

Russie : Positional method of teaching for university students

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I/ The development of professional thinking of psychology students.

One of the main goals of professional training is preparing professionals, whose competencies could meet the challenges of the practice. The situations where gaining knowledge and learning new technologies gets outdated in the process of professional life, is a commonplace not only for technical majors, but for liberal arts as well. The situation in psychology is even more complicated, because new methods and techniques do not cancel the previous ones, but in fact make the scientific-psychological reality even more variegated. The psychologist, who wants to be updated, has to be able to "write in" new discoveries into his/her scientific worldview, but not only add new knowledge to already gained one, but compare it to own theoretical orientations. So, in the professional training of a psychologist the main goal is to form professional thinking of the students, which will help them to solve theoretical and practical tasks/problems.

Thinking becomes critical professional characteristic of a psychologist, since it is a mechanism of analysis and comparison of theoretical conceptions and practices. Do not think that professional thinking is a prerogative of scientists and theorists. Everyday practice sets important tasks for a psychologist. The successful resolution of them depends on how effectively he can separate the most important characteristics of the situation, compare this particular situation with universal knowledge, decide what the object of investigation is, and how to develop research design. Developmental goals of higher education are justified. Past or present day knowledge becomes outdated very soon, and students should learn not only to rely on their static knowledge they gain in class, but also develop skills of analyzing new information.

Some of the developmental goals of professional training of psychologists are achieved by practicum, supervision, case studies. However, these mainly help to develop certain professional skills in the practical context. When we are talking about "professional thinking" we are talking about the ability to solve practical and theoretical tasks in the process of professional practice of psychologists.

We believe that professional thinking as an instrument of professional practice of a psychologist can be developed in the process of learning theoretical basis of psychological science.

To fulfill this goal Nickolay Veraksa¹ offered a new method of teaching, called "positional teaching of students". A new method is that students read scientific texts (monographs, articles) or listen to lecture, and then discuss them during positional seminars.

II/ Research studies about the model of positional teaching of students

Lev Vygotsky wrote, that if we want to develop the child's cultural ability (e.g. space orientation or reading complex texts), we have to offer him some specific tools, which will help him to learn it. For example, space orientation will be developed in a child by means of teaching him to read and construct schemes.

What tools do we need to develop skills and abilities of reading sophisticated texts? To answer this question, we have to analyze what an "advanced, good" reader does. Nickolay Veraksa considers that a reader also uses certain tools: he conceptualizes text, finds main ideas in the text, builds a relational scheme of the context, asks questions and builds oppositions. In the model of positional teaching of students, such elements as "concepts", "ideas", and "oppositions" become cognitive tools that a student should acquire. These cognitive tools are called "positions", and the teaching process is called "positional".

Lev Vygotsky² formulated a very important law of development: at first we use tools externally, one person learns to use the tools in collaboration with others, and only later these tools are internalized. Initially tools have to be "tested" in the group work, where each concept and the idea becomes an object of discussion.

Position seminar consists of two parts. First, students work in small groups. Each group is assigned - to review a lecture or text book from the perspective of one of the proposed positions. Later students defend their position during the panel discussion. As a result, these means become internalized.

III/ Dimensions of student's work with subject context

Learning process has two elements - object that a learner has to gain understanding of and that is changing in this process, and subject, who develops and changes in the process. According to traditional approach, the most important goal is that a student has to learn certain cultural context. But when student's personality is not taken into consideration, then education becomes characterless and dull. In this case, students lose the interest in learning and study only for test. The real life learning is different from formal training in the fact that student is interested in what he is learning, not only he is looking for information, but also he is ready to participate in a dialogue - agree or disagree. In fact, students have to learn this particular thing at the university. This means that the student has to find his own sense in the science.

In the traditional approach, the situation gets even more complicated. Typically, professor takes on a dominant role in the teaching process and serves as a mediator between the science and a student. In this case student becomes dependent on his professor in obtaining knowledge. That's why in positional teaching it is critical to stress the importance of both learning about the object and also active independent participation of the subject. Positional teaching has double task: to learn about the object and to realize the subject.

