1. Vygotsky and Piaget were both born in the same year, and were interested in many of the same aspects of human life. Vygotsky knew of Piaget’s early work, and cited it widely; however, Piaget only came to Vygotsky’s work very late in his professional career. These facts raise some interesting topics. Was there something special about the era in which they both lived, that they both devoted themselves to research about how children learn and think? Or is it a natural subject of inquiry? After all, St. Augustine and the Greek philosophers studied the same subject, as did Rousseau a century before Vygotsky and Piaget. How did their own life experiences affect their work? Had they been able to collaborate, what direction may their work have taken?

2. Do your students know much about the Russian Revolution and subsequent history of the Soviet Union? Pause on the group photo of Vygotsky where he is standing, and look carefully at the range of clothing. People are dressed in military uniforms, in peasant attire, and in Western business clothes. The Russian people were trying to forge something new and complex during the heady years between 1919 and the early 1930’s, and they were optimistic and energetic in spite of the terrible economic conditions. The relative intellectual freedom of the times was lost when Stalin took power and began his program of terror (Great Purge). One could discuss the relationship of political events and intellectual development: the Renaissance in England occurred after great political and religious upheavals, America’s Revolution produced much lasting political discourse, the French Revolution influenced many of the arts, and World War II spurred technological advances. The question could be whether the extraordinary talents exhibited during these periods of turmoil were a product of it or were always there, only needing an opportunity to be exposed.

3. Use this video viewing as an example of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Some of your students may be well informed about Vygotsky, and be able to critique the examples we used. Others may be totally new to the field, and will need several viewings, supplementary readings, and lectures before they are able to confidently discuss Vygotsky’s achievements and use them to evaluate present-day situations. Have your students chart their own ZPD on the subject of Vygotsky. What in the video assisted them to move up their independent level of knowledge? Have them perform the same analysis on another subject they have learned.

4. Do you and/or your students have experiences with adults who are not literate? What learning strategies do they observe? What talents do they see that are not common to literate people?

5. Is the analysis of higher versus lower mental functions new to your students? Is it a useful distinction? Drs. Bodrova and Leong think that today’s popular culture overly emphasizes lower functions. Do you agree? Has popular culture always been based on them, or is it a new phenomenon? Have your students analyze what mental skills are needed to play some current video games.

6. All of us know dozens of song lyrics. Is this learned using associative or deliberate memory? Are there lessons for pedagogy in this? (For example, consider setting multiplication tables to music, teaching reading from repeatable chants, or the incredible capacity of the human brain to hold information.) What function do these songs have in defining generations? How does all this relate to Vygotsky’s analysis of thought and language?

7. Are you and/or your students fluent in another language? How does one language affect your thinking as opposed to another? How has this fluency affected your life view?
8. Some see Vygotsky as a bridge between behaviorism and the cognitive developmental stance of Piaget and his followers. Comment.

9. Vygotsky read widely. Especially important to him were the works of William James who wrote of the construction of human thought and action.

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