialogical act. It adopts an ontological and epistemological orientation rooted in dialectical materialism, cultural-historical psychology and a critical-reflexive praxis of inquiry. Following Stetsenko and Arieievitch's (2014) assertion that theory is not separate from the practices and conditions that produce it, the methodology employed here treats research as an embedded, ethical and co-constructed process. Knowledge is co-created through dialogical engagements with texts, participants and practices, informed by a commitment to collective transformation.

The approach is qualitative, drawing on a wide-ranging synthesis of theoretical literature, empirical studies and policy texts. Rather than beginning with fixed categories or hypotheses, the inquiry has emerged through reflective engagement with mature learners, participatory research projects and critical readings of educational and psychological frameworks. Analysis is guided by critical discourse analysis, historiographic reflection and the collective memory of educational struggle, privileging lived experience and narrative meaning-making over managerial or positivist validation. In this framework, reflexivity is not a methodological add-on but central to the production of knowledge. The author's position, as both researcher and institutional actor, is shaped by the same contradictions, compromises and opportunities explored in the text. This involves acknowledging the partiality of knowledge, the relational conditions of its production and the need to account for the ethical-political choices inherent in all research practices.

Ethically, the work aligns with what Stetsenko and Arieievitch describe as a transformative activist stance, where research becomes a form of political action embedded in a broader social project. This view resists the abstraction of data from context and insists on co-presence, where participants, be they students, texts or co-researchers, are engaged not as sources of information but as collaborators in a shared ethical and intellectual endeavour. Data sources included a wide array of theoretical literature, including cultural-historical and critical pedagogical texts, policy documents and empirical studies involving mature learners. Additionally, the author's participation informs insights in collaborative research initiatives and ongoing educational practice. This methodological stance affirms Stetsenko and Arieievitch's

(2014) claim that knowledge and practice are not sequential but simultaneous, interwoven within historical conditions of struggle, possibility and shared human development.

Collaborative Praxis, Participation and Method: Ethics and Struggle in Research

To write about collaborative praxis is to write about politics. The term demands engagement with critical traditions that emphasise social change as both the subject and method of research. In educational settings, particularly with working-age adult learners, this often means contesting institutional norms that mask unequal power relations. Vygotsky's theoretical project, often domesticated in Western readings, emerges from an effort to develop tools for human development under radically changed social and economic conditions. Stetsenko (2020) takes this forward by arguing that psychology cannot be separated from politics. She critiques both behaviourist and constructivist approaches for sidestepping responsibility and calls instead for theory that does not merely describe the world but seeks to change it. According to her, praxis is not something that comes after theory; instead, it exists within the process of theorising itself.

Research with adult learners reflects this dedication to change, as their studies are frequently influenced by breaks in education, financial obligations, caregiving duties and academic environments that value individual achievement. Collaboration, in these accounts, is not an abstract value but a practical necessity. It refers to relationships through which learners manage uncertainty, affirm belonging and create shared knowledge. Collaborative practice opens up opportunities for co-design, allowing students to help develop materials and challenge the standards used to evaluate learning, questioning the very rules of learning assessment. In doing so, it contests systems that extend managerial control through digital platforms while claiming to promote independence or flexibility. This practice is considered political because it prioritises collective dignity over institutional metrics in education.

The methodological implications of this position are considerable. Vygotskian theory encourages researchers to ask not only what is happening but how it came to be and whose interests it serves. This historiographic stance is evident in recent work that examines how current categories of 'support' and 'independence' emerge from historical shifts in educational purpose, particularly the drift toward marketised logics (Merrill, 2015; Reay, *et al.*, 2010). These studies foreground how structures of meaning are not neutral but produced through ongoing struggle over what learning is for and whom it serves. In this way, collaborative praxis challenges researchers to move beyond technical accounts of method and instead adopt historically and ethically situated approaches that foreground power and participation.

Blunden (2014) contributes a vital dimension to this discussion by arguing that collaborative activity is a 'project' in the historical-materialist sense. Projects, in his account, are not simply tasks or institutional plans but long-term collective engagements that draw together motives, identities and histories. This aligns with Vygotsky's concern with activity as the ground for development and meaning-making. Collaborative praxis, seen through this lens, is not a pedagogical strategy but a form of ethical participation in collective life. It means working together not just in the classroom or in research teams, but in shared efforts to shape conditions of learning in ways that affirm justice and dignity.

