

## “Understanding and Revising Egan’s Conception of Mind”

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Kieran Egan has provided educational theorists and educators with something that few others have in the history of educational theorizing – a *theory* of educational development. He has located this theory and the need for its vision against a compelling backdrop of conflicting educational visions. Regardless of the accuracy of Egan’s critique of educational policy conflict, his theory serves simultaneously as both a descriptive and prescriptive account of the development of the “educated” mind. His model attempts to harmonize naturalistic, social, and humanistic conceptions of education by linking a sequence of educational activities that reflect the development of social knowledge to the “natural” knowledge-seeking tendencies of children – tendencies that change with age and maturation.

While the attractiveness of his model lies precisely in this merging of descriptive and prescriptive theoretical theorizing, it is also the area in most need of clarification. Egan’s model has evolved over more than almost two decades of publications, the seeds of which extend back to *Teaching as Storytelling* (1989) and continue through his most recent publications. Egan has probed deeper into the aspects of each of his developmental “stages” as well as enhanced his attack on the competing notions of education that have put modern educators in a curricular bind. But he has not in any comprehensive way summarized his conception of mind.

Elements of a number of other philosophical and psychological theories factor importantly into Egan’s implied conception of mind. The work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky figures prominently as well as a mix of philosophical approaches to understanding mind and the “educated” mind. At times Egan appears to embrace an Oakeshottian notion of “educated” as implying cultured, or initiated into a community of knowledge – at other times, Egan seems to prefer a less contentious yet more philosophically problematic conception of mind. This is particularly true in his work on imagination (Frein, 1997).

In this paper, I will survey Egan’s seminal works in an effort to make as explicit as possible his implicit conception of mind. In doing so, I will argue that Egan has avoided – consciously or unconsciously – a definitive conception of mind in order to avoid becoming embroiled in the bloody battles between philosophers and psychologists as to the nature of mind. “Coming down” on either side has appeared (and quite rightly) to Egan as limiting in terms of how he wishes to present his educational model.

I will also draw upon recent scholarship on Wittgenstein and Vygotsky in order to offer a social conception of mind that may offer footing on which Egan’s theory can rest more comfortably (Williams, 1999).

We have a wonderfully mysterious place to start when investigating Egan's understanding of mind. Egan omitted a chapter from *The Educated Mind*. He tells us that this chapter summed up the link between his theory of imagination and developmental model proposed in *Educated Mind*. He posted this chapter in three parts on his personal website (<http://www.educ.sfu.ca/kegan/>).

In this chapter Egan explains what he feels is the engine that drives educational development. The chapter is a fascinating example of Egan at his exploratory best. It shows the challenges he himself has with the foundations of his theoretical model. I will try to summarize and paraphrase from this webified missing chapter:

We can understand, according to Egan, educational development as a synthesis of cultural development on the one hand – particularly the logic of human innovation – with the individual development of the human mind (and Egan here prefers the work of Vygotsky). The entity that allows human beings to have this sort of mediation between general and individual development is the human imagination, the ability to envision and hence create the possible.

It is the imagination that fosters general human innovation. About the progression of innovations in cultural understanding Egan writes:

“One invention leads logically to the next, which leads to another, which leads to social changes, new kinds of understanding, and further inventions, and so on. Such accounts expose a logic of invention and discovery, and of cultural development or impose a logic on them. The pace and shape of that development is obviously seen as influenced by social and psychological conditions” (<http://www.educ.sfu.ca/kegan/>).

This is relatively safe ground. Thinkers such as Thomas Kuhn in the *Structure of Scientific Revolution* have investigated the history of scientific innovation and have supplied historians and scientists alike with useful models.

Whether or not we agree that human innovation is “progressive” in any teleological sense, and whether or not we agree that revolution comes gradually or quickly in the form of paradigm shifts we can all agree that human understanding has a logical movement. Human innovation depends upon prior human innovation and builds upon it.

For Egan, the capacity of the imagination mediates between cultural knowledge and psychological development. Egan, first quoting Howard Gardner, writes:

“Howard Gardner notes that: ‘The deep problem for the developmentalist attempting a synthesis is to understand the relationships among the constraints imposed by nature, the constraints imposed by culture, and the degree of human inventiveness that nevertheless manages to emerge’. The deep problem for the educational theorist is similar, and a model I will suggest for the solution is, again, a troika in which imagination takes the central, dynamic role and the two conditioning, constraining roles are taken by disciplinary logic and by psychological development.”

