1 Thinking Spaces of the Young

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When and how can appropriate *thinking spaces* offer young people the resources to face life's challenges? Thinking is considered here in the large sense of a dynamic mental activity, both cognitive and symbolic, an alternative to acting out or to reacting. Under certain conditions that permit it, the individual develops in what may be viewed as the continuation of Winnicott's (1971) *transitional space* or what we designate as *thinking spaces*, which pertain to both the self and the nonself and allow us to elaborate both fantasy and images of reality. The thinking space is the frontier of freedom in the psychic activity in which the individual elaborates the perceived reality in order to represent or symbolize it and to become able to reflect on it.

Expanding still more on Winnicott's model, we also consider the thinking space in its social dimension. Thinking has its roots in collective activities that permit or even provoke it. The child and the young enter communities of practice that make more or less explicit (first during feeding and nurturing time; then, around play and daily routines; later, in more formal teaching, cultural socialization, leisure, professional training, and work activities) their thinking and the discursive fruits of it. In dialogues, the child and later the adolescent are called upon as cothinkers or challenged with issues on which they have to take a stance. This constant confrontation with joint activities, with words and other symbolic mediations, with role-taking, but also with socially built situations, with set problems and their accepted solutions, with memories and expressed feelings, contributes to equipping the individual with the means to think, which he or she in turn learns to use by reinvesting them in new contexts and also in facing new technologies (Perriault, this volume). This merging in socially shared thinking can be vastly different for young people, depending on their circumstances. Young

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people do not always find spaces that allow for a personal, meaningful involvement and for social relationships that provide resources for thinking, acting, and reflecting on the experience. Thinking spaces are both inner zones of personal psychic activity and social opportunities to carry on this activity in sufficiently secure settings where the child or/and adolescent can risk confronting others with differing points of view and discovering new elements of reality.

The grandfathers of modern psychology (e.g., Baldwin, Vygotsky, Piaget, Mead, and others) were extremely conscious of the importance of social life in the development of higher psychological functions. Each in his or her own way has made efforts to account for the interdependence among such psychological endeavors as integrating perception, cognition, and emotion; being social; asserting an identity; constructing a time perspective; and taking role perspectives and responsibilities. Adolescence has then been described as a period in which social moratoriums (Erikson, 1950) can offer most valuable opportunities to learn life skills and ground self-identity. In the past few decades, systematic empirical investigations have brought further evidence of the importance of expert–novice interactions (teaching, training, and cultural socialization) for one entering the conceptual world offered by a cultural milieu and its practical and symbolic tools (Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991; Pontecorvo, Säljö, Tudge, this volume). Research has also shown the crucial role of more horizontal peer interactions in the development of competencies by the genuinely creative dynamics of a thinking mind constructing its own understandings via personal experience and confrontation with the "otherness" of his or her fellows and partners (Carugati, Staundinger, this volume). The mind and the culture, the personal biography, and the social inheritance of knowledge and of collective emotional experience have all been shown to be closely interdigitated in the daily experiences of young people who strive to survive and discover themselves as agents in ever larger networks of action, discourse, and legitimization.

What is known about the role of various social contexts in fostering or impeding this psychological growth in adolescence? Is it a matter of the growth (or learning) of individual competencies and skills, or is such a metaphor misleading (Kaiser, this volume) because it does not point adequately to the interpersonal processes that people experience when shaping their personalities and crafting their skills (Rijsman, this volume)? Social life can encourage thinking, but it can also resemble an obstacle course that offers neither time nor partners to help young people become conscious of and reflect on their lives. We need to understand better what sustains the development of such basic life skills as the ability to express emotions and

revisit experience, to give it meaning, to make choices, to construct time perspectives, and to develop an active sense of coresponsibility toward the future.

Interrelated Levels of Analysis

In trying to examine the thinking spaces of the young, it can be useful to distinguish (Doise, 1982) between different but interrelated levels of analysis: those that pertain to individuals and those that reflect the collective character of thinking as inserted in joint activity and broader social life.

Seen from an individual level, thinking is related to other elements of the psychological growth of the person (e.g., maturation, emotions, language acquisition) and develops within a history of experiencing personal relationships with significant others, via trial and error in devising means (e.g., tools, know-how, strategies, discourse, concepts) via networks in which the person discovers the different roles that can be played. The individual discovers that the course of personal action can be stopped and reflected upon (e.g., imagined, replicated, predicted, modified, compared, criticized, built into an alternative, narrated).

