DESIGNS FOR LEARNING #2/11

Two lenses on texts and practices:
Analysing remixing practices across timescales

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Scholars in several fields of research have increasingly started to pay attention to how young people remix media content on a wide range of sites and for various reasons. This article brings together socio-cultural and multimodal perspectives in order to provide a refinement of our understanding of remixing as a literacy practice. The author argues for two analytical lenses in order to understand how semiotic artefacts are negotiated by students and remixed in situ. *By using the notion of timescale as a lynchpin between multimodal and socio-cultural analysis, the author seeks to understand how remixing work on different timescales. The author proposes the term <u>R</u>emixing to denote the development of culture across time, and the term <u>r</u>emixing to denote a practice that can be empirically examined through close analysis of artefacts and activities in literacy practices.*

INTRODUCTION

Within the last ten years, editing software and social networking have become omnipresent in the lives of young people. The growing availability of broadband infrastructure, combined with the intense use of editing software, has resulted in a convergence of the learner's role as spectator and author. Recent advances in editing software and the Internet have enabled learners to create, design and publish media content across a wide range of modes. Youthful media production in itself is a celebrated phenomenon (Drotner, 1991; Fornäs, Lindberg, & Sernhede, 1995; Jenkins, 1992; Willis, 1990); however, it is the relative availability and affordability that facilitates a new form of uptake, creative content production across a wide range of genres and decisively fast distribution.

Scholars in several fields of research have increasingly started to pay attention to how young people "remix" media content on a wide range of sites and for various reasons. A debate among researchers is currently emerging with the aim of understanding new "media literacies"—or forms of competencies, skills and literacy practices—that young people are developing with new media (Burn, 2009; Carrington & Robinson, 2009; Livingstone, 2009; Pahl, 2005). Additionally, a growing number of researchers conduct qualitative, ethnographical case studies in order to understand in depth how young people create, remix, author and share a wide range of media content (Buckingham & Willett, 2006; Ito, 2009; Jenkins & Purushotma, 2009). In sum, researchers across a wide range of disciplines are exploring the culture

of new media, and its remixing practices (Manovich, 2008).

The term *remix* is not new. The more narrow origin of the term stems from the music scene in Jamaica in the early 1970s (Hebdige, 2004). Musicians and DJs have referred to remixing as the practice of separating individual audio tracks from different multitrack recordings and the creative composition of recombining them into new arrangements and beats. Subfields of popular music studies as well as issues of identity in subcultures have an established tradition, referring to remixing as bricolage, looking at the role of the bricoleur in mash-ups and composing practices (Brøvig-Andersen, 2010; Langlois, 1992; Maira, 1999; Serazio, 2008). Due to the new possibilities with digital technology, the technical operation of remixing content within and across modes has over the past couple of decades become affordable and accessible to young people. Broadband connections greatly increase the ease of locating and reusing "found material" from other periods and artists (Manovich, 2001, 2005, 2009).

In discussions of how young people remix media content, the term often refers to any kind of reworking of an existing cultural work (Curwood, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Lessig, 2008). In other words, digital remixing of multimodal texts makes visible how all cultural expression builds on what has come before. In this broad sense, remixing means to "take cultural artefacts and combine and manipulate them into new kinds of creative blends" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, p. 2). However, research building on empirical evidence and analysis of how the semiotic meaning of these cultural artefacts is interpreted, negotiated and remixed *in situ* is rather scarce.

A main objective of the present article is to contribute new knowledge and insights into the production of new media by young people, by studying remixing practices *in situ* in an educational context. In order to illustrate the theoretical and methodological points with empirical data, the article presents an extract of interactional video data, which stems from a documentary project in a media studies class. The article suggests two analytical lenses through which to understand how semiotic artefacts are negotiated and remixed by students *in situ*. The argument is outlined in two parts. In the first part, two diverse approaches to remixing practices are discussed in order to understand how these practices of editing may be investigated in empirical analysis on different analytical levels. The last part of the article illustrates these two lenses in an empirical analysis of how students work with a particular downloaded image as part of their work with a documentary.

