

Play, Perform, Learn, Grow

Lois Holzman, East Side Institute, New York NY

Keynote Address: Bridging Communities, Practices and the World

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Play, Perform, Learn, Grow. These words, our conference, this gathering, are the activities that fuel the human life force. Each of us has come to the conference with a particular way into the theme. Each of us has come to embrace play or performance—in whatever ways we understand and practice them—in a different way. Each of us has taken a unique journey to be doing the work we do to harness play and performance to help people to learn and grow and change the world. What are these journeys? What roads have we taken? What are our stories? Let's discover them.

Please turn to the person next to you. Decide who is A and who is B. Got it? OK. Person A will ask Person B, "What's your story?" and then Person B will ask Person A "What's your story?" You each have 2 minutes. Begin.

Give yourself a round of applause. These stories are now ours. Let's see how and what we might build on them over the next few days.

Now I'll tell you my story. I'm eager to share it because it's the story of one of the forces that gave birth to PPLG and a significant strain with it. It's the story of social therapeutics.

Today, social therapeutics is a methodology for reinitiating the development of persons and communities through activating their capacity to play, perform, philosophize and, in that process, create new ways to see and be and relate. At the same time, it is a social change effort rooted in the belief—the activity—that ongoing social-emotional-cultural-intellectual development is essential for world-changing. In other words, social therapeutics proceeds from the premise that the changing of the world and of ourselves is one and the same task.

Social therapeutics grew *out of* social therapy, the radically humanizing psychotherapy developed in the 1970s by Fred Newman, and it's grown *into* performance activism, the global emergence of a positive, reconstructive social change approach. It's grown without a plan, but with plenty of discontent. The growth was not systematic or rational. There was no theory put into practice. There were plenty of inspirations, though, from political struggles, from psychology, from the arts and culture and from philosophy. And equally, or maybe, more important, inspirations from the people we were organizing to join us in creating organizations that challenge the way established institutions do things. And from their response, creativity and hard work when we invited them to build with us organizations and programs that humanize rather than harm.

This 40+ year organizing effort was started and begun by Fred Newman, who left teaching philosophy to organize the poor. He and a handful of followers set up community organizing collectives in working class neighborhoods of NYC and started a union for poor and unemployed people. Fred also created social therapy and began to practice it at this time. I met Fred during these beginnings. I had just gotten my Ph.D. in developmental psychology and joined a team of researchers developing a social-cultural

alternative to the cognitive model of learning used nearly universally in schools. Fred and I shared the same dreams for a world without poverty and our different life experiences and training had convinced each of us that psychology as a discipline and as popular culture desperately needed to be transformed. Psychology's individualistic focus, claim to objectivity, emulation and imitation of the physical and natural sciences, and dualistically divided worldview, made mainstream psychology not a force for good but an impediment to ongoing social development and social activism. Fred asked me to join him in creating a place to transform psychology. I said yes.

That place is the East Side Institute, one of the sponsors of PPLG.

At first, the Institute concentrated on building social therapy practices and developing the approach as a critique of traditional therapy. Like other new psychotherapies springing up in the 1970s—a time of great social upheaval—social therapy tied the “personal” to the political; it engaged the authoritarianism, sexism, racism, classism and homophobia of traditional psychotherapy. Its reason for being was that living under capitalism makes people emotionally sick and the hope was that therapy could be a tool in the service of progressive politics. But social therapy's secret weapon was its engagement of the philosophical underpinnings of psychology and psychotherapy. It rejected explanation, interpretation, the assumption of self-contained individuals, the notion of an inner self that therapists and clients need to delve into, and other dualistic and problematic foundations of traditional psychology.

We found that the best environment for engaging all that is the group. People don't change themselves, or the world, alone. We do it socially, in groups. Social therapy groups are made up of 10-20 people of varying ages, ethnicities, sexual

orientations, professions, backgrounds and life styles, and “presenting problems.” As we’ve come to see it, the more diverse the group, the more material the group has to build with, and the more we have to build with, the more possibilities are likely to be generated. Unlike most group therapies where the group serves as a context for the therapist to help individuals with their emotional problems, in social therapy the group—not its individual members—is the therapeutic unit. The work of the group is to generate qualitative transformation, to create new emotional growth through participating with their group members in building something together—namely, their group. It turns out that an ongoing group-building process is a very effective way to deconstruct the deep-rooted senses of self and identity and reconstruct the concept of social relationship. It is through the social activity of building groups that people learn and grow.

