6 Knowledge as play

Centring on what matters

Tomas Pernecky and Lois Holzman

This is a dialogue between Tomas Pernecky and Lois Holzman about academia, learning, education, Lev Vygotsky and spaces in which we live and work as researchers, students, professionals and intellectuals. It seeks to uncover the developmental and non-developmental sides of knowledge through the discussion of topics such as academic integrity, activism, creativity, epistemic posturing, social constructionism, social therapeutics and performance-based approaches to education and therapy. The notion of knowledge-as-play emerges subtly but with force as a recognition that the quest to know is intimately human, and therefore inseparable from our interaction with other humans and the world, part of our ways of being, doing and becoming – and always something we can play with.

Thoughts on education, play and culture

TOMAS: I suppose an appropriate way to begin this dialogue on knowledge-as-play is to invite you to play with me. I am interested in exchanging ideas about this topic because I see playfulness and creativity as something that is closely connected with knowledge. Do you want to play?

LOIS: What a lovely and challenging offer!
Yes, I want to play!
Knowing makes our brains heavy. Playing makes them lighter.
Playing with knowing – what does that do?
We cannot know, but we can play!

TOMAS: Your mention of heavy brains reminds me of the education I experienced earlier in my life. It was built around memorising – memorising dates, memorising names, memorising key historical events, memorising rivers and geological formations, memorising chemical formulas, memorising works in literature and so forth. 'Success' and one's intellectual worth was determined through testing and examination. In this educational paradigm, the mind is viewed as a container that has to be filled with information.

I remember our maths teacher at high school taking immense joy in failing students. Every class would start with him randomly choosing a

handful of students and asking each three questions. The questions had to do with memorising mathematical theorems, formulas, multiplication of high numbers (e.g. 18×16). You would only have a few seconds to answer. This routine quickly turned into entertainment, because it was very common for the teacher to shout loudly into the class, with a large grin on his face, statements like: 'Holzman, another round one!' To explain, we had numerical five-point grade system; 1 = excellent, 5 = fail. Visually, the number five appears to have a round 'belly'.

LOIS: So the maths teacher was playing, not with maths per se, but at least with numbers. Bravo for him! Interesting that you chose the word 'entertainment' and not 'play'. Thoughts on that? And your experience with memorising… that's play-able with too. A few of our kids at the Barbara Taylor School (a community, Vygotskian, performance-based school we ran for 12 years, one of three schools discussed in my book, *Schools for Growth*; Holzman, 1997) invented a version of the game 'Concentration' to memorise stuff.

TOMAS: I didn't see it like that. For me it wasn't play because it wasn't innocent – it had real consequences. The students could not opt out, and there was power imbalance and vulnerability controlled by the teacher. However, at times it could be entertaining because of the shared fate and comradery of the students, and the performatory nature of these 'events' – there was a cultural element interwoven into the mix. Maybe it was 'serious' playing.

LOIS: Do you mean that he, as the authority figure, was teaching in an entertaining way, and to you that means he wasn't playing (but maybe playing with you students, in the negative sense of play)? I'm asking because you then go on to say that there was a cultural element and that maybe it was serious playing. I'd love us to disentangle all the confusion language creates. Play, like most words, means so many different things depending on context. Not to mention one's own connections and connotations and meanings and uses.

I follow Vygotsky mostly on play, although others feature in my understanding/practice. For Vygotsky, there are three kinds of play – free or pretend play, game play and theatre (he doesn't speak of theatre as play though). Free or pretend play is 'the highest form of child development' because of how action and rules are related. The rules come into existence along with the playing (the action). (Note that in game play the rules are created beforehand.) This is both freeing (a pencil can be a horse) and constraining (the play changes if the pencil becomes something else, even a pencil). Related is Vygotsky's other insight – in play children can do what they don't know how to do. They can be who they are not. They can be themselves and not themselves at the same time.

This is profound to me and has important implications for older children and adults (i.e. everyone). Because we're so hung up with doing things right and not making mistakes that we don't involve our

imaginations to 'play' with what we're doing. We don't engage in action in which we are becoming what we can imagine through our action (I prefer the word 'activity'). What this means in practice is that we can play with everything from the most trivial to the most serious events, emotions, concepts, etc. So, I'm not sure what I think about 'serious play' but I feel sure we can play with serious things.

TOMAS: The cultural element is difficult to explain; how do you explain culture in a paragraph? The oral exams, which always took place in front of the classroom by the teacher's desk, could become the source of entertainment, as the students – in an attempt not to fail – would make up all kinds of answers. Indeed, some of them got all of us laughing. Therefore, failing could be very 'cool'; you could be very popular. Now, some of the teachers would 'play' along. For example, they would 'play' using facial expressions (picture Robert De Niro in *Meet the Fockers*), or, in disbelief of what they were hearing, bang their head against the desk. At other times, the friendlier teachers would play along by saying things like: 'Well, this is a fascinating interpretation, Holzman! Please continue … we are all dying to learn more'.