TWO APPROACHES TO REMIXING: RESEARCHING TEXTS AND PRACTICES

The task of bringing together socio-cultural and multimodal perspectives, in order to understand new literacy practices and learning, occupies a broad range of research projects at the present time (Gilje, 2010; Ivarsson, Linderoth, & Säljö, 2009; Pahl, 2011; Prior & Hengst, 2010; Selander & Kress, 2010). Such an endeavour has also been explored as an important issue by

Staffan Selander, who examined, in the first issue of this journal; "The cross-road between social semiotics and Vygotskian-inspired socio-cultural theories" (2008, p. 11). These attempts are part of a broader picture, in which scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds aim at combining and elaborating multimodal analysis with methods derived from other fields, such as ethnography (Björkvall & Engblom, 2010; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005); cultural studies (Burn, 2009); and activity theory (Jewitt, 2006).

My understanding of remixing practices is framed within broader discussions of socio-cultural perspectives (Cole, 1996; Säljö, 2000, 2005; Wertsch, 1991, 1998, 2002; Wertsch et al., 1995). Such an approach builds on Vygotsky's theories (1978, 1986), which emphasise that learning and meaning making is mediated by action in a social context.[1] Consequently, the term, mediated action, is the basic unit of analysis in socio-cultural research. By putting emphasis on the situated nature of human action and communication, a socio-cultural analysis opens up an understanding of how cultural resources are interpreted and negotiated in an unfolding activity—*in situ.* There is, however, a particular emphasis on language in the socio-cultural interpretation of *mediation*: "Indeed, Vygotsky's famous dictum of language as 'the tool of tools' testifies directly to this central role ascribed to linguistic mediation" (Ivarsson et al., 2009, p. 203). This situated perspective provides a slightly different lens than the multimodal analysis, by looking in particular at the link between people and the cultural tools that they are using (Ivarsson et al., 2009, p. 211). Following this line of thought, this article aims at understanding *how* semiotic artefacts are negotiated and talked about in practices of remixing with editing software for images.

Contrastingly, we might say that the socio-cultural perspective does not provide a lens that enables researchers analytically to conceptualise the multimodal aspects of the artefacts, in this case a picture, which are negotiated in this editing practice. Ideas in social semiotics draw on socio-linguistic and discourse analysis and offer a social understanding of sign-making aimed at analysing the diversity and similarities of different semiotic systems in a particular cultural and social context. In this way, a multimodal lens provides us with analytical tools useful to understand the modes in texts. By emphasising the term mode, this perspective puts an emphasis on how we construct the world through the semiotic resources we have at hand in a given situation and in all material utterances we use (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Lindstrand, 2006). Consequently, it seems to be appropriate to suggest that social semiotics may offer a framework to untangle the semiotic granularity of artefacts and objects as negotiated by agents in socio-cultural terminology. In order to understand how these two lenses may be combined in an empirical analysis, the terms *mode* and *mediation* can be used as exploratory and complementary concepts. Such a "combined analysis" may be helpful when aiming at a fine-grained analysis of still and moving images as displayed in the interface when young people work with editing software in front of a computer

screen. However, understanding composition and editing work with cultural tools also calls for a perspective on how these semiotic resources operate on different timescales.

In a seminal article, Jay Lemke attached the notion of timescale to Vygotsky's four different levels of understanding and form of human development and culture. Lemke claimed that all: "human activity takes place on one or more characteristic timescales" (2000, p. 273). Lemke argues that talk and practices in classrooms constitutes a social semiotic formation over longer timescales, but these can only by empirical investigated on shorter timescales. By offering this approach to classroom studies, he is elaborating the socio-cultural position by arguing that learning and development are occurring on multiple timescales. Consequently, socio-cultural theory should not only paying attention to social interaction, but also take into consideration: "the role of longer time-scale constancies and how they constrain, afford, and intrude moment-to-moment activity" (Lemke, 2001). Standing on these shoulders, a growing number of researchers are focusing on literacy practices and identity in diverse learning contexts (Leander, 2003; Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007; Wortham, 2009). For instance, Pahl (2011) discusses the making of digital stories, pointing out how meaning-makers can draw on recent events, as well as accounts of past events (p.25). In this sense the notion of timescales can be linked to the materiality of an object and its affordances. Looking at texts and pictures as artefacts working on different timescales in a remixing practices, gives us a helpful lens to understand how students make meaning in new literacy practices.