The work with a scientific text includes task resolutions in three dimensions - normative, transformational and symbolic.

a) Normative dimension

Each text has certain ideas and concepts. They are objective and have existed before the reader started reading the text. But the process of learning about these ideas and concept is subjective and requires decoding of what the author was trying to say. It is not so easy to find them and the opinions of professional can be different about these ideas and concepts.

Positional seminar shows: each position sets a real task for students, which can only be solved collectively.

"Concepts"

Scientific text reflects the moment of the development of the concept: the existing term gets a new meaning. Students either do not realize that the meaning of the concept changed or think they learned a new concept.

Here are errors that occur in students' answers most frequently. Very often the group finds a number of concepts, among which there are some synonyms. This means that it is hard for students to identify precisely the essential concepts, to discover the identity of meanings?? of different words.

Sometimes the group can not see the difference between essential and secondary concepts, which were used for illustrations of the thesis. This situation is familiar to every teacher: it's difficult for students to distinguish "figure" and the "background".

"Ideas"

The idea is an important thought of the text. It's always a new solution offered by the author, an objection to a traditionally accepted proposition. Very often the ideas that students found in the text, are commonplace. For the novice reader, it is difficult to understand this internal dialogue, which includes any idea.

Frequently ideas proposed by the group do not reflect the entire text, but only fragments, and - what is an important - only secondary fragment. This means that it's difficult for students to separate the important from the secondary in the article or lecture. In this situation, the teacher can propose students to correlate ideas, selected by the group, and the title of text.

Sophisticated text (for example the texts by J.Piaget, L.Vygotskiy etc.) includes a large number of ideas, messages. Some of them belong to the author, other - to somebody else's quoted by the author or even to his opponents. It's difficult for students to understand which ideas belong to the author and which not: sometimes they attribute the author's ideas to his opponents. The important task is to help students to separate the author's ideas from opposite ideas.

"Schemes"

The group "Scheme" has to present a graphic representation of the main elements of the text. It is sometimes difficult for the students to understand the relations between the elements.

The scheme includes key concepts of the text and marked with arrows the relationships between them. Thus, first step is to identify the main concepts in texts, and second - to understand how these concepts are linked.

The simplest scheme - a scheme-classification, but even with the creation of such schemes some difficulties arise: sometimes classifications have different bases. Much more difficult task is to master the scheme, reflecting the development of concepts.

Initially, students perceive the scheme as an illustration to the text as a means of memorization of main ideas. But the scheme is a tool of understanding. Important point of discussion is the search for the name of the scheme and justification of this name, the discussion of whether schema helps (and how) to understand the content of the text.

While working in groups, students gain new knowledge, i.e. learn about the object, but this process is still not subjective, students do not express their attitudes or opinions. In order to create such an opportunity for the students, there are two more positions: "Critic" (against) and "Apologist" (for).

In the position of "Apologist", students find elements (ideas, concepts) that are very close to them. Interestingly, students may choose ideas that the author of the text didn't favor.

In order to realize the position of an apologist, a student must accept the author's view as their own; imagine the arguments of its opponents. Initially, students simply add to the quotations from the lecture usual laudatory words "it was interesting", "very important to know that". During the discussion and under "pressure" of the critics apologists are beginning to understand that just saying "nice words" to the author is not enough: it's necessary to look for arguments to defend their position. In the position of "Critic", students find contradictions and discrepancies. This leads to a lot of discussions.

The position of the criticism is difficult for students - the authority of teachers and textbooks are quite large. During the discussion, the teacher shows that good criticism is never directed against the person. Critic questioned the scientific idea, thereby stimulating the author of this idea to look for new arguments in its favor, to conduct new studies to refine and develop the idea. Developing the formula for Descartes "I think, therefore I exist", we can say that there a scientist exists as scientist until he doubts (not in the sense of uncertainty and confusion, but in terms of awareness of the need to find justifications and evidence).The task of critics is to find "weak spots" of scientific theory, to discover questions that it does not answer, and ask these questions. It is important that the question is always asked from a position opposite to the criticized theory.

b) The dimension of transformation

Scientific context is always a result of discovery. Science is a very different sphere of life - it doesn't exist without searching for a new knowledge and refutation of the old one. The task of education is to teach students to be able to find the problems themselves.