Ferholt, *et al.* (2020) expand on the importance of using historical memory as a method, referencing Leont'ev's (1981) concept of a 'leading activity'. They argue that human development hinges on the emergence of shared forms of activity capable of addressing collective needs. In the face of crises, from the pandemic to climate collapse, education cannot

remain neutral. Rather, it must become one of the principal sites where shared agency affirms and renews. Their argument situates collaborative praxis not just as a pedagogical concern but as a societal necessity. By inviting researchers to engage with participants as co-authors of inquiry, they call for a shift in power within research relationships. Participants no longer appear as passive sources of data but as historical agents engaged in the co-production of knowledge. This shift in the status of participants requires more than participatory gestures. It demands a reframing of research as a collective project shaped by mutual responsibility and shared authorship. Stetsenko (2020) is again instructive here, arguing that method and ethics are inseparable. Her participatory approach treats inquiry as a site of political action, where the struggle to understand the world is also the struggle to remake it. The researcher does not simply observe or interpret but enters into relations with others in ways that have consequences for all involved.

Arievitch (2017) offers a related but distinct emphasis. He rejects accounts of learning that rely on abstract models of individual choice or cognitive growth and instead presents education as a moral act grounded in care, sociality and historical situatedness. His call for a humanising pedagogy resonates with Freire's (1970) insistence that genuine dialogue requires shared risk and commitment. In institutional settings dominated by metrics, Arievitch's reminder that pedagogy is always political becomes essential. This ethical perspective influences both conceptualisations and practices of collaboration. Within educational literature, the notion of 'collaboration' is frequently treated merely as a technical approach describing group work, cooperative tasks or discussion forums, rather than shared struggles over meaning and value. Dafermos (2022) warns that concepts like 'agency' or 'motivation' can be seen as fixed, despite being shaped by history and society. His critique reminds us that educators cannot understand development apart from the social contradictions that produce it. To speak of collaboration without addressing these contradictions is to empty the term of its force.

Collaboration, in this reading, becomes a way of resisting commodified models of education that treat learners as consumers and teachers as service providers. It demands recognition of the material conditions under which learning takes place and the multiple demands placed on adult learners, as education is not a linear path but a negotiated terrain shaped by family, work, debt and health. Studies by O'Shea (2016) and Reay, *et al.* (2010) document how these factors shape not only access but experience. Collaborative praxis offers no simple solution to these challenges but insists the lived realities of those involved grounds research and pedagogy. This involves a rethinking of agency itself. Stetsenko introduces the concept of '*collectivindidual*' agency to capture the relational nature of human development, suggesting individuals are not isolated units but always exist in relation with others, with social norms and histories. In research with mature learners, this concept has been useful in affirming the emotional, social and intellectual labour that goes into returning to education. It resists deficit models that treat learners as lacking and instead highlights the forms of strength that emerge through interdependence. Collaboration, therefore, is not only a method but an ethic, recognising that knowledge is made with others, not merely about them. It means challenging extractive modes of inquiry that treat data as property and, instead, working towards shared understanding and shared ownership. It means holding open the space for difference, disagreement and co-creation. Thus, collaborative praxis is ongoing; it is not a fixed model or strategy, but an active way of engaging with the world as it exists and may become. It is method, theory and action held together by the question: how do we live and learn together in ways that matter?

Collaboration, Power and Digital Learning in Higher Education

Digital education introduces both potential and difficulty for those working within traditions of collaborative praxis. While online platforms can extend reach and offer more flexible routes into study, their design often reflects organisational imperatives that prioritise control, efficiency and measurement over connection, trust and human need. These platforms frequently replicate managerial expectations in digital form, quantifying engagement through metrics and restricting interaction to measurable and trackable formats. In doing so, they risk marginalising those students least able to meet narrowly defined performance indicators, particularly working-age adults with limited digital access, caregiving responsibilities or other commitments that lie beyond the formal boundaries of institutional timetables.

However, these same platforms can be adapted, resisted or reimaged when learners and educators treat them not as neutral tools but as contested spaces. Sannino, *et al.* (2021) indicate that online peer learning can facilitate the development of professional agency, if social conditions promote participation, collaboration and teamwork. Where design fails to centre on these values, learners often describe experiences of alienation, frustration and passivity. The danger lies not with the technology itself, but with its use to extend surveillance, increase pressure or mask asymmetries in power. These findings match those of Merrill (2015), whose study of mature learners reveals that motivation arises not from fixed personality traits or external incentives but through lived experiences of participation, recognition and shared struggle. Involving learners in designing modules and making curricular decisions increases their engagement and ownership. Motivation is shaped by interactions with the learning environment, not just internal measures. Institutional risk indicators like attendance may overlook how policies can exclude students, such as those with caregiving responsibilities. The issue lies in academic expectations that ignore students' diverse realities, as noted by Reay *et al.* (2010) and O'Shea (2016). A reorientation toward collaborative praxis therefore demands not only new teaching methods or support services but an institutional willingness to share power. Empowering students is essential for acknowledging them as important contributors to learning environments. This means valuing informal educational roles they already play, like mentoring peers and helping others, as core to their achievement. Collaborative praxis demands a real redistribution of authority and responsibility, not just more empathetic listening.