In the event described below, I will point to how similar practices of meaning-making are going on in front of the screen. In order to understand these literacy practices, we might start with the longest time span, examining human development and (remixing) culture. This is within socio-cultural theory, usually referred to as the *phylogenetic* level of human development and culture (Wells, 1999, p. 55; Wertsch, 1985). In the opposing scenario, paying attention to the timescale of an individual life course, the *ontogenetic* level gives attention to the individual life trajectory. However, in order to understand remixing practices in relation to a socio-cultural and multimodal analytical lens, the *sociogenetic* and the *micro genetic* levels are the most important timescales to discuss in detail.
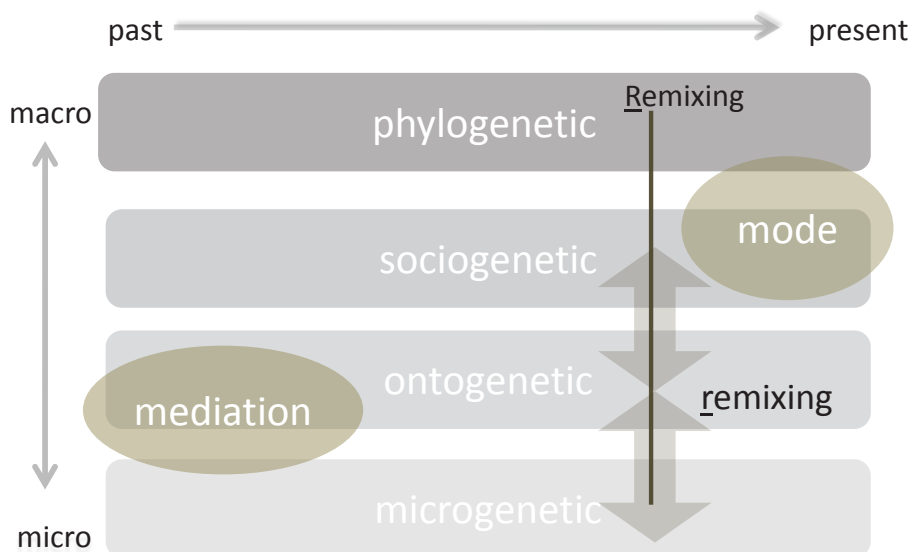
Figure 1. Understanding remixing practices: Analytical levels and timescales. Inspired by Ludvigsen (2011).

The *sociogenetic* level refers to the socio-cultural history of mankind.[2] This analytical level pays attention to the constitutive of new institutions and the practices therein. Analytical work on this level is often described as different forms of discourse analysis (Gee, 2005, pp. 33-34), a method that is historically related to social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988). In this line of thought, we might indicate that social semiotics is a theory that is able to cope with issues of social and cultural change, empirically reachable by a close analysis of how development and change on this genetic level affects and changes the modes used within a particular discourse across time (see for instance Bezemer & Kress, 2009). As follows, a multimodal analysis might help us to put an emphasis on how literacy practices, as being inherent in multimodal texts, are constituted and shaped within particular domains within society.

More in line with studies of social interaction in the socio-cultural approach, the *micro genetic* level of analysis allows us to understand meaning-making in a particular event with duration of only minutes, or even seconds. This level pays attention to the participants' bringing semiotic resources into play in a literacy practice that is framed by a particular context (and task). By looking at remixing practices *in situ*, the remixing culture—an emerging phenomenon that could be described on a sociogenetic level—can be empirically reachable by a close analysis of how agents bring artefacts into

play on the *micro genetic* level of analysis. We might consider this as *remixing* as mediated action working on a short timescale, but still closely linked to <u>Remixing</u> on the sociogenetic level, a process of change and struggle working on a much longer timescale across a wide range of domains.

