

Adolescents' Experimenting with Roles in the context of L.S. Vygotsky's ideas: an Activity-Based Technology "Digital Storytelling Theater"

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The article is devoted to the elaboration of a new model of drama for adolescents – “Digital Storytelling Theater”. The model is based on the idea that the leading activity of adolescence is represented by experimenting with roles, in the framework of which adolescents acquire social roles as a new system of cultural signs. “Digital Storytelling Theater” allows to create conditions for adolescents' experimenting with social and psychological objects (roles, positions, relationships etc.) In this kind of drama adolescents do not only play out roles according to a given scenario but participate in a palette of activities while working on a performance. The elaborated model of drama activity allows to construct the zone of proximal development for adolescents due to two supplementary processes: interiorization and exteriorization. Interiorization is connected with adolescents' acquiring new cultural signs – various social roles and patterns of role behavior. Exteriorization presupposes revealing – “bringing out on the stage” – role contradictions and conflicts, which are profoundly linked with adolescent crisis and to a large extent determine the way how it occurs. The model was elaborated on the basis of the Center for Interdisciplinary research on Contemporary Childhood of MSUPE in 2019-2022 and was tested in 3 different schools in Moscow and in Moscow Region with the participation of 336 adolescents aged from 13 to 15 years.

Keywords: experimenting with roles, role, drama, theater activity, drama-based pedagogy, school theater, adolescents, zone of proximal development, Digital Storytelling Theater.

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Ролевое экспериментирование подростков в контексте идей Л.С. Выготского: деятельностная технология «Мультимедиа-театр»

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Статья посвящена разработке модели театральной деятельности для подростков – «Мультимедиа-театр». В основу модели положена идея о том, что ведущей деятельностью подросткового возраста является ролевое экспериментирование, в рамках которого подростки осваивают социальные роли как новую систему культурных знаков. «Мультимедиа-театр» создает условия для экспериментирования подростков с социальными и психологическими объектами (ролями, позициями, отношениями). Предполагается, что в таком театре подростки не только разыгрывают роли по предложенному сценарию, но и участвуют в комплексе деятельностей, связанных с подготовкой и реализацией

театральной постановки. Предложенная модель театральной деятельности позволяет строить зону ближайшего развития подростков за счет того, что она обеспечивает развертывание двух взаимодополняющих процессов: интериоризации и экстериоризации. Интериоризация связана с освоением подростками новых культурных знаков — различных социальных ролей и паттернов ролевого поведения. Экстериоризация предполагает вынесение вовне — «на сцену» — ролевых противоречий и конфликтов подростков, которые глубинным образом связаны с феноменом подросткового кризиса и во многом определяют то, как он протекает. Разработка модели осуществлялась на базе Центра междисциплинарных исследований современного детства МГППУ в 2019–2022 гг. Модель «Мультимедиа-театр» прошла апробацию на базе трех школ г. Москвы и Московской области при участии 336 подростков от 13 до 15 лет.

Ключевые слова: ролевое экспериментирование; роль; драма; театральной деятельности; педагогика, основанная на драме; школьный театр; подростки; зона ближайшего развития; мультимедиа-театр.

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A few words to the discussion about adolescents' leading activity

Today, the issue of spotting the leading activity of adolescence still remains one of the most discussed in the Cultural-Historical Theory. Many authors do not share D.B. Elkonin's "classical" point of view, that adolescents' leading activity is intimate and personal communication with peers. For example, N.N. Veresov argues, that communication may not be regarded as the leading activity in the strict sense of the word since in A.N. Leontiev's logics, the leading activity possesses a certain structure (tasks, actions, operations) which has never been described for communication [1]. K.N. Polivanova highlights, that D.B. Elkonin does not provide an "activity-based analysis" of adolescents' personal communication, leaving aside many questions connected with the content of development at this age period: "Unclear, concerning intimate and personal communication, remains also the issue of the mechanism of the transformation on the outer stage of the activity of communication (interpsychological form) into a certain personal ability (intrapyschological form) and, finally, the issue — which ability may be regarded a new formation of adolescence. Moreover, the question about the content of the intimate and personal communication remains unclear (we do not know what do adolescents communicate about)" [5, p. 14].

