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Where Vygotsky Meets Piaget: American Educational Television Goes to Russia

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Abstract

A discussion of the current effort to develop a Russian version of the acclaimed American educational television program *Sesame Street* highlights some fundamental differences between American and Russian educational philosophies and research methods. The program's producers have shown much sensitivity in their willingness to adapt the show to local conditions; yet there are many features and ideas implicit in the program that conflict with Russian views on education and research. Thus Russians are broadcasting a hybrid show that represents American cultural values and educational ideals, but which also makes a valiant effort to uphold Russian cultural norms.

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of cultural borrowing in education, in which one culture borrows or adopts innovative educational models, structures and practices from another, has been an important means of educational reform since before the nineteenth century. While in the nineteenth century innovators such as France's Jullien de Paris and Japan's Prince Tomomi Iwakura borrowed from other nations for the improvement of their own educational systems, in the twentieth century, international educators have focused their efforts on changing the systems of other nations (Wilson 1994). Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the "melioration" of the Russian educational system has attracted numerous international educators, ranging from university scholars to government agencies and non-governmental organizations, who offer advice and funding for educational reforms and innovations on all levels. One of the most unique of these efforts is a current joint venture between *The Children's Television Workshop* and the Russian company Video art, to adapt the acclaimed American educational television program *Sesame Street* to the educational and cultural context of Russia. An examination of the process through which the show was adapted to Russia highlights the educational and cultural differences between the two countries, and the challenges that accompany such a cross cultural endeavor.

2 The History of *Ulitsa Sezam*

The Russian *Sesame Street* – entitled *Ulitsa Sezam* in Russian – will constitute the first Russian-language educational television program specifically aimed at preschool children. Every effort has been made to adapt this show to the Russian cultural context. The program has a cast of Russian actors and puppeteers, and is co-directed by Russian and American directors. It is set in an apartment courtyard that is typical for most Russian cities, and its educational material is grounded in a curriculum that was co-designed by Russian and American educators. Furthermore, Russian animation artists, song writers and script writers have participated in the creation of the show. Most significantly, the show has been given the seal of approval by the Russian Ministry of Education, and was praised in Russia's main teachers' newspaper, *Uchitel'skaya Gazeta* (Bigil'dinskaia 1996). It is hoped that the development of *Ulitsa Sezam* will initiate a new trend in educational television for preschool children.

In the United States *Sesame Street* has been instrumental in preparing young children for schooling for over twenty-five years. Its short segments, each designed with a specific educational goal in mind, have the entertainment appeal and direct message common in commercials. The program has been so successful that other countries have requested advice in developing their own, indigenous versions of the show. Today there are fifteen adaptations of the program that are broadcast in more than forty countries (Guenina 1996c). The Russian production, broadcast for the first time in October, 1996, is one of the most recent of these.

In Russia *Ulitsa Sezam* represents a novel approach to both education and children's television. The concept of learning via television is, in itself, an innovation for Russia. Similarly, the actual style of teaching and structure of the program, as well as its curriculum, are new to Russians. For example, the show emphasizes more "affective" aspects of education, such as the child's social development, including respect for self and for others. Furthermore, although the curriculum for the program was designed in part by a Russian educator, it is structurally based on the American model. It contains the same breakdown of curricular goals into: 1) symbolic representation – letters, numbers and geometric forms; 2) cognitive process – perceptual discrimination, relationships, classification, and ordering; 3) reasoning and problem solving and 4) 'the child and his world' – concepts regarding the self, social units, social interaction and the man-made and natural environment. Sections on the environment and human diversity were added specifically to appeal to Russian concerns. Ecology is a new and important problem for Russians, and thus the *Ulitsa Sezam* curriculum includes lessons on conserving paper and other resources, and teaches children to appreciate the environment. Because Russia is a highly diverse society, the show places particular emphasis on the benefits of diversity, and makes a special effort to include ethnically non-Russian characters in the program.

3 Russian Theories of Childhood Development

In addition to being based structurally on the American model, the curriculum and teaching style of *Ulitsa Sezam* also stems philosophically from the American and Swiss educational tradition. From the time of the Revolution in 1917, Russian education has been isolated from Western developments in psychology and education. The result of this isolation is the development in Russia of an educational tradition that differs in many ways from those

developed in other industrialized nations. This is especially true for Early Childhood Education. Many of the innovations currently being introduced to Russia from the outside contain assumptions that Westerners have about the way children develop and learn; values that Russians do not always share.

The notion that children develop in specific stages, and are only capable of learning certain material when they have reached the appropriate “readiness”, is common in educational theory and practice in American schooling. This assumption about the way in which children learn, and about what they are and are not capable of learning at a given age is also an integral part of *Sesame Street*. However, Russian educators clearly do not share all of our assumptions about learner readiness.