<center>METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS</center>

The basic epistemological principles in the present article are grounded in Interactional Analysis (IA). This lens emphasizes the unfolding of an individual act (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). These principles are in line with methodological principles in New Literacy Studies and understand practices as a "recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge" (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). In this sense, practice is an observable specific ethnographic detail, a unit of analysis that is empirically observable in the "life world" of remixing culture, where digital technology plays an important role. The emergence of the use of video data to understand young people's text-making practices is a striking phenomenon within many research fields (Gilje, 2010; Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010; Pea, 2006; Pearson, 2005; Walsh, 2008). Such rich data are helpful when putting an emphasis on how learners deploy semiotic artefacts in a situated activity. In this sense it suits the task of understanding how students make meaning when remixing when editing (moving) images as a literacy event. Deploying mediated action as a unit of analysis makes it clear that human cognition must be investigated through action. This analysis at the *micro genetic level* identifies practice as a property of human activity across a few seconds in front of the computerscreen. However, we might also expand this approach by paying attention to remixing practices on longer timescales, a point that can be identified in Scollon's understanding of *mediated action*: "A practice is a mediated action with a history" (2001, p. 66). Scollon's thoughtful definition is moving us towards textual practices, institutionally embedded cultural patterns for constructing texts. Such a lens put an emphasis on the wide range of resources, or modes, used in discursive practices (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009) such as remixing. This latter perspective, in line with the multimodal approach, has primacy for understanding practice as inherent in the multimodal text, rather than looking at how meaning is made *in situ*.

To sum up the methodological implications: the multimodal perspective offers analytical tools for understanding the potential and the constraints of the semiotic artefact, in this case a picture, working on a longer timescale, that is being worked on and negotiated in the specific remixing practice taking place on a shorter timescale. In order to understand this practice as a literacy practice, a socio-cultural approach offers perspectives on learning in relation to social interaction around semiotic artefacts. Here, meaning-making is not viewed as first and foremost in the text, but in the talk that revolves around the text in the process of editing, remixing, composing and designing.

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The study from which the extract derives was conducted in a media studies class at an urban upper secondary school in Oslo, Norway. The project was initiated and carried out by the teachers as part of the syllabus and was offered to the students over five weeks. In total, 31 students in the second year participated in the documentary project, resulting in a number of different short documentary films (between three and five minutes long). The work to be reported on here is derived from a joint collaboration done by one group of four students: Steven; Michael; Heidi; and Carla. These four students, two boys and two girls, recorded the footage together and co-operated in the process of downloading semiotic material, such as pictures and music that could be edited and remixed into the documentary. Before post-production, they split into two groups, Steven and Michael as one pair in the editing process, and Heidi and Carla as the other pair, working in front of a shared computer on a desk in another part of the room.

The event to be analysed is drawn from the process of making an introduction to a short documentary about Blitz, an anarchic-inspired 25-year-old community of youngsters in Oslo. The task of making such a documentary was set by the teacher in a media studies class in the second year of the media programme in the Norwegian curriculum. This programme has become extremely popular among youngsters over the last decade and more than hundred upper secondary schools are now offering the vocationally oriented programme in Norway (see Erstad & Gilje, 2008).

CASE STUDY: Photoshopping™ the police to make a chaotic scene

Steven and Michael worked together in front of the computer screen. They chose pictures previously downloaded from different sites on the Internet, aiming at making a kind of rapid slideshow as an introduction to the documentary about Blitz. However, some of the pictures are black and white photos from the official Blitz site and other images from different sites are in colour. In the present extract, they have chosen a coloured image, previously downloaded from vg.no.[3] They agreed on using this picture, but want to edit the picture so it fits in more with the style of the other photos. For a few minutes, Steven explores the different labels on the filters in *Photoshop*™ without making a particular choice. After a while, Axel, a boy from another group who has previously suggested music for Steven and Michael (see Gilje, 2008), pays attention to what they are doing. The data excerpt starts at a point where Axel begins to pay attention to the work that Steven and Michael are doing.

Figure 1 P1-5. [P1, 2] and so on in the transcripts below indicates the exact place in the utterance where the picture was copied from the video.

Part 1

Axel: [P1] If you are looking for pictures, there is a lot on the homepage for Blitz. There are plenty of pictures from demonstrations and so on, I think.

Steven: Yes, it was not that much, but we have found "bloody loads of stuff". So, I downloaded every picture. Yes, yes (inaudible) – the whole thing. I wonder if we shall do… (searches for a filter on the screen).

Part 2

Axel: (Looks at the picture on the screen) Maybe it should be a bit darker.

Steven: We will make it black and white.

Axel: Yes, of course. Oh, yeah (leans forward so his black sweater appears on the right side of P2).

Steven: [P2] Artistic, eh, sketch, eh. (reads aloud the names of filters on the menu).

Part 3

Axel: Which programme do you use? (…) Photoshop™? [P3] Then use image and then mode…if you are going to make it black and white.