These questions of power and participation extend into the daily practices of teaching. Literature on collaborative praxis attends to theory or policy, but the work of pedagogy unfolds in relationships. Studies of teaching with mature students, including those by Merrill (2015), find that certain lecturer characteristics of empathy, consistency and clarity, matter not only for engagement but for survival in education. These are not soft skills or personal quirks; they are professional commitments that shape whether students feel seen, heard and valued. Where institutions reward only individual outputs or performance indicators, these relational qualities are often ignored or even penalised.

Teaching, in this account, is not an individual performance but a shared inquiry. The lecturer does not stand apart from the student as an expert transmitting knowledge. Instead, both enter into a changing relationship. This does not imply that power is erased or that expertise becomes irrelevant; it means recognising that the conditions under which people learn are shaped in and through human contact and that this shaping is a form of ethical work. Arievidtch and Stetsenko (2000) remind us that development cannot be abstracted from the social relations in which it takes place, stating learning is not only a cognitive achievement but a

moral and political act. Despite the significance of these practices, they often sit at odds with institutional cultures that prioritise metrics, outputs and strategic planning. This disjunction between the ideals of collaborative praxis and the structure of contemporary higher education is neither incidental nor accidental. It reflects a deeper tension between education as a public good and education as a private investment. Funding mechanisms, research assessments and workload models all operate in ways that marginalise dialogical, participatory or critical work. There is little room in these systems for uncertainty, shared authorship or co-produced inquiry.

To recognise this shortcoming is not to retreat into despair or abstraction. Stetsenko (2021) argues that even under constraint, researchers and educators retain the capacity to act, to organise and to experiment with alternatives. Collaborative research collectives, joint authorship, student-staff partnerships are not utopian gestures but small enactments of a different educational ethos. They allow for the redistribution of voice, the sharing of risk and the affirmation of learning as collective work. Blunden (2014) provides a conceptual language for these efforts, describing projects as social forms of activity that hold shared intention across time. His emphasis on the project form as central to human life helps clarify the stakes of collaborative praxis; it is not only a method of inquiry but a way of living together with care and purpose.

To write in support of collaborative praxis is therefore to write both critically and hopefully. It requires attention to material constraints, but also to possibility. Yet even as the literature grows, so too does the risk of repetition, abstraction or moralism. Terms like 'agency' and 'participation' can circulate without adequate attention to the labour and conflict they imply. Without grounding in lived conditions, collaborative praxis may be reduced to a rhetorical gesture. To avoid this, researchers must ask challenging questions: who participates, who decides, who benefits? They must remain open to doubt, tension and failure and resist the temptation to present collaboration as harmonious or complete. This includes examining their own position as academic labour is not separate from the systems it critiques; researchers are subject to the same demands for productivity, compliance and impact.

Collaborative praxis cannot mean only working with those who agree. It requires working with resistance, contradiction and sometimes hostility as well as holding open spaces where disagreement can be heard and where care is not confined to the interpersonal but becomes a method of research. Ferholt, *et al.* (2020) and Guarrasi, *et al.* (2020) remind us that collaboration is not only desirable but necessary for survival. They urge us to treat collaborative learning not as an option but as a leading activity capable of organising our response to shared crisis. To adopt this view is not to celebrate collaboration uncritically but to insist that learning, teaching and research are always social acts and that their shape depends on the values we choose to honour. Collaborative praxis, properly understood, is neither a tool nor a programme, it is a commitment to working with others toward conditions in which all may learn, act and live with dignity.

Collaborative Praxis and Institutional Tensions

Collaborative praxis requires a serious engagement with history, not as a passive record but as a field of conflict that shapes how people come to know, act and relate. Vygotsky's view that consciousness is formed through historically situated activity means that education cannot be separated from the social and material conditions in which it takes place. Memory, in this tradition, is not sentimental. It carries the potential to disrupt prevailing accounts of learning by restoring suppressed narratives and challenging the structures that marginalise them.