To explain the concept of imagination, Egan draws upon the long and complex history of the concept. The summary found in the missing web chapter is very similar to the short history of the imagination as found in *Imagination in Teaching and Learning*. We will turn to this shortly. But, in brief, Egan notes the difficulty in clearly using and researching the imagination given its history – a history that Egan claims begins in the Hebrew Bible and continues through current educational practices.

We are left without a conception of mind, however, even at the end of the missing chapter. We have a conception of a portion of the mind – the imagination – and its role in Egan’s theory of cognitive development. It is a significant step in explaining how children learn new cognitive tools. It is by appealing to the imagination, Egan suggested yesterday at this conference’s keynote address, that cognitive tools are truly learned. But it does not go far enough. How are we to understand the process? How does the imagination work its mystery? How does it enable children to learn something that they do not yet know?

At this point, I will ask patience for a digression on the fascinating work of philosopher Meredith Williams – work that holds great promise for a refinement of Egan’s engine of human learning and development.

In her recent collection of essays on Wittgenstein, Meredith Williams investigates the implications of Lev Vygotsky’s theory of socio-linguistic development for a general social conception of mind. In her view, the path toward a conception of mind that avoids traditional and problematic divisions between psychology and philosophy involves a harmonizing of Vygotsky’s theory of development with Wittgenstein’s understanding of meaning.

Williams suggests:

“My own view, very briefly, is that Vygotsky’s approach to the role language plays in cognitive development would be well served by replacing his theory of word-meaning with the account of language and meaning presented in the later work of [Wittgenstein].” (Williams, 1999).

Williams, as with other interpreters of Vygotsky’s work, find Vygotsky’s model of the social aspect of mental development as both the most important aspect of his theory but also the area most in need of refinement. In gross summary, Vygotsky’s theory of development removes the “process” of development from inside the heads of children. Vygotsky suggests that it is only in the context of a community of adult language users that children learn language use and consequently develop “minds”. There cognitive abilities are developed by a community and within a community.

Specifically, Vygotsky makes the still-radical suggestion that forms of thought (abstraction for example) are not developed as part of the “natural” mental development of the child but only through the child learning “abstraction” through exchanges with adults in the language community. For Vygotsky, the question of nature vs. nurture is a

divide only in our explanatory accounts and a spurious one at that. Brain development may indeed make possible “higher” cognitive abilities but it is only through initiation into language using communities that the brain’s powers become oriented toward the patterns and structures we see in human socio-linguistic practices.

This is where Williams turns to Wittgenstein. She does not elaborate but rather suggests rather teasingly that Wittgenstein’s account of language and meaning supplies a needed refinement of Vygotsky’s theory. Vygotsky’s understanding of meaning, she argues, is limited by a purely relational account of meaning – that meaning stems from the interplay between a reference object in the real world and the sound.

Since I have already done gross injustice to Vygotsky with a paragraph summary, I might as well continue by summarizing parts of Wittgenstein’s later work in similar fashion. Williams recognizes a solution in Wittgenstein’s later work – primarily the *Philosophical Investigations*. For Wittgenstein, language use itself is what fundamentally supplies meaning regardless of any referential qualities. In particular, the shared and fundamentally social conventions of language use are the root of meaning.

For those who haven’t read the *Philosophical Investigations*, I can only point to the text for Wittgenstein’s argument through examples; it is at once both rigorously theoretical and poetic. One famous example may illustrate Wittgenstein’s attack on traditional accounts of language and meaning.

2, 4, 6, 8 . . . what is the next answer?

To successfully put 10 next requires a basic understanding of numeracy; a child must be able to count to 10. But it requires something more fundamental; it requires that the child understand *what it means to follow a rule*.

For Wittgenstein, following a rule is *this*.

He argues:

“It is of the greatest importance that a dispute hardly ever arises between people about whether the colour of this object is the same as the colour of that . . ., etc. This peaceful agreement is the characteristic surrounding the use of the word ‘same’.” (Williams, 1999 quoting *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*)

In her examination of the relevance of the later Wittgenstein on theories of learning, Williams give us an answer to the core the link between Vygotsky and Wittgenstein.