Steven: (mumbles) Maybe that is the easiest way.

(Steven alters the picture to black and white by using the layer that Axel suggested.)

Part 4

Steven: Then I should make it a bit darker, I suppose.

Axel: You can use levels, then.

Steven: Yes.

Axel: Levels is bloody handy, that's what I think (…).

Steven: (Opens the levels menu). I have to check. (10 seconds, Axel moves away while Steven works.) [P4]

Part 5

Steven: [P5] It's impossible to see that this is a police exercise! (Knocks the screen with his fingers 10-12 times).

Steven: It looks like chaos, in a way (Steven alters photo to a picture that shows the movement).

In the first part of the excerpt, Axel is asking Steven about pictures that have been downloaded from the official Blitz site. Steven is not disturbed by Axel, but continues to search for appropriate filters. Part 2 in the excerpt starts with a suggestion from Axel. In a way, he has become accountable in the situation, suggesting that Steven should make the picture slightly darker, but Steven interrupts him with the utterance: "We will make it black and white". Steven continues his search for an appropriate filter, reading out loud the different labels in the submenu: "artistic, eh, sketch, eh". Axel leans forward and addresses Steven with the question that opens the third part: "Which programme do you use? *Photoshop*™?"

The movement and the utterance indicate that Axel would like to take part in the process. With this utterance, he moves his attention away from the picture in itself, and is more oriented towards the process of using the software—making the picture into black and white. Without waiting for a confirming answer about the software, Axel starts immediately to instruct Steven about how to use the programme. Steven follows the instruction and applies a filter on the picture so it becomes black and white. In part 4, Steven picks up on Axel's idea, suggested in part 2, making the picture darker. Steven's utterance, "It is impossible to see that this is a police exercise, it looks like chaos" indicates his purpose in the editing process.

<div align="center">ANALYSIS</div>

Digital editing software, like *Photoshop*™ and *Final Cut*™, provides the learner with the facility to adjust and remix pictures and moving images. The individual working with the cultural tool visualizes these changes completely differently than when working with analogue tools. In terms of a socio-cultural perspective, the digitization of images and moving images makes us "think" differently than when we are working with analogue editing tools (see Gilje, 2011).

When, for example, a student uses a filter, they master a cultural tool (Wertsch, 1998) to "add" a particular effect; "This process involves the text´s having a 'personal sense' for its user, as opposed to abstract, distanced 'meaning' (Wertsch, 2002, p. 120). Therefore, the socio-cultural perspective applied in this analysis places emphasis on how human reasoning and arguing *in situ* are shaped by using these new cultural tools. Such a perspective has accentuated questions such as, "What kind of reasoning is going on in these remixing practices?" In particular, the socio-cultural perspective explores the digital compositional practices as remixing in the analysis of how semiotic artefacts are talked about and their use negotiated in editing practices.

In doing this, I have extended, but not opposed, Kress (2003), who acknowledges that analysis of meaning-making should be extended by looking in great detail at practices: "I am aware that this partial focus [referring to his unit of analysis] needs to be complemented—matched—with the interests and the work of those who look much more and in great detail at *prac-*

tices” (Kress, 2003, p. 13; see also Lindstrand, 2008). However, it is possible to elaborate on the analysis by looking more closely into the ways in which Steven argues here. His interpretation of the picture in the last part draws upon his understanding of how the meaning of the picture, as an artefact working on a longer timescale, has changed throughout the remixing, done in just a few seconds. By turning the picture into black and white and at the same time adjusting the brightness in the picture by using levels, Steven interprets the picture in a new way and is eager to demonstrate this to his “tutor”, Axel. Steven’s own interpretation, based upon his utterance, is that he has turned a picture of a police exercise into a picture of “chaos!”.

In the process of remixing, he relates questions of these discourses to the process of design (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). His aim is to “fit” the picture into the style of the other downloaded images, so he can use them in his rapid and “smashing” introduction to the documentary. Steven’s interpretation of the artefact link relates both semiotically and materially to his understanding of discourses around such images. With help from Axel, he has been able to render the meaning potential of the image in a remixing practice with digital tools. This editing process in *Photoshop*™ has made it possible to apply the picture to another discourse of pictures, the “style” Steven associates with Blitz. From being a picture of an exercise for the police on a sunny day, the meaning potential of the picture, when presented rapidly with other pictures from rallies and clashes with the police, has changed, by combining data from the picture with the practice in this process of *transformation* (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 175; Gilje, 2010; Kress, 2010, pp. 129-130; Selander & Kress, 2010, p. 34), the remixing practices becomes semiotic work led by discourses working on timescales other than the *micro genetic* level.