Both Russian and American psychologists share the notion that children develop in stages. Yet Russian psychology is grounded in a different perception of how children progress from one stage to the next. Russian educators criticize Western psychologists, and Piaget in particular, for their belief that development and teaching are processes independent of one another, and that instruction in a given area cannot take place until the child has reached the appropriate readiness (Zankov 1977). The great Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky accurately captured the Russian perspective on Piaget’s theories when he remarked that in the Piagetian paradigm “teaching trails along behind the child’s development, orienting itself not on his tomorrows, but on his yesterdays” (Davydov 1988).

Russian and Soviet psychologists’ theories, which are based on Vygotsky’s idea of the “zone of proximal development”, regard teaching as an integral part of development, which can, if structured appropriately, help the child make the transition from one stage to the next. Since the 1920s and 1930s Soviet psychologists like Vygotsky and El’konin have asserted that the direct source of the child’s development lies in the social environment to which he or she belongs. The child’s mental development is, from the very outset, mediated by the upbringing and teaching he or she is provided, and therefore these aspects are incorporated into the actual process of child development, instead of merely being built upon them. In short, the development of the child’s mental functioning is social in nature, and cooperation and teaching are the source of that development (Zankov 1977).

Given the assumptions of Soviet and Russian psychology, one can conclude that Piagetian notions of development are antithetical to the type of teaching that Russians have traditionally promoted in their schools. Piaget and his followers maintain that no matter how hard a teacher attempts to accelerate the learning of a child, the child will not be capable of absorbing information if he or she has not reached the appropriate stage of development. The Russian tradition, in contrast, asserts that the child’s development may be accelerated, if instruction is specifically geared to do so (Lesser 1977).

Throughout the Soviet period, researchers in education worked to develop methods of instruction that would accelerate children’s development. In 1981 the noted Soviet psychologist Davydov wrote that in Russia “studies of preschool-age children have determined the conditions under which graphic-operational, concrete-imaginal, and abstract thinking of children at this age may be developed beyond the level previously assumed” (Tabachnick, Popkewitz & Szekely 1981). Similarly, Menchinskaja cites a study by Leningrad psychologists in which school instruction was structured in such a way that pupils develop to a level far beyond that achieved by traditional methods of instruction (Tabachnick et al. 1981). It is likely that these theories of development have influenced Russian educators to continually strive to teach children more advanced material at an early age.

It is possible that Russian development theories had an effect on Russian educators and writers participating in the production of *Ulitsa Sezam*. During the preparation of curriculum and research materials for the production, the Russian partners in the project consistently presented ideas that the Americans considered too difficult for the program's audience. It was the Russians' claim that their children were more advanced, and were therefore capable of understanding concepts that preoperational children, according to Piaget's theories, were incapable of grasping. In forming the curriculum, for example, Russian educators wanted the program to teach the difference between voiced and unvoiced consonants, and introduced grammatical concepts such as prefixes and case endings. Similarly, the Russian writers for the project continually introduced scripts with word-plays and puns – concepts that, in Piaget's view, the preoperational child is supposedly not able to understand. In the end, the Russian writers and educators were persuaded to integrate basic Piagetian concepts into the curriculum, in order to write scripts and curricula in keeping with the spirit of *Sesame Street*.

4 Conflicting Cultural Values and Images

In addition to a new educational philosophy, *Ulitsa Sezam* introduces Russian children to ideas and images that do not always match the Russian cultural context, or are unfamiliar to Russian children. For example, although it has a cast of Russian puppets and actors, the show also introduces Russian children to Kermit the Frog, Cookie Monster and Grover – characters that have become symbols of American culture over the past twenty-five years. This is due to the fact that, for financial reasons, Russian segments constitute approximately thirty percent of the program, while the rest is made up of segments from *Sesame Street*'s international library. The latter have been carefully selected for their cultural “neutrality” by the Russian production team.

Russian children have had their own cultural icons for a number of years. Since the Soviet era, the most celebrated program for preschool children has been a fifteen-minute evening program called *Good Night Little Ones*. The main purpose of this program seems to have been preparing children for bed, although the show's different episodes occasionally introduce children to an educational or moralistic goal. The stars of this show are two animal puppets – a rabbit and a pig – who are known to Russian children everywhere.

The novelty of *Ulitsa Sezam* for Russia is that it introduces children to puppets that do not represent recognizable animals or characters. The three muppet characters designed expressly for Russia are modeled after *Sesame Street*'s celebrated friendly “monsters”. The production's two hand puppets are male and female “monsters”, while the large, stand-up puppet represents a Russian fairy tale character that lives in a tree, and according to Russian folklore is invisible. American children, for years accustomed to *Sesame Street* “monsters”, would immediately recognize and accept these new puppets. Yet field research has demonstrated that Russian children, although their reactions to the “Muppets” are positive, continually attempt to identify them as familiar and recognizable animals. The large puppet, in particular, is regularly identified as a giant rabbit, a dog or a wolf (Guenina 1996a). Nevertheless, the *Ulitsa Sezam* production and research team have taken care to make the show's characters as “Russian” as possible by drawing from traditional folklore and customs.

