

It All Comes Down to How We do What We Do
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A long, long time ago when I was 22 years old, I taught in a high school about 30 minutes from Providence RI. The area was pretty rural then and isolated—many of the students told me they'd never even been to Providence. I taught English and, in those days, teachers had the freedom to choose their materials and methods. I brought in ballads, folk music and rock & roll; we learned logic together; we read MAD magazine and made our own. My students really appreciated my creativity and my urging them to be creative. Even so, I envied the art teachers because being creative and fostering creativity was what they were supposed to do. I thought they had all the fun.

I didn't become an art teacher or even remain a high school English teacher. Instead I went to graduate school in linguistics and developmental psychology. You see, I loved language—the art of it, the creativity of it, and the effortless way we learn it as babies. And through my study and research, I discovered that playing, improvising and performing are the secrets to learning language—indeed to learning anything. Looking back, I realized that in my high school classes, what I was doing was helping teenagers become language artists by giving them opportunities to play with words, to improvise with each other, and to perform as wordsmiths—just like they did when they were little.

I share this little piece of my history as a lead in to talking about playing, performing and improvising as what we need to be doing if we want to be successful learners and teachers. Because the most creative and most developmental kind of play is improvised and performed. And the deepest and longest-lasting kind of learning is playful.

It's hard to play these days. That's because play and learning got separated from each other a long time ago and acquired different meanings and connotations. Play goes with having fun and learning goes with being serious—in other words “work.” In today's competitive and consumer culture, it's all about working hard, from kindergarten through college to the workplace. We've been socialized to “stop playing and get to work” if we want to succeed in school and in life. When I see how rarely children get to play in school and how few families play at home, I am very sad, and sometime angry. We shoot ourselves in the foot when we stop playing in the name of learning, because with only school **work**, kids get turned off and resentful, and have few outlets for their energy, creativity, imagination and sociability to flourish. And it's not only kids that suffer the loss of play. We all do. College students and professors suffer. Workers suffer. Parents suffer.

All of my adult life has been about bringing play, improvisation and performance back into people's lives, whatever their age or situation. And into learning environments, both in schools and outside of schools. I want to help people reinitiate their creativity, their curiosity, their desire to learn, their development. I say reinitiate because for so many of

us, the fire has gone out. But the embers are still smoldering—we all have these capacities and they're just waiting to be reignited.

What I mean by development is not the textbook listing of stages that a human being goes through. It's not something that happens TO us. It's something we CREATE.

Development is a social process of creating something qualitatively new out of what exists. Infant to baby to toddler to child to teenager to adult—these are qualitative, not quantitative, changes. Crawling babies become walking babies, babbling babies become speakers of a language—and it's life-changing. Throughout our lives we have the ability to develop, to transform the circumstances we find ourselves in and become bigger and better, more knowledgeable and skilled, more passionate and imaginative.

One of my heroes is the Russian psychologist from the 1920s and 30s, Lev Vygotsky. He put forth a social-cultural understanding of learning and development as linked to each other, 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.

When we have “conversations” with babbling babies, we and they are playing, we're improvising with sounds and words. They're performing as speakers before they know the first thing about language, and we're performing as understanders of their babbling. When we give them markers and papers, we and they are playing, we're improvising with images and representation and perspective and color. They're performing as artists before they know the first thing about art.

The magic here is that we adults are relating to their performing selves, to who they are becoming. We're not stuck on what they don't know. We're not obsessed with correcting them. Like skilled improv comedians, we accept their offers (“we wa mama”) and we add something (“Yes, Mama's gonna give you some water”). We follow the basic rule of improv—what's known as “Yes, and.” It's what makes an improv scene funny. But it's way more than that. It's the key to the socialness of human development and learning: Accept and build—and people will keep becoming, keep learning, keep growing.