With the inspiration of Karl Marx, the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky and the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Newman and I deepened our understanding of how and why social therapy worked. The three of them had radically social understandings of human life and activity. To them, how we feel, see, understand, speak and relate are not merely social in origin but social when enacted or, in the language we have come to embrace, when performed. Also, to all three of them, human life and human development are not pre-determined, not defined and limited by biology, or psychology or even by history. We humans create our world and have the power to collectively and constantly re-create it. How we think and speak and feel and make meaning are not preordained or static. Marx, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein, in distinct but related ways, show that we are fundamentally social beings and that it is through our *activity* that we create meaning. What Fred and I, working with hundreds of others, were

able to discover is a way to bring this humane, activist, development understanding of what it means to be human to all kinds of people, developing with them a *methodology* for simultaneously engaging daily life and the seemingly intractable social institutions that cause so many painful distortions of life.

As Fred and I shared our understanding through our writings and as social therapy practices expanded across the US, we met many who had similar understandings and many more who were excited to hear about what we were doing. Could this approach work outside of the therapy room? Could people build groups, create ensembles, build developmental environments anywhere—schools, hospitals and clinics, their homes, entire communities—where everyone could learn and grow?

Thus, social therapy, an approach to emotional development, became social therapeutics, a methodology of group-building that engages the subjective and the personal, in a way that, simultaneously, allows us to challenge the political, economic and cultural institutions that are generating so much underdevelopment, pain and violence.

This growth, however, wouldn't have happened without play and performance. The catalysts for our realization of how powerful they are were poor NYC mothers, Lev Vygotsky, and the Castillo Theatre. First, the mothers.

As I mentioned earlier, in the 1970s one of our organizing efforts was a union/advocacy group for poor and unemployed people. Thousands of people joined the union, most of them women trying to raise their kids in devastated neighborhoods. They would ask us over and over again to do something so their children wouldn't hang out on the streets and get in trouble. We went to the young people and asked them what they

wanted to do. They said they wanted to put on talent shows. This was the period of hip-hop's emergence, and youth in the Black and Latino communities were eager to showcase their break dancing, rapping and other performance skills.

Our organizers and the young people worked together to produce a talent show, then another, and another. In addition to performing on stage, the young people were soon producing, ushering, running the tech and organizing their friends and neighbors to attend. At each talent show, participants were told from the stage, "If you can perform on stage, you can perform in life."

And we meant it. We had learned from Lev Vygotsky that performing is what babies and little children do—of course *they* don't know that's what they're doing. We learned from him that playing at being someone you're not is the secret to learning and growing when you're little. They play at speaking and become speakers. They perform as dancers and artists and learn how to dance and draw. Performing, we realized, is being who we are and not who we are/who we're becoming at the very same time. When we're little, adults support us and cheer us on as we perform our lives. Vygotsky's social-cultural understanding of human beings linked learning and development together with play as a centerpiece. Playing is how children develop, he said, because in play children are as if they were "a head taller"—they stretch; they do things they don't yet know how to do; they suspend the "real world" and create something fantastical out of what they've experienced. They perform as if they were someone else and, in doing this, they actively create who they're becoming.

How we got to see the similarity between play and performance was through forays into theatre and improvisation. Our community began a theatre, the Castillo

Theatre, and an improv troupe in the 1980s. Writing, directing, casting professionals and amateurs, and putting on plays; doing improv comedy shows and inviting audience members to come on stage and improvise—these community-based creative activities helped us see that not just babies and toddlers, but actors on the stage too are appreciated for being who they are and other than who they are at the same time. What if everyone was supported to play and perform in this way?

Newman and I began to see everything our colleagues and I were doing as performance pieces. The social therapy group building is like the ensemble building necessary to put on a show. Meaning emerges through social activity in both social therapy group talk and in creating a production, where script, characters, set, lighting, costumes, etc. come together to create the play. Our experience creating theatre and bringing performance to inner city youth corroborated Newman's and my hunch that Vygotsky's insights about young children were applicable throughout the life span. The potential to perform "as if a head taller" is always there. Realizing this, we infused our projects with our new found discovery, and all of our activities became explicitly playful and performatory.