She writes:

“[T]he background structure and cognitive competence necessary for language use or rule-following to occur at all is provided by those who have been acculturated into the practice, while the initiate learner’s behavior is shaped and made intelligible by this

background. The cognitive skills of the teacher provide the ‘bootstrap’ for the novice.” (Williams, 1999).

We might summarize by saying that Vygotsky’s famous “zone of proximal development” should be considered to be not only the point at which a child reaches a wall of cognitive progress and requires help from the adult community but also a context that is created from the language practices and norms of the adult community. The child learns through the interplay between his or her use-practice and the corrections and modifications supplied by the adult language-using community. This adult language-using community is, of course, fundamentally culturally determined.

Here is where we return to Egan. Egan gives fairly short shrift to Wittgenstein in *The Educated Mind*, despite what could ultimately be seen as a Wittgensteinian subtitle – “How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding”. He does quote and reference Wittgenstein twice; once in the context of referring to human experience as “essentially linguistic” in which he draws a connection between the *Philosophical Investigations* and the wholly linguistic turn in contemporary philosophy.

Although Egan is always challenging to corner on any philosophical question, my personal contact with Kieran leads me to a possible answer on why he does not incorporate more of Wittgenstein into his work. Egan loves words; it shows in his writing and is his philosophy. He also loves the power of images, humour, and metaphors. He believes, I feel, that analytic philosophical traditions over-simplify language and conceptual meaning. For the most part, I share his aversion to the style if not content of some of the more didactic analytic philosophers.

We see this most strikingly in Egan’s accounts of imagination. While he does make use of Alan R. White’s analytically based conception of imagination as the “capacity to think of things as possibly being so” he does not settle comfortably on a wholesale adoption of a limited analytic sense of the imagination. He holds on to critical aspects of the Wordsworthian imagination – “it is the source of invention, novelty, and generativity . . . it is not distinct from rationality but is rather a capacity that greatly enriches rational thinking” (Egan, 1992). This certainly compares favourably with Wordsworth’s reason in its most exalted mode

My recommendation to Egan is one that he would not likely adopt quickly given what I believe to be his deep appreciation for, and acceptance of, the Romantic imagination. Essentially, I believe he should let go of the concept of imagination as the driving force behind the development of cognitive sophistication through his stage theory. Ironically, it is his work on imagination that has gained him the most recognition and is the very reason why we are all here at the first international conference on imagination in education.

The engine behind the learning of new cognitive tools – tools that are reflected in the theories and concepts available to us – is the interplay between the learner and the community of all learners. The learner continually experiments and seeks to gain

initiation into more aspects of the cultural practices (or socio-linguistic “games” if we use Wittgensteinian terms). If we wish to call the child’s ability to question and respond “imagination” we can do so but only at the cost of associating it with tremendous baggage.

I would suggest that Egan can even push his developmental theory further – the empirical claims about the stages that children progress through may say more about the logic of our practices and modes of thinking than about the child’s quasi-innate developmental hardwiring. The reasons for the remarkable interests that children show as they move through childhood and adolescence may be related to the implicit ways our language and social practices show the value of those practices. There is much work to be done here, I believe.

Egan sometimes falls into the Piagetian traps that he argues so strongly against – by suggesting a sort of naturalism about the stages of cognitive development. However, every element of his developmental model is only strengthened by rejecting the “imagination” as the mediating force. This is not to say that the ability to think of things as possibly being so isn’t valuable. Neither is it to say that we can’t refer to this as “imagination”. Interestingly, it may be that the desirability of thinking of the possible is one of the core pieces of the cultural game that children learn through the play back and forth within the boundaries of the adult language-using community. Indeed, the degree to which play and imagination is valued is not culturally universal.

It may be that the concept of imagination is too central to the *project* of Egan’s work to either fundamentally revise or reject. It is clearly dear to his heart, his sensibility about what is important in education and what is important in human life. I share many of the values and commitments that surround his concept of imagination. Yet, I would argue that the role of the imagination in his theoretical work the weakest part of a powerful set of theories on schooling, human learning and child development.

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