Stetsenko (2020) draws attention to this political dimension by showing that development is always entwined with struggle. She places agency not in individual traits but in the capacity of people to resist, reconfigure and reclaim their circumstances. Her work rejects neutrality and insists that theory itself is an intervention in the social world.

This has practical relevance for educators and students working under pressure. Mature learners return to study following periods of personal upheaval, redundancy, bereavement, illness or migration that often precede re-engagement with education. These experiences are not incidental; they are central to how learners see themselves and their reasons for studying. Research by Merrill (2015) shows that mature students frequently describe their learning as a personal commitment to change or recovery. Students speak of returning to study after difficult experiences, with learning framed as a means to re-assert confidence or self-worth. Similarly, O'Shea (2016) found that first-in-family and mature learners often described their education as emotionally significant, where persistence was tied to identity and recognition rather than outcomes alone. Education offers students a space to mourn, reflect or reconnect with forgotten ambitions; for others, it is a way to speak into public discourse from which they have long been excluded. These motives cannot be captured by metrics of employability or skill, as they speak to the emotional and political labour involved in learning (Pap   and Rahim, 2026). Collaborative praxis recognises this and calls on institutions to acknowledge the full histories students bring with them and to make space for these to shape learning, not be erased by it.

To engage collaboratively also means to accept disagreement. Collaboration is often mistaken for consensus, but genuine collaboration involves tension in which ideas are contested and differences emerge. Arievitch (2017) reminds us that power is negotiated and learning rooted in real life is messy and uncertain. The expectation that educational processes should be smooth or conflict-free only reinforces institutional norms that value conformity over critical thought. In practice, this means rejecting standardised delivery models that allow no room for dispute or understanding that assessment rubrics and module specifications can silence more than they reveal. In studies by Bovill (2014), when students were given the opportunity to choose materials, lead discussions or contribute to assessment design, disagreement sometimes increased, but so did commitment. Disagreements became part of the learning process, as students explored whose stories were valid, what knowledge mattered and what it meant to speak with authority. The role of the educator, then, is not to manage or eliminate tension but to support the process and remain present when certainty gives way to discomfort.

This approach challenges conventional ideas of knowledge, as academic cultures often rely on narrow expectations around formal writing, citation and abstraction. These conventions are not neutral; they exclude those whose ways of knowing do not conform. Tett, *et al.* (2017) found that mature students feared their experiences would be dismissed if expressed in their own words. Confronted with traditional academic expectations, some students chose to withdraw while others adapted. For those who received encouragement, creative expression became a way to participate; spoken word, collage, performance and journaling were not used as alternatives to academic thinking but as valid forms of meaning-making. These approaches were not simply supplementary additions to standard assessments; rather, they represented alternative ways of engaging with knowledge. These varied forms of academic expression enabled students to analyse, critique and reflect in ways that gave due respect to their individual histories and lived experiences. This repositioned education as an encounter among multiple ways of knowing, rather than a one-directional monologue. Academic rigour was not diminished by this diversity; instead, it was redefined. Rigour became the discipline of

listening, responding and remaining open to change, rather than simply adhering to fixed formats or conventions.

Working within systems that prioritise speed, uniformity and predictability is challenging. Tools like metrics, audits and rankings subtly influence educators and students, limiting what is considered valid or acceptable, which often discourages risk-taking. Collaborative efforts including co-design, peer research, or engaging with the public, can be dismissed as inefficient because they require more time, invite questions and are hard to measure. Carey (2013) documents staff frustrations when collaborative approaches to teaching were blocked or delayed by formal procedures. Approval panels often struggled with ambiguity and saw student-driven topics, especially those grounded in lived experience, as risky or lacking rigour. These responses expose the gap between institutional statements about inclusivity and the everyday mechanisms through which control is exercised. Rather than being shaped by values, educational cultures are often shaped by the systems that monitor and approve them.

Policy frameworks often make this worse. The language of value for money, student satisfaction and measurable impact now dominates public discussion of higher education. Collaboration becomes a branding term, the student voice is managed, not heard, and participation is simulated, not enacted. In this climate, collaborative praxis risks being co-opted and becoming a checklist for token gestures. To resist this, practice must remain grounded in shared work that refuses simplification and must involve real decisions, real risks and real shifts in power. Staff must be supported to experiment and must be trusted to lead. Institutions must be willing to revise their own assumptions; without this, the talk of collaboration collapses under the weight of its own contradictions.