Despite the fact that the segments from *Sesame Street*'s international library have been selected for their cultural "neutrality", some of them were confusing to the Russian children who watched them during field research. An analysis of children's reactions during a field research study of Program 21 demonstrates a number of instances where the show actually clashed with Russian culture. For example, one of the American segments shows muppets eating popcorn in a movie theater; something that is neither allowed nor approved of in Russia. In another segment, the appearance and behavior of some of the muppets reminded the children of drunken men, – a reaction the segment's original, American producers had not intended. The summary of the research on the show in which this segment was included noted that "the segment's characters are unfamiliar to Russian children and the place where they live (garbage cans), and their appearance can cause children's negative reaction (for example, to identify them as drunks and homeless, which was reported during the pilot study in kindergarten #1420 of Lubertsy)" (Guenina 1996a).

The most confusing segment from Program 21 for the Russian children was a puppet segment designed to teach the number seven. Here the pun in the title, "The Magnificent 7", made little sense the children interviewed, as it was based on the title of an American film. Furthermore, the segment is set in what appears to be a stereotypical East European village. The characters themselves seem to be dressed as Roma (Gypsies), and speak with a Caucasian mountain accent (the voice-over used to dub the English). Although these cultural stereotypes might not be as obvious in America, in Russia they are potentially offensive to Gypsies and Caucasians, who are important subcultures there (Guenina 1996a).

It is interesting to note that for Program 21, attention studies demonstrate that among the segments in the show with an attention level below ninety percent, there is only one original Russian segment ("The Letter"), the rest are dubbed American segments (Guenina 1996a). One cannot draw sweeping conclusions from so little evidence, yet it is possible that the American segments selected for *Ulitsa Sezam* are less attractive either because they are dubbed, or because, as demonstrated above, they are not as culturally relevant.

5 Research Methodology

A final difference between Russians and American approaches to this project that was highlighted by the co-production of *Ulitsa Sezam* was the area of field research. Children's Television Workshop incorporates its own research design into the field research of all of its co-productions. The heavily quantitative and behaviorist design is new to the Russian researchers in the Behavioral Sciences. Russians, especially the Soviets, have long used a more qualitative approach, which in the Soviet era relied heavily on Marxist-Leninist doctrine. The Soviet style of research has always been suspect and alien to American researchers, who consider it subjective and lacking in methodological rigor (Tabachnick et al. 1981). The Russian researchers working on *Ulitsa Sezam* were introduced to such notions as independent variables, testing affects, rater reliability and validity for the first time. Although this was a comparatively new methodology, the researchers had little trouble adapting to it.

The CTW research methods, which were designed expressly for American subjects, had to be adapted to the Russian cultural context. The field research tests included an attention study, in which researchers were asked to stand beside the television while children watched newly produced *Ulitsa Sezam* segments. Every 10 seconds the

researchers noted the subjects' behavior on charts, including whether or not the subjects eyes appeared focused on the television screen. This study had proved successful with American children as subjects, since they were not inhibited by the presence of researchers, and reacted freely and naturally to the show. Russian children, however, were clearly uncomfortable in front of unfamiliar adults, and sat frozen in front of the television. The research therefore had to be altered in order to ensure more natural reactions. All of the researchers but one left the room, and a camera recorded the children's behavior. The attention studies were conducted at a later point using the resulting video tape.

6 Concluding Remarks

Despite the conflicting cultural and educational perspectives that resulted from the production of a Russian *Sesame Street*, the final product is a great improvement over other television programs that have been exported to Russia over the past five years. After watching an episode of *Ulitsa Sezam*, one Moscow child commented: "I liked it because there was no murdering and fire, my mother watches scary movies" (Guenina 1996b). Similarly, a newspaper reporter from the Russian daily *Segodnya* (1996) expressed concern about the negative effects of violent cartoons on her own child's behavior, and welcomed *Ulitsa Sezam* as an alternative to violent cartoons and soap operas imported from the United States and elsewhere. If Russian children cannot escape the adverse effects of television, they should at least be exposed to programs that do more than entertain.

It is clear that Russian television is in need of a program that is both educational and at least partially Russian in spirit, that will provide a positive alternative to commercial television programs from the West. Furthermore, *Ulitsa Sezam* should prove a valuable asset in that it will introduce Russians to educational television as a concept, and thereby provide educators with a valuable new tool. Russia, in turn, may have much to offer in the future "melioration" of educational television. Russian studies in accelerating children's learning may have something new to offer educational television, and education in general in Western Europe and the Americas.

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