FINAL REMARK ON d/DISCOURSE, l/LITERACY AND r/REMIXING

In the introduction, I cited Knobel and Lankshear (2008) on the relation between remixing and culture. In their work on New Literacies and technology, they make a distinction between Literacy with a capital “L” and literacy with a small “l”. For them, *Literacy* refers to making meaning in ways that are tied directly to life and to being in the world. Literacy with a small “l” describes the actual processes of reading and writing. As they state, this is a rephrasing of the distinction made by Gee (2005) in his writings on Discourse with a capital “D” and small “d”. I think that there is a need for further refinement of the argument here in relation to young people’s remixing practices.

So, in the same shameless seam, I continue this process by making a distinction between *Remix* with a capital “R” and *remix* with a lower-case “r”. Remix with a small “r” is the actual process of “mashing up” online content, *Photoshopping*™ visual expressions and work with media content in a formal or informal learning process. These processes are semiotic work, and rap-

idly leave traces of text on the Internet. It is this process, described with the lower-case "r", which is actually new, made possible by digital editing tools available across a wide range of modes and contexts. Knowledge and insights into such practices may be best accomplished by doing analysis at the *micro genetic* level, by scrutinizing remixing practices with editing software over a short timescale. However, this analysis should include a lens that purports an understanding of semiotic aspects of artefacts that are established over longer timescales. By paying attention to how modes can have different meaning potential, we must consider remixing of semiotic resources as work on longer trajectories and timescales. By understanding human learning and meaning-making as appearing on different, but intertwined, timescales, it is possible to understand remixing as a mediated activity within the new *Remixing Culture*. The Remix with an upper-case "R" works on another timescale. This reflects a slower cultural evolution. But, at the same time, Remix with an upper-case "R" is more challenging to investigate empirically by using only the socio-cultural perspective as an analytical lens. By providing two analytical lenses on texts and practices we might understand remixing as remaking aspects of the world in our engagement with it (Kress, 2010).

People in all cultures have remixed ideas, media pieces and cultural expressions that use a wide range of modes and techniques. In our wired-up, digital culture, remix with a lower-case "r", refers to the diverse ways of engaging in remixing practices. On another timescale, remixing with an upper-case "R" may be understood when analysing social change embedded in multimodal texts that are made in these practices. The awareness of these different timescales and levels of analytical description may enable us to refine our analysis of young people's remixing practices in contemporary society.

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[1] Reading Vygotsky today, in order to understand a sociocultural approach to literacy and learning, some of his basic statements about culture is a bit problematic. For instance, his evolutionary approach and strong belief in the enlighten project, reflects a kind of ethnocentric perspective, - dividing cultures into 'primitive' and 'developed' cultures. According to Wertsh and Tulviste (1992, pp. 551-553) this approach, mirrors a kind of Eurocentrism which had not incorporated the anthropological notion of culture - as found in the work by Bronislaw Malinowski – for example (Malinowski, Thornton, & Skalník, 1993). According to Wertsch and Tulviste, the analysis of culture in Vygotsky's work is part of his lifelong challenge to elaborate on the notion of mediation (1992). They argue that Vygotsky gave the idea of mediation analytic priority over the notion of culture. For Vygotsky, in the psychology of his day, it was important to stress that the use of signs leads humans to a specific structure of behaviour. Such a new approach breaks away from biological development and creates new forms of culturally-based psychological processes. In Vygotsky's view, and in particular in the version elaborated by James Wertsch (1991, 1998, 1999; Wertsch, Río, & Alvarez, 1995), culture is a dynamic process that can best be understood as semiotic mediation (Wertsch, 1998).

[2] Vygotsky's ideas of the sociogenetic level is also referred to as the "sociohistorical" or "cultural historical", and as a domain it played a central role in the USSR in learning theories in 1920s (Wertsch, 1985, p. 30).

[3] Norway's leading newspaper (Tabloid), and most visited site in terms of daily hits.

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