As an alternative for intimate and personal communication with peers are offered: socially significant (V.V. Davidov) and socially useful activity (D.I. Feldstein), socio-psychological experimenting (G.A. Tsukerman) and project activity (K.N. Polivanova. There is also a point of view that in relation to adolescence it is possible to discuss a number of different activities (V.P. Zinchenko, O.V. Lishin, B.G. Meshcheryakov).

From our point of view, the main reason, why the question of the leading activity of adolescence triggers discussions between researchers, relates to identifying the "ideal form of development" for this age period. As D.B. Elkonin argues himself, in order to fully determine a certain type of activity, which is specific of a particular age period, it is first of all necessary to identify "...its higher, developed form, which already exists as reality and active interaction with which constitutes the very process of development" [15, p. 403]. As we know, for elementary school period theoretical relation to reality was identified as an "ideal" form, (V.V. Davidov), however for adolescence this form has never been described [5]. At the same time, this form is discussed in L.S. Vygotsky's work "Concrete Human Psychology" [2], which, due to certain circumstances, has not gained necessary attention from his followers.

In his unfinished work, L.S. Vygotsky speaks about the necessity of studying in adolescence, *the structure and the hierarchy of the higher mental functions*: "The task in adolescents ... to study different spheres of behavior (professional complex etc.), the structure and hierarchy of functions, their relations, and collisions" [2, p. 1031]. In this very work Vygotsky argues, that the *hierarchy of functions depends on the social situation*, "...that is, functions change their hierarchy in different spheres of social life" [2, p. 1030]. As an example, L.S. Vygotsky points out to a judge who judges his wife. As a judge, he criticizes her wrong behavior (thinking prevails over passion), as her husband he continues to love her (passion prevails over thinking). In this case, the "drama" relates to the necessity of sentence: what would it be like? What function would prevail? By this very example L.S. Vygotsky highlights, that the relation of functions depends

on **roles**, which are characteristic of human in different social situations: “Social role (judge, doctor) determines the hierarchy of functions” – that is, roles act as *cultural signs, which regulate higher mental functions*. The collision of “functions = drama”, and “drama”, according to the founder of the Cultural-Historical Theory, is the main source of development.

Thus, while stressing the necessity to study in adolescence the structure and hierarchy of functions regulated by roles, L.S. Vygotsky points to the fact that the problem of the content of development in adolescence lies in the sphere of “role dramas”, which are connected with the introduction of the growing child into the system of social interactions. This point of view provides principally new possibilities for the analysis of the content of development in the transitional period, and particularly, for identifying the leading activity of this age period.

Thus, *the system of social roles*, which exists in the culture where the child is developing, may be regarded as the “ideal form” of adolescence. In this case “...interiorization of these roles determines the content of development in adolescence and takes place in the activity, which might be labeled as “role experimenting”. Role experimenting, in its turn, might be regarded not just as the leading activity of adolescence, but as a system of activities, which relate to “trying on” different social roles and types of role interactions” [9; 10].

Adolescents’ role experimenting as a socio-psychological phenomenon

At the beginning the concept of “role experimenting” was mostly used in the English-speaking scientific community for identifying the process of choosing virtual roles in video games, however, later the term broadened its meaning and started referring to any kind of playing out roles and images, which are performed both in real and virtual environments [10, p.27].

The term “role experimenting” is profoundly connected with the concept of *role*, which has long been neglected in Russian psychology. The main reason for this is still prevailing sociological understanding of the phenomenon of role, which reduces role exclusively to a socially determined pattern, which each human “acquires” for successful functioning in the society. This kind of reduction fully leaves aside *personal aspects of role*, and in its extreme forms equals roles to some kind of “masks”, which the individual “puts on” depending on the social situation.

This interpretation contradicts the point L.S. Vygotsky’s point of view. As it has already been pointed out, the founder of the CHT has clearly indicated the regulating functions of social roles as of cultural signs. While signs are interiorized, it is impossible to reduce role to some kind of a “mask”, which is imposed from the

outside. Moreover, it seems that Vygotsky regarded role as *a unity of personality and environment, where the unity of environmental and personal moments is reflected* (as an analogue of “perezhivaniye”). Thus, the social content of role is always inscribed in the socio-cultural context (outer plane), while its individual aspect relates to the personal characteristics of its bearer (inner plane). The social roles are never “played out” by the individual – they are always refracted through their personal characteristics and creatively “lived through”.