The renowned painter Pablo Picasso once said, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Vygotsky's statement about performing a head taller through play helps me understand how profound Picasso was. I think he's pointing to the trap we get into—once we know how to do something, we become less willing and able to do new things. We get stuck doing what we know how to do. Imagination reigns supreme when we're little—when we don't yet know that we're supposed to know. We take risks. We learn how to paint, draw, sing, dance, talk, even think, because we are supported to **play** at “painting” “drawing” “singing” “dancing” “talking” and even “thinking.” Because we're supported to **perform** as painters, drawers, singers, dancers, talkers and thinkers. *Before we know, we do.* We play, we perform, we pretend our way to growth, learning and knowledge. For me, this is the fundamental

developmental process of the human species.

I think that the way to remain an artist once we grow up means that we can't let all the knowledge we're accumulating about art, color, perspective, how things are supposed to look, etc., take over or suppress our imagination and stop us from doing things with paint and pencil and color and perspective that we've never done before. The same holds for remaining a learner once we grow up. We can't let all the knowledge we've accumulated about a particular subject, or about how to learn, or whatever identity we've taken on (good learner, bad learner, smart, not so smart) take over or suppress our imagination and stop us from doing things with books and lectures and concepts and ideas that we've never done before.

Like Picasso's challenge of how to remain an artist one you're grown up, my challenge is how to remain playful once you're an adult learner or teacher. I don't mean just playing games. I actually don't mean doing any particular activity. By playful, I mean *how* you do something, as distinct from what it is you're doing. To do something playfully is to be improvisational and performatory—to play around with it. I've learned that you can do just about anything playfully. Even testing—in the elementary school I ran a while ago, we'd have the children perform as test makers and test takers before they took the official standardized tests. They had to improvisationally perform as test takers before they knew how. In the Institute I direct now, we have our adult students play with concepts and theories by performing—reading part of an academic text out loud together as a poem or playing the expert theorist being interviewed on a talk show. When you consciously perform as someone you are not, you are playing, you are doing what you don't know how to do, you are opening yourself to imagination and possibility, you are learning and you are becoming who you are not.

I've learned from experience that no formal presentation is complete without a Power Point slide. Usually, the slide is a summary of the major points covered in the lecture, sometimes called the "take-aways." So, I prepared a slide. And it is a summary of sorts, but it's not a summary of what I've already spoken about. Instead, it locates what I've said in a broader context, which is what human beings are—or how we've been *socialized* to understand and experience what it is to be human.

So, who and what are people?

We are shaped by our environment ... but not only that—We are shapers of our environment

We are tool users...but not only that—We are tool makers

We are adapters to culture...but not only that—We are creators of culture

We are members of identity and geographical communities...but not only that—We are builders of new communities and new KINDS of communities

We behave...but not only that—We perform

We are who we are...but not only that—We are who we are becoming

The human characteristics on the left are essential to becoming socialized and adapted to any culture. They are what psychology and education focus on as they socialize us to understand what human beings are capable of and should be.

And what about the human characteristics on the other side of the slide? They're the ones that make it possible for us to develop, grow, create, learn, make new things, see new possibilities. They're the ones that get activated when we play, when we perform, when we improvise.

To the extent that these characteristics are believed to be not important, ignored, and denied us, we wind up living in a world that denies our becoming-ness, our socialness, and our capacity to take what there is and transform it. We actually wind up living in a world that suppresses half of who we are and what we're capable of!

My organization, the East Side Institute is only one out of hundreds of organizations in the US and around the world that create programs and projects that allow people to give expression to this other side of us. What's so valuable about these kinds of programs and projects is that their work gives **developmental shape** to the relationship between our being shaped and being shapers, between our cultural adaption and our cultural creation, to who we are and who we're becoming, and so on. It's when we play and perform—at any age—that we are using and showing these two sides of being human.

I guess I do have a take-away for you, after all. It is this: When we play, perform and improvise, we give expression to our **full humanity**. Don't settle for being only half of who you are—as a learner, an educator, a colleague, a peer, a friend. It all comes down to how you do what you do. So, whatever you do, do it playfully. Create your life. Change the world.