It can be achieved by work in the group "Critic".

Secondly, it can be achieved when the teacher is able to build course content not just as a listing of concepts, but as the history of scientific discovery. In this case students will discover the creative side of science. Mechanism for resolving problem situations is a creative (dialectical) thinking to manipulate the opposites, to solve contradictory situations. During the positional seminar there is one more group "Dialectics". The task of this group is to reflect the generation, genesis of a new concept or object in schema. The emergence of new ideas in science, the emergence of new in the human psyche - always the result of the dialectical transformation of the initial object (the scientific concept, mental function) in the new object (a new theory, a different mental function). The task of the group "Dialectic" is to find the "root" of new idea or phenomena and describe the type of transformation that led to its appearance. For example, the idea of ??the unconscious in psychoanalysis comes through the dialectical transformation of the theory of consciousness.

One more position is the position "Question". Questions are valuable because they are representing the first step to building a meaningful objection to the traditional well-known ideas. To ask a smart question students have to determine the boundary between known and unknown. When Socrates said, "I know that I know nothing", he reveals the fact that he knows a lot. Only knowledgeable person can discover his ignorance. By asking questions, students discover the boundaries of their own understanding of the text, find the boundaries and perspectives of development of scientific theories.

c) The symbolic dimension

"Smart" reader not only understands the content of the text, but also can refer to it and express his own attitude. Several positions were created to help students to express their ideas in symbols.

The position "Symbol". Student has to describe main ideas of the text in symbolic way. He has to draw a symbol to represent the idea.

The position "Poet". Students have to make a poem that would reflect the idea in the text.

The position "Theater". Students who choose the position of the "Theatre" should create and play any theatrical miniature, also reflecting the studied issues. Initially, the students perceive the task of this group as the easiest - they need "only" to rhyme what was said at the lecture, draw a picture, or play a little dramatization. However, after the first attempts to create a symbolic product it becomes apparent that the content of the poem or a mini-performance must be carefully selected to reflect the essence of the text. Thus, the group "Symbol" must take two steps: identify the main ideas in the text

and translate them into an art form. It seems obvious and simple that the heart pierced by an arrow is a symbol of love, but a symbol of the idea of development in the concept of Lev Vygotskiy, for example, is not an easy task.

In addition, the art form always entails the expression of relations and feelings. As a result, poems and mini-plays are beginning to incorporate themes of love, death, friendship. This means that students begin to capture the drama of scientific knowledge, they develop personal attitude to the scientific content. It means students get not only rational but also an emotional experience during the reading of scientific texts. The position "Reflection". This position allows students to analyze their difficulties while working with a scientific text, to understand what tasks they should set first.

IV/ The role of the professor in the positional seminar

The professor's role in this discussion is extremely high, but it differs sharply from the traditional position of professor whose aim to transfer completed knowledge. The aim of the seminar is to teach students to think for themselves, to defend their point of view, and look for arguments. Objective of the workshop is to teach students think independently.

During the work in small groups professor should help and consult groups.

During the panel discussion the role of the professor is to help students express their ideas and encourage present and defend their positions. It is important for the professor not to start explaining the material. Most serious challenge for professors is not to impose their judgments, but engage in "Socratic" conversation, helping students to cultivate their understanding. The professor should work in the zone of proximal development of students only if they can get at the seminar experience of independent thinking and development. Lists of concepts, questions, or scheme, prepared by the group: it is impossible to predict accurately all the content which have to be discussed, so the professor must always be ready to respond to unexpected questions, to allow non standard problem situations. If two groups discuss the same text, seminar will be completely different. It requires from the professor flexibility and willingness to solve unexpected problems. But it means that the position seminar - an excellent tool for the development of the professor's own mental abilities.

(1) Veraksa N.E., The model of positional teaching of students, *Voprosy Psikhologii*, 1994, , #3. PP. 122-129. (in Russian), 1994. ?3, ?.122-129.

(2) Vygotsky L.S. The Problem of the Development of Higher Mental Functions // *The Collected Works of L.S.Vygotsky*. V.4. Edited by Robert W. Rieber. - Plenum Press, New York, 1997. PP. 1-252.