The sensitive period for acquiring the system of social roles as cultural signs is adolescence. It is exactly at this age period that the child acquires the possibility to regulate their behavior in different types of social interactions via roles. Apparently, adolescents need time and space for something which might be called “role test” – experimenting with roles and various patterns of role behavior. This fact is easily illustrated by various forms of adolescents’ activity, which, according to A.M. Prikhozhan, are literally “permeated by role experimenting” [8, p. 40]. In fact, almost all forms of interactions, in which adolescents are involved, are connected with testing of new social roles – whether it refers to creating virtual profiles (social networks or video games) or participating in different role movements/subcultures. These research-like, often play-like activities and interactions create space for adolescents’ development, since it is in these interactions that adolescents find a sense for their roles and roles become *personally meaningful* for them. Exactly “...as preschoolers eagerly get involved in a play situation for “playing out” the plots that they see in their everyday lives, adolescents seek space for experiment, however, in comparison with preschoolers, they are not that much interested in “playing out”, but rather in modeling of social relations and in constructing their “I-image” through this [9, p. 9]. From this point of view, the creation of *the zone of proximal development of adolescents* is connected with the construction of such spaces and platforms, where adolescents may creatively experiment with roles.

The idea of acquiring social roles as the result of the process of upbringing is reflected in the Federal Standard of School Education: in the framework of the realization of “The working Program of Upbringing”, the school is required to create conditions for “*the realization of the possibility of social tests*” [7, p. 20]. At the same time, despite the exclusive importance of role experimenting for adolescent development, the need of fulfilling the role tests is very rarely considered by the practice of contemporary Russian schools. Ignoring this age task contributes to the decrease of learning motivation in adolescents, it also decreases their level of involvement in the learning activity. Moreover, in school adolescents are often imposed with unwanted role patterns, which are capable not only of decreasing interest for the learn-

ing process, but also of triggering inner conflicts and contradictions. The lack of possibility to perform the role experiments in the learning process leads to adolescents' search for the means of solving their age task somewhere out of school. Searching for platforms for role experimenting often becomes the reason for adolescents' risky and deviant behavior (roofing, train surfing, train hop), including the desire to join some kind of subculture, desire to "escape" to virtual reality etc. [3; 10; 11; 16; 26; 28].

Considering all of the above, learning and development of adolescents might be efficient in the situation of *specifically organized joint activity, which allows adolescents to experiment with roles*. In the practice of school, platform of this kind might be organized through theatrical/drama activity, based on role experimenting.

Theatrical practices in education: Russian and international experience

In the last few years, theater and drama have been widely used all over the world for solving various tasks connected with development, learning and socialization of children and adolescents [17; 18; 19; 20; 22; 25; 27; 29]. The so-called "drama-based pedagogy" is widespread in foreign schools for teaching purposes, it focuses on learning through theatricalization of educational process, i.e., the use of both production directing and acting techniques as well as on approaches to teach subject content through role-playing, visualization, "hotseating" technique, "frozen pictures" technique ("tableaux"), pantomime, improvisation, storytelling, etc. Drama-based pedagogy encompasses numerous branches, including "drama in education", "developmental drama", "educational drama", "creative dramatics", "process drama", "role drama", etc. [23].

According to T.A. Poskakalova, in the European countries and countries of the English-speaking world the use of theatrical practices in education today is associated, first of all, with the idea of "sustainable development". Within the framework of this concept, the main goal of the educational process is not reduced to the acquisition of subject knowledge, but rather focuses on the development of students' personality, the formation of a holistic worldview, boosting their level of psychological well-being, and the acquisition of "21st century competencies" (soft skills, literacy skills). In this regard, most of the indicated areas of drama-based pedagogy focus at the process of dramatization itself as well as on the changes that occur in the process of joint activities. whereas the product of such activities (performance) is of secondary importance. A distinctive feature of drama-based pedagogy refers to the blurring of the boundaries between the stage and the audience – students simultaneously combine the roles of actors

and spectators ("actors" and "observers"), which contributes to the development of a wide range of skills and abilities (primarily reflective ones) [23]. As a result, in foreign pedagogy drama and theater are rarely regarded in the context of specific academic disciplines, but, on the contrary, are used as a means of integrating them. This explains the diversity of types and forms of theatrical activity that exist in the educational process abroad: being involved into theatrical activities, children and adolescents creatively reconsider themselves, revise and rethink the subject content they study, redefine the surrounding social realities and political problems [6; 13].