This thinking activity is usually not done in isolation, however. On an interpersonal level, daily confrontation with the thinking of other partners is a powerful incentive that involves facing the *otherness* of his and/or her fellows' perceptions, feelings, wordings, or scopes. Incentives may come from a partner who joins in the activity, reflection, or conversation, reaches into the zone of proximal development (I prefer the term *zone of proximal thinking*), and pulls on the ongoing psychological activity, notably by contributing to its verbalization but also by just creating a differentiation of actions and thoughts. Thinking can also be fostered by formal teaching situations or from reading, the media, or other cultural activities (Zittoun, 2001). But usually these are mediated by someone who has introduced the young person to the school, the book, the play, or another cultural event or joint activity and who is also likely to discuss it with him or her later.

Even if some identification with the partner occurs, sustaining the mutuality, the interaction most often leads one to discover that, whatever the resemblance, the other is never oneself, and that one's own point of view amounts to only one among a number of others and is seldom the whole truth. Confrontation with alternative points of view might be resented as conflictual: a conflict between two modes of responses that, here and now, appear incompatible. But are conflicts always conflicts in the sense of incompatible issues? Answering this question requires examining the problem

from different points of view. That is, gaining a deeper understanding of the situation or reformatting the problem may make it possible to account for both positions and even to conceive of other positions. Otherness per se is not adversity; being different brings about dialectical dynamics; conflicts need not be intellectual or emotional fights and certainly not physical fights. The difference of points of view creates opportunities. Sociocognitive conflicts challenge the person to depart from a restricted perception of what is at stake and to decenter and gain an understanding that includes the position of the peer (Perret-Clermont, Grossen, Nicolet, & Schubauer-Leoni, 1996; Carugati, this volume). Whether it is correct or incorrect does not matter at this point. This decentering allows a young person to become capable of accounting for different partners' points of view. It occurs most easily in relational spaces that have sufficient emotional security for the matter to be a cognition under consideration and not the relationship itself (Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1992; Monteil, 1989; Perret-Clermont, 2000).

Young people need to experience such secure relationships. They might find them in families (Hofer, Youniss, & Noack, 1998; Hofer, Pontecorvo, this volume), schools, churches, or youth movements (Heath, this volume); or in sports, music, or theater groups (Roulleau-Berger, this volume); or in their more informal peer groups (Amerio, Boggi Cavallo, Palmonari, & Pombeni, 1990; Heath, Hundeide, this volume). And what about their experience in apprenticeships, student jobs, formal employment, trade unions (Tannock, this volume), and political parties? These crucial life settings deserve more attention from research in order for us to gain an awareness of when and how such activities can offer youth the necessary framing needed to exercise, through trial and error but still in security, new skills, other perspectives, and new ways of doing and taking the initiative. And yet this will not be sufficient (Perret & Perret-Clermont, 2001). Young people also need to be explicitly encouraged to *reflect upon* such learning opportunities, a necessary step for experience to become learning: that is, not only to venture into them, more or less by chance, but also to express the experience, consider it, remember it, learn from it, and plan new trials.

This leads to another level of analysis: the functioning of social institutions and intergroup relations. Families and school systems (Fouquet, this volume), professional training and division of labor (Ryan, Meghnagi, this volume), and even the boundaries of ethnic and religious groups are undergoing important changes. These changes affect both the conditions in which young people live and their access to the experience of former generations, as well as their understanding of its relevance for the present. The historical and cultural circumstances invalidate certain social modes of functioning,

foster new ones, and modify the general scenery in which young people discover themselves sources of agency. What skills do they develop to cope with the apparent diminishing of traditional references? How do drastic events such as war (Popadić, this volume), regained peace, the move toward democratic management of society (or the reverse), and rapid economic changes (e.g., growth or recession) affect their life perspectives (Bandura, 1995; Newman, 1993; Petersen & Mortimer, 1994; Wilson, 1996; Fouquet, this volume) and present attitudes toward self-agency, identity, and social relationships?