Research projects embedded in community partnerships show how academic and public knowledge can be brought into relation. Watermeyer (2015) discusses modules and initiatives co-designed with local groups to address urgent social issues, including food insecurity, digital exclusion and housing. These activities did more than meet curriculum requirements. They created space for students, researchers and practitioners to work together on problems that mattered. Although the process was often slow and emotionally demanding, it offered new ways of understanding, renewed commitments to justice and challenged conventional definitions of expertise. Students reported that their learning became meaningful not only for themselves but for others. Researchers found purpose beyond institutional recognition, and practitioners gained access to tools often reserved for the academic world. These collaborations demonstrate that learning does not need to be solitary or abstract; it can be shared, practical and accountable to real lives.

Professionals must reconsider their roles: researchers cannot remain neutral and teachers cannot stay distant. Both should fully engage, embracing responsibility over sentiment, appreciating that sharing knowledge involves vulnerability, making mistakes and adapting education. As Arievidt and Stetsenko (2000) state, sharing knowledge is a moral activity that shapes values and identity, as collaborative praxis highlights not only what we teach, but also how, with whom, and why. This article examines the political, historical and epistemological dimensions of collaborative praxis within Vygotskian psychology. Rather than offering fixed answers, the aim has been to clarify what is at stake in this discussion and to contribute meaningfully to ongoing debates about the purpose of education, the ethics of research and the possibilities of shared intellectual and pedagogical endeavour. Collaborative praxis is not a technique or a trend. It is a commitment to forms of inquiry and learning that resist control, open space for shared authority and recognise the inextricable relation between knowledge

and power. It draws from Vygotsky's insistence that human development is social and historical, and from the political commitments of scholars including Arieviditch and Stetsenko, who challenge the depoliticisation of theory in psychological discourse. This commitment finds relevance in the lives of those who participate daily in education under pressure: mature students, precariously employed staff, marginalised learners and fatigued educators. These groups are not looking for innovation templates or generic toolkits. They seek relationships founded on trust, opportunities to speak honestly and institutions willing to be unsettled by those they serve. To reclaim the radical potential of Vygotskian thought is to begin from these needs. It is to assert that the purpose of education is not to generate compliant bodies or measurable outputs but to cultivate people capable of thinking critically, acting ethically and caring collectively.

To move forward, institutions must reconfigure their systems of evaluation and reward. Current metrics encourage individualism and quantify outputs, often to the detriment of collaboration. If co-authored work, participatory processes and experimental methods are to be taken seriously, they must be acknowledged in professional recognition and assessment. This also means supporting forms of student work that escape conventional academic formats. The complexity of co-produced learning cannot be captured through essays or timed assessments alone. Portfolios, critical journals and collective outputs must be recognised for their value.

Collaborative praxis also brings emotional and ethical demands. Teaching and researching in these ways involve vulnerability, discomfort and long-term care. Most institutional policies, however, reduce academic work to a technical activity devoid of affect. Staff need professional development that reflects the relational nature of collaborative work. This includes facilitation skills, ethical reflection and spaces to discuss the dilemmas of practice. Students too need emotional and material support, especially when projects intersect with experiences of trauma or injustice. Staff who are emotionally present and willing to acknowledge uncertainty are often more effective in supporting students to take risks, speak freely and stay the course.

Despite the language of participation, educational providers remain shaped by practices that retain control rather than share it; power is often masked by polite consultation, while core structures remain unchanged. Collaborative educational work requires more than gestures of inclusion, it depends on a willingness to redistribute authority, to make space for distinct kinds of knowledge and to fund this work in real and sustained ways. Students, communities and practitioners bring experience that should not be filtered through academic validation or treated with quiet condescension. If participation is to mean anything, it must include decisions about what counts as knowledge and who gets to shape it. This is a political question as much as pedagogical, as collaboration demands attention not only to what is taught but to how institutions operate. Without changes to how validation works, how research is measured and how teaching is resourced, the talk of partnership will remain a hollow formality.