Returning to the math teacher, he was known to appreciate the female figure, so some of the girls would dress especially for the maths class. Of course, the danger was that they would be called for an oral exam more often (i.e. a closer visual examination). I remember an occasion when one of our friends dressed very provocatively. We all joked about her playing a risky game and 'asking' for an examination. When it happened just a few moments later and her name was called, we all burst into laughter.

Overall, some teachers were nice and fun, some were mean, some would get angry and shout at students – we were all taking a part in the 'play' of education in a given context; on another level, we were performing culture.

By 'serious play' I mean that it wasn't simply a game upon which we had all agreed; I could not opt out. One of the consequences was that students could fail the subject, and some did. Maybe a better way to describe the maths teacher is to use the term 'gleeful'.

I don't think that the examples above fit Vygotsky's notions of play and development. In fact, we have probably introduced additional categories: 'serious play' and 'play as survival'!

LOIS: You're right. It wasn't how Vygotsky understood play.

Challenging the status quo from inside and out

TOMAS: You mentioned the Barbara Taylor School. We should also note that in addition to being a mental health professional, thinker, writer, disruptor and a successful business woman, you have been the director of the East Side Institute, which you co-founded more than 30 years ago.

LOIS: Yes, I suppose I do wear many hats – but on the same head! The Institute is an international, not-for-profit organisation for the study and practice of social therapeutics and performance activism. Both are ways to bring development – human development and community development being inseparable – to the forefront of efforts toward culture change and social transformation. We've developed a methodology based in the human capacity to play and perform and relating to people of all ages and circumstances as builders of ensembles and performers of their lives. If you will, as simultaneously who they are and who they are becoming. We have hundreds of national and international students, alum, partners who work in just about every area of life.

TOMAS: I am curious about your own journey as we don't often get to know the people behind books and institutions. You have lived the experience of a mental health professional and held other influential roles in your life. As I understand it, the Institute was a place and space that allowed you to challenge the dominant paradigms of that era. It was here that your colleague and mentor Fred Newman started to experiment with combining theatre, play and therapy together to create therapeutic experiences – which later became known as social therapy. You created a new paradigm and a methodology according to which clients are seen as performers, and where performance becomes a powerful tool for transformation and human development. Would you say that you revolted against the (conventional) knowledge in your field?

LOIS: Yes, that's one way to put it. When we set up the Institute it was designed to challenge how things were done in both their form and content. With regard to form, we were non-disciplinary from the beginning, had no grades or tests (or diagnoses in our therapeutic work), gave no degrees, and yet our content was university-level. Our content was philosophical-historical-political-psychological. Studying or training with us was, and continues to be, not only critical of the mainstream ideas and practice, and also not only activistic, but what we came to identify as practical-critical – meaning that the critique is in the activity, in the very practice of say, a non-diagnostic therapy or a social-performatory educational approach.

TOMAS: What drove you to create this new disruptive space/place?

LOIS: I love this question. On my part, it was having been involved in efforts that challenged established knowledge in both my graduate training in developmental psychology and psycholinguistics (at Columbia University) and post doc work in cognitive psychology (at Rockefeller University). The criticism we received in both places (despite being well-funded by foundations) for stepping outside the box, coupled with all I learned about what was 'wrong' with established methods and understandings and all the exciting new things we were trying and what we could discover doing, exposed the limitations on how far you could go in a traditional institution like a university. I could see how the hierarchical

structure, the insistence on measurement and evaluation at every step, the gate-posts that got you in or kept you out, the -isms, etc., were built into the institution. It was similar for Newman, who kept being fired from colleges and universities for giving all the students in his philosophy classes an 'A' grade so as not contribute to the men being drafted into fighting in the Vietnam War. (College students were granted a deferment, so if one were to fail out of college, one would then be eligible to be drafted into the War.) He finally left his faculty position at the City University of New York in the mid-1960s to do community organising and to develop his unique form of therapy, social therapy. We met in 1976, established the Institute, and worked together until his death in 2011.

TOMAS: You must have had a very strong conviction for your project. This is not a career path many people would choose. But there is also a sense of excitement that comes with starting a new Institute with like-minded colleagues. It must have been a lot of fun!

LOIS: Yes, and the excitement (and challenge) grew! We were like-minded in the broadest sense of our humanitarian and political convictions for a better world, but not in a huge amount else. We came from different backgrounds, professions and of course each had our own quirks and eccentricities. The Institute was, and continues to be, a training ground for creating with differences and using what everyone had to give.

TOMAS: To go against the norm is not always easy. Were there many challenges along the way? Have you or the Institute experienced any difficulties that are worth noting?

LOIS: Oh my goodness, yes! Our unorthodox ways of working – being activist intellectuals, working at an independent institution of our own establishment – was looked upon with suspicion by many in both the academy and in legitimate community-based organisations. We refused to apply for and take government money? We did our research outside of legitimate institutions? Our therapy groups didn't consist of people with the same 'presenting problem' but were, rather, heterogeneous in every way? Our staff were all volunteers? Hmm, there must be something fishy going on! Many of us were politically active as well, and some openly socialist. This did not play well in liberal, Democratic-Party-controlled New York City. We regularly got attacked for 'brainwashing' people. In addition, our scholarship (books published by Routledge, journal articles, etc.) was ignored for many years by all but our closest academic colleagues.