At around this same time, awareness and interest was growing for social therapeutic methodology and our understanding of play and performance. It was becoming known internationally and within some scholarly traditions as a method of social engagement and personal transformation. Face to face and Internet connections with people developing or searching for new ways to build community, heal trauma, engage the devastation of poverty, transform the learning model, etc., blossomed. We discovered that lots of people world-wide were experimenting with the creative arts and

performance approaches to psychological and social issues. Among scholars, colleagues of ours were also coming to appreciate the potential of performance, and through a series of conversations with some of them, we decided to host a conference on performance together. We called it Performing the World (PTW). 120 people from 14 countries came together in October 2001 for this three-day experiment in performing a conference. Since then, the Institute has hosted nine more PTWs each with 300-500 participants from dozens of countries. The next PTW is in September 2020 in NYC and I hope to see all of you there.

The international interest in social therapeutics, as well as that first PTW, prompted us to create a way for people from outside NYC to train with us. In 2003, the Institute launched The International Class, a ten-month course of study in social therapeutics. The International Class combines virtual study and conversation with three immersive residencies at the Institute. This past June, we graduated our fifteenth cohort. As of this date, there are 143 alumni from 30 countries. PPLG's founder, our dear Elena Boukouvala is one of them.

About ten years into Performing the World and The International Class, after experiencing their steady growth, we realized that social therapeutics was becoming a methodology for a new kind of social activism—performance activism—which is neither resistance nor reaction, not a negation of what is, but a positive becoming of what can be.

Performance activists need each other's support. They need community. A new kind of community. What social therapeutics calls a development community. A development community is not based on geography or culture or race or profession, or identity of any kind. It is open to anyone and everyone who wants to join it and joining it

consists of participating in the work of building it. A development community is constantly changed and transformed by those who participate in it. It is not a static formation determined by the past, it is a dynamic process constantly generating new possibilities, including evolving versions of itself.

The notion of a community as an entity for creating social change is new. It is not a movement or political party; it's not an intellectual or spiritual discipline. As, my colleague Dan Friedman said of performance activism last year in his keynote to the first PPLG, a development community is "something new under the sun."

Our development community emerged from the activity of building groups. We tried building all sorts of groups. Some of them worked, many of them didn't. But in the process of building organizations and activities from the ground-up, the development community emerged.

Thirty years ago, Fred described a development community and why we need it. He said, "There is no haven, no place to hide. There is no escaping the cruelty, the pain, the torture. Many people try. They turn to families, to intellectual endeavor, to relationships, to drugs, to crime, people look to politics, people look everywhere to find a haven. People join communities because they seek a haven in a heartless world. But there is, in my opinion, no haven. He continued, "To me, community is the specific and passionate activity of supporting people who, far from seeking a haven in a heartless world, want to engage its cruelty, to do something to change it, to create a world in which havens are not necessary."

While there may be no haven, Fred said, we have the potential to create a Heart, that is, to do the work of developing "a world in which havens are not necessary." This is

the process by which social therapy gave birth to social therapeutics and performance activism. This is my story that is now our story. This is the road I took to get here today.

That road was not built by theory, although, as I said, we learned from some great thinkers. It was not shaped by ideology, although the values of collectivity, cooperation, and non-violence constantly guide us. Without a plan, the process emerged from what we saw happening, both on the ground in our own activities and in the broader culture.

As I see it, that's what Play, Perform, Learn and Grow is all about. And that's what—whatever our stories, however we got here—we all are doing. From my perspective, PPLG is part of the ever-expanding development community, the Heart we are building in a havenless world. It includes what you are doing, however it emerged, whatever you call it, because you are working to humanize rather than harm; you are struggling to socially create new possibilities, rather than shape people and history into preconceived solutions: you are listening instead of preaching. You are saying “yes/and” to whatever your communities and history throw your way. You are, in a variety of ways, helping to generate self- and world-changing.

Whatever road got us here, it seems to me that PPLG is itself a wide road we are now walking together, paving it as we go—and that's what make it, and us, so powerful.