The work of Vygotsky, particularly as reinterpreted by writers including Arieviditch and Stetsenko (2020), helps make this political dimension visible. His ideas of mediation and internalisation gain meaning when connected to social struggle rather than abstract theory. To reclaim the radical potential of his work is to examine the tensions it holds between theory and practice, between critique and action, between the individual and the collective. These tensions are not problems to be resolved but conditions to work within as collaborative praxis sits in that unsettled space, asking tough questions: who is learning, with whom and for what purpose? There are managers who argue that educational institutions may never fully support this kind of work. In response, others have created independent spaces of collectives, community

research groups and public education projects that challenge existing norms. These alternatives are not replacements but reminders that education can be organised differently. If such work is to survive and have influence, it will require resources, alliances and a refusal to accept market values as the measure of educational worth. Vygotsky wrote during upheaval with the belief that collective human effort could change the world. To honour that belief now is not to romanticise the past but to commit to education as a site of change and means treating collaboration not as a method but as a shared refusal to leave things as they are.

References

- Arievitch, I.M. (2017). *Beyond the brain: An agentive activity perspective on mind, development, and learning*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Arievitch, I.M. & Stetsenko, A. (2000). The quality of cultural tools and cognitive development: Galperin's perspective and its implications. *Human Development*, 43(2), 69–92. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1159/000022661>
- Blanck, G. (1997). Vygotsky: The man and his cause. *Learning and Instruction*, 7(1), 3–15. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4752\(96\)00025-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4752(96)00025-8)
- Blunden, A. ed. (2014). *Collaborative Projects: An Interdisciplinary Study*. Leiden: Brill.
- Carey, P. (2013). Student engagement: stakeholder perspectives on course representation in university governance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(9), 1290–1304. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2011.621022.
- Dafermos, M. (2021). The metaphysics of psychology from a dialectical perspective. *Theory & Psychology*, 31(5), 690–708.
- Dafermos, M. (2022). Conceptualising crisis in cultural-historical activity research: Revisiting dialectics and revolutionary theory. *Human Arenas*, 5(2), 189–207. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-022-00289-4>
- Ferholt, B., et al. (2020). Humanity's leading activity and survival in socio-political conditions. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 27(4), 315–320.
- Guarrasi, I., Jornet, A. & Rajala, A. (2020). Expanding bio-geographies and re-generating CHAT projects. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 27(4), 301–306.
- Leite, A., et al. (2020). Prefigurative activism and collective imagination: CHAT perspectives. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 27(4), 321–327.
- Leont'ev, A.N. (1981). *Problems of the development of the mind*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Merrill, B. (2015). Determined to stay or determined to leave? A study of non-traditional students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(10), 1859–1871. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.912625>
- O'Shea, S. (2016). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': First-in-family students, university experience and the practice of retention. *Higher Education*, 72(1), 59–78. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9938-y>
- Papé, N. & Rahim, A. (2026). Behind the Grade: What Students Learn That Is Never Recorded, *Journal of Contemporary Development & Management Studies*, 10(2), 30-40
- Papé, N., et al. (2025). Evaluating Teaching Methods for Mature Learners: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Learning Preferences in Higher Education, *International Journal of Business Performance Management*. Accepted for publication 09 September 2025
- Quinn, J. (2010). *Learning communities and imagined social capital: Learning to belong*. London: Continuum.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. & Clayton, J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925>

- Sannino, A., Engeström, Y. & Jokinen, E. (2021). Digital peer learning for professional agency. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 52(4), 1597–1610.
- Stetsenko, A. (2020). Theory for and as social practice in Vygotsky's work: Educational research as a political and moral project. *Educational Theory*, 70(1), 41–61.
- Stetsenko, A. (2021). Reassessing CHAT in times of historic socio-political turmoil. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 28(2), 157–163.
- Stetsenko, A. & Arievitch, I.M., (2014). Vygotsky's theory of learning and development and the sociocultural genesis of individual identity. In: *B. Wagener and J. Valsiner, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 435–457.
- Tett, L., Cree, V.E. & Christie, H. (2017). From further to higher education: Transition as an on-going process. *Scottish Educational Review*, 49(1), 69–85.
- Tur, G., de Benito-Crosetti, B. & Arnab, S. (2025). Data literacy for citizenry through game-based learning: Adult perceptions of fun and learning with the DALI Toolkit. *First International Journal of Digital Learning*. Coventry University. DOI: 10.1111/dali.110374921
- Vella, F. (2025). *Reading motivation and reading habits in university students in Malta: Implications for digital literacy and performance*. University of Malta Institutional Repository. Available at: <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/139589>
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- _____. (1987). *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky, Volume 1: Problems of General Psychology*. Edited by R. W. Rieber and A. S. Carton. New York: Plenum
- Watermeyer, R. (2015). Lost in the 'third space': the impact of public engagement in higher education on academic identity, research practice and career progression. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5(3), 331–347. DOI: 10.1080/21568235.2015.1044546.