TOMAS: This would be difficult. I am glad we are having this conversation. It is important to see and understand this side of knowledge and academia. Tell me more … obviously, you did not give up.

LOIS: We persisted and grew to where we are now through grass-roots organising and participating in national and international academic events. That combination for decades, coupled with the disillusionment among

more and more scholars and practitioners within mainstream psychology and education, has led to our recognition, modest as it is.

One more continuous challenge is that our decisions have kept us financially 'poor' in that we rely on a small group of supporters and the modest fees we charge to keep us running. That's the price of independence, and we have found it to be well worth it.

TOMAS: I find it interesting, yet not surprising, that to be able to pursue what you wanted to do and to experiment with new ideas, you found the university environment to be too restrictive. Yet it bewilders me to think that you could not find enough support at the universities where you worked, because this is the kind of innovation, risk-taking and exploration – even if it is controversial and goes against the established canons – that is important, valuable and worth supporting.

LOIS: I, too, would occasionally get bewildered, especially when things like this would happen: A very high up in the New York City (NYC) Board of Education visited the Barbara Taylor School, and at the end of a few hours there he said, 'It's a miracle'. We never heard from him again. It's when you have a great conversation of substance and new understandings emerge on both sides and you think it's the beginning of something (who knows what) to be continued, and there's no more communication because the person is now ignoring you – that's bewildering to me.

TOMAS: Yes, one would go from being enthusiastic to feeling deflated. You mentioned earlier that you ran the school for 12 years. Had it become too difficult to continue?

LOIS: Yes. It wasn't sustainable. We did marvellous work and were particularly effective with children for whom our school was the last resort – troubled, learning difficulties, etc. But at that time, our approach was simply too radical for most parents and certainly for a funder to support it.

Building spaces for activism and intellectual integrity

TOMAS: I am keen to exchange more thoughts on intellectual integrity, resistance and alternatives ways of approaching knowledge. For me, one of the important missions or tasks of postdisciplinarity lies in creating spaces for thinkers, students and practitioners so that we can explore and create without boundaries (disciplinary, methodological, institutional, etc.). The three international conferences we have held to date (Neuchatel, Switzerland, 19–22 June 2013; Copenhagen Business School, 22–24 June 2015; and Auckland University of Technology, 2–5 February 2018) were headlined in terms of freedom, creativity, disobedience, and knowledge as art and performance. They attract people who are creative, curious, open-minded, disruptive and not afraid to think outside the box. The reality for many, however, is that after the

conferences people go back to their day-to-day working environments that are often not so flexible. And so, the hope for these events, similar to this book, is to create spaces for being, sharing and collaborating. You made the decision to create such a space permanently. I have three questions: (1) What went through your mind in the 1970s? (2) What were the non-negotiables that made you take the step to set-up an independent Institute? and (3) What would you do differently today?

LOIS: First, I wish I had known about your conferences! They sound terrific! Will you be having another? And they have a family resemblance to our Performing the World (performingtheworld.org) conferences perhaps. These international gatherings have been happening every other year since 2001. Let's you and I create an opportunity to share our experiences organising these kinds of events and the importance we believe they have.

TOMAS: Yes!

LOIS: Now to your questions. In the 1970s, when I made the choice to start the Institute and involve myself in community organising efforts – in other words to become an activist – I felt like I had two choices for my life trajectory: I could stay within the university and would likely be a 'house radical' of the psychology faculty, finding my 'tribe' outside my own department (psychology being very conservative) perhaps among the feminists, conducting research that was always on the fringe, and making a name for myself within a niche area. Or I could join with Newman and less than a dozen others and strike out on our own to see what we could create independently and if anyone out there wanted it. I remember that the thought of pursuing the first path bored me just thinking about it! And that I had no idea what would happen with the second path, except that it wasn't likely to be boring! We set ourselves up as a non-profit organisation, so that we could accept donations.

Among the non-negotiables, as I recall, were things I've already mentioned, like no separate disciplines, no grades, no diagnoses. In addition, there would be no abandoning academia, but rather, we would bring what we were doing into the universities and professional associations and write academic books and articles. We wanted to dialogue with colleagues, learn from them, share what we learned from our more independent location. We constantly invited researchers and scholars to visit and study us.

What would I/we do differently today? We might have named ourselves differently – had we known what would happen to psychotherapy in the ensuing decades. Our name doesn't convey what we've become – a centre for social therapeutics and performance activism. It doesn't even convey what we were, namely a centre for social therapy. But at the time, our concentration was on practising (and training others to practice) a radical, non-diagnostic group psychotherapy called social therapy. The interests of our volunteer faculty and our clients led to the broadening

of social therapy into a methodology suitable for all kinds of settings outside a therapy office.

Here's how I described what we've become at the 2018 Performing the World conference:

> The Institute is a US non-profit organization with broad international reach. We're a school for a new psychology and a new kind of activism, both of which are based in play, performance and practical philosophy. We're a school that doesn't look or function like a school. We have a physical space but most of our work takes place elsewhere and virtually. We have students but there are no requirements to become one. We have graduates but they earn no degrees. We have a prestigious faculty whose training as community organizers in the