The Social, Cultural, and Historical Embeddedness of the Development of Young People's Life Skills

Learning is not just the incidental gathering of information (on the Internet or elsewhere). It is also not only the steady conformation to formal school requirements. Long-term relationships and, hence, sustained interest seem necessary to acquire complex skills (Hinde, Perret-Clermont, & Stevenson-Hinde, 1985). Efforts are more likely to be fruitful when they respond to vital needs in a scenario of plausible success. As Hundeide (2001) states:

We therefore need a broader view of human development and mediation, where the emphasis is not on the development of skills, tools, operations or even cognitive structure as such, but on the mediation of our shared cultural and moral conceptions of the world, of life, of values of persons, identities and human relationships within which cognitive skills and individual coping strategies become meaningful and worthwhile. (p. 6)

The personal appropriation of preexisting knowledge and the development of competence occur if they get crafted within activities that make sense for a personal narrative. Hundeide continues, "Human beings need a conceptual framework of meaning into which they can project their life so that it makes sense. These life-theories or narratives are crucial for psychological adaptation and survival under difficult life conditions" (p. 1). To reflect on one's own practice is also in itself a source of change, but it requires discursive resources. Adolescents will develop skills in those activities that deal with issues that are relevant for them on the personal level (e.g., survival, recognition, reproduction, identity, violence), but these skills will be life skills only if they are also meaningful at the collective level and not just fruits of despair. To be true skills (and not mere reactions), they have to be recognized as such, reflected upon, and adapted to new situations. And this can occur only if adequate frames offer the discursive means, the interlocutors,

and the rules of the game that guarantee the security necessary to read past experience in a critically constructive way.

Obviously the thinking spaces of the young will differ according to their social and cultural situations. In the ensuing chapters of this volume, the reader will discover how certain social settings (e.g., families, schools, peer groups, or workplaces) are likely to function at times as very valuable resources, in other circumstances as constraints, or in extreme situations as destroyers of the identity and thinking capacities of the person. It will become apparent how much the wider historical and cultural circumstances affect the possibility of intergenerational or cross-age transmissions. Under pressures such as affective losses, school failure (Zittoun, this volume), unemployment, war, and cultural disruptions, young people might undergo more or less severe emotional anesthesia. Where and with whom can they regain their human identity necessary to make a narrative and revisit their experience? When meaning-making systems have been removed, how can the young return to "normal"?

In some circumstances, adults no longer believe in their capacity to educate or teach. Some educational institutions do not adapt easily to societal change. For instance, in the professional training area, even the dual system does not always manage to keep up with changes in the market. And in places where society requires entrepreneurship and high-risk attitudes, schools might still tend to teach obedience and conformity rather than opening spaces for creativity, initiative, and responsibility. In other circumstances, however, the nonadaptive nature of certain institutions can make them a refuge in a disrupted environment. When adults and young people compete for scarce resources, the criteria for adulthood may become desynchronized. When society is disrupted, the young do not feel welcome to join society, but instead may be inclined to change it or to try to escape from it, as some young Yugoslavians did in the 1990s (Popadić, this volume).

Learning, Meaning Making, and Generativity

Many of the findings reported in the following chapters point to the importance of discourse not only in conveying experience but also in meaning making and learning (Middleton, Pontecorvo, Säljö, Tudge, this volume). Perhaps experience cannot be conveyed, but the meaning of it can be transmitted and permitted to point to goals and relationships that are worth investing in, inviting young people to project themselves into time perspectives, building bridges among the present, the past, and the future. Narratives

permit the reconstruction of identity throughout changes from infancy to adulthood and also throughout changes in the environment and in ideological modes.

Discourse as a collective activity creates the tools for transmitting cognitive and symbolic memory, confronting reality and fantasy, and opening the way for distantiated looks at emotions and events. Spaces with adequate frames (i.e., security, rules of the game, mediation tools, know-how) must offer the possibility of putting experience into words and reflecting on it. Frames are required to stop the concatenation of ongoing activities and to invite the actors to face their limits, revisit their experience, acknowledge the new skills learned as well as the difficulties that have been overcome and those that remain, and redefine themselves as conscious agents with goals within their settings. The invitation to the noble task of thinking has to be extended to the young. Frames need guardians whose task is not to possess knowledge as a private property or to repress creativity or critical reflection, but to maintain the rules of the social contracts that permit dialogue and joint creative thinking. Who will take responsibility for this guardianship of thinking spaces that are secure enough for the anxiety-raising activity of revisiting experience? This guardianship is not custody. It is a caring, social awareness, a generativity: the *engendrement* of the meaning of the lives of future generations, the crafting of futures (Resnick and Perret-Clermont, this volume).

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