In Russia, the prospects for the use of theatrical activity in the educational process are announced/proclaimed at the highest level. Thus, according to the "Road map" of the implementation and development of school theaters in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation for 2021–2024, by 2024 at least 4 programs of extracurricular activities to support school theater are to be designed. Also, by that year the repertoire of school theaters should be revised and brought into line with the curricula. Moreover, educational and methodological centers for the development of school theaters in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation should be launched. New school theaters should be opened and measures should be taken to increase the number of children aged 8 to 17 years who are engaged in the "Art of the theater" educational programs [4].

However, today the use of theatrical activity in Russian education is non-systemic. Many teachers use theatrical activity in their teaching practice, but most of them do it intuitively, without having a clear idea neither about the specific ways of its implementation in working with different subject content, nor possessing adequate tools for assessing its effectiveness. It is also important to note that in Russia the educational potential of the school theater is most often considered in the context of familiarizing students with cultural heritage, primarily – with literary works or historical events. Partly for this reason, theatrical activity is practiced exclusively within the framework of the humanities and, in most cases, is fundamentally regarded as an extra curriculum activity [12; 13].

It is worth to mention that school theater in Russian has always focused on the final product, in other words, on the performance to be played in front of an external audience (other class students, teachers and parents), while the process of its preparation itself is considered as subsidiary. Moreover, it is always the teacher's prerogative to choose the plot, distribute roles and be in charge of performance and stage design [12]. Thus, theatrical activity in school practice most often comes down to students' passively acting out plots chosen and staged by the teacher. This position significantly reduces the developmental and educational

potential of the school theater, narrowing it to a reproductive educational technology. The current situation indicates the need to rethink the goals and the value of theatrical activity in the context of the educational process. It also demonstrates the importance of the elaborating special practical tools (teachers' manuals, recommendations, etc.) that would allow teachers to use various drama techniques and approaches to solve specific pedagogical issues.

“Digital Storytelling Theater” is an activity-based technology of learning and development of adolescents

The attempt to adapt a systematic approach to the application of theater activity as a means of learning and development of adolescents was undertaken by the researchers of the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education in 2019–2022. In the course of four years, the research group of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Contemporary Childhood under the guidance of O.V. Rubtsova conducted a series of experiments, in the framework of which an original model of organizing theater activity with adolescents was elaborated [12; 13; 14; 26].

In the concept of the model “Digital Storytelling Theater” drama is regarded as *a particular form of experimenting with social and psychological objects* (roles, positions and relationships). In this kind of theater, adolescents do not only act out or perform a given scenario, but rather are involved in a complex of activities connected with the preparation of a theater performance. An important constituent of theater activity is represented by the work with digital technologies, including shooting of short videos, which are later used in the performance. The elaborated model of theater activity allows to construct adolescents' ZPD due to the fact that it contributes to two complementary processes, *interiorization* and *exteriorization* (fig.1). Interiorization is connected with adolescents' acquiring of new cultural signs – various social roles and patterns of role behavior. Exteriorization presupposes taking into the outer – “on the stage” – adolescents' various role conflicts and contradictions, which are profoundly connected with the phenomenon of adolescent crisis and to a large extent determine the way how it enfolds. “Microdramas” and “pereghivaniya”, which emerge in the process of a particularly constructed drama activity, create conditions for the movement of all the participants of the learning situation (including the teacher) from the zone of actual development (ZAD) to the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

The elaborated model was tested on the basis of three schools of Moscow and Moscow region with the participation of 336 adolescents aged from 13 to 15 years old. In the framework of the testing, the research group:

- organized 71 drama sessions with adolescents;
- conducted 50 interviews (with the adolescents, who took part in the theater activity, as well as with teachers, school psychologists and representatives of school administration);
- video recorded and analyzed 2470 minutes of videos (including recordings of drama sessions, group discussions, rehearsals, workshops, creating narratives and digital storytelling etc.).

As the result of the approbation, the following principles of organizing school theater as an activity-based learning technology were formulated:

1. *Creating conditions for role experimenting*. The basic principle of the elaborated model is connected with creating an environment where adolescents could solve their most important age task – experiment with roles. Role experimenting in “Digital Storytelling Theater” takes place due to the variety of *different types of joint activity and forms of “obschnostey”*, in which its participants are involved. In the framework of working on the performance adolescents constantly switch from one type of activity to another (writing of the scenario, digital storytelling, acting etc.), moving from one project group to another. In the course of this process, they exchange roles and positions many times – that is, from the very start of the work on the performance till its final rehearsal, they manage “to try on” up to a few dozens of role patterns in the framework of a few “obschnostey” that have emerged.

2. *Step by step*. The alternation of different types of activity in the framework of the created model is orga-

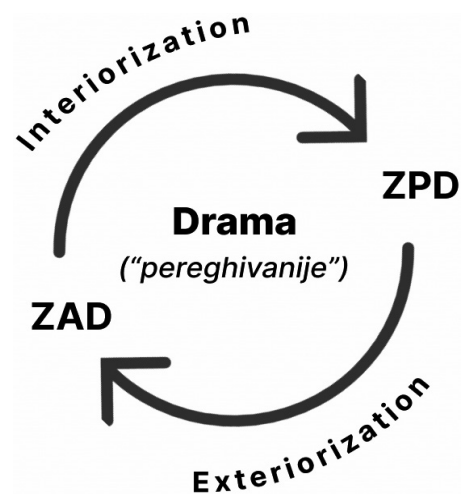


Fig. 1. “Microdrama” and “pereghivaniye” in the process of specially modeled theatrical activity

¹ Here the Russian word “obschnost”, designating a particular kind of community, is appropriate to use.

nized in accordance with certain stages, each of which has its own goal, tasks and structure. The duration and structure of each step depends on the peculiarities of a concrete class or group with which the work is conducted. It is particularly important to pay attention to the very first step — introduction into the project when adolescents acquire the motive to join drama activity, which the majority of them have never faced in the learning process before. A certain significance is also put on verbalization of expectations, emotions and fears of adolescents, which relate to a new form of learning for them.

3. *Orientation on the process rather than on the final product.* Since the main goal of the “Digital Storytelling Theater” is creating conditions for constructing the ZPD for the participants, the emphasis should be put on the very process of the drama activity, that means, on the working process, rather than on the performance itself.

4. *“Safety” of the role tests.* It is important that drama and theater activity are regarded by adolescents as a “safe” space, where they can feel free and experiment without being afraid to get a bad mark, to do something “funny” or “wrong”. It is very important that in the framework of the drama activity, reflexive sessions are held, where adolescents have the opportunity to discuss their emotions and impressions and to share their ideas about the difficulties, that emerge in the working process.

5. *Abandoning of the habitual hierarchy of “teacher—student”.* It is particularly important that during all the stages of the project the teacher acts as an aid, a “co-participant” of the activity, whose main task consists in creating a favorable environment where adolescents could experiment and show initiative. The challenge of this task consists in not allowing “chaos” in the classroom, but rather in delicately accompanying adolescents in those forms of interaction which are new for them.

A successful introduction of drama techniques into the learning process also requires that the teacher pos-

sesses a certain palette of exercises and techniques, that could allow him to incorporate drama activities into the context of concrete learning disciplines («drama across the curriculum»). For this, collaboration between teachers, who teach subjects, with specialists in the sphere of drama pedagogy are needed. Teachers are also asked to regularly attend teacher training and constantly exchange practical experience. Generally, it is very important that in the educational environment there is a positive relation to drama techniques and that teachers are willing to emerge in new practices. It is also important that they are ready to prepare both students and their parents for new types of learning activities

In the place of conclusion

Thus, the novelty of the elaborated model of theater activity based in role experimenting consists in the fact, that in the framework of this model, adolescents experiment with social and psychological objects — roles, positions, and relationships. Drama allows adolescents on the one hand to interiorize cultural norms, values, forms and means of joint activity, and on the other hand — it creates conditions for the exteriorization of adolescents' inner conflicts and “pereghivaniya”, which contributes to their constructively overcoming the crisis of this age period.

On the whole, for meeting the challenge of constructing the ZPD of adolescents in a school theater, it is important to regard drama not as a reproductive work of putting on a performance, that has been created by someone else, but *to organize it as a platform for role experimenting, for trying out different types of activities and “obschnostey”.* This kind of drama is capable of meeting the key age tasks of the adolescent period and at the same time allows them to acquire necessary competences and personal educational results in accordance with the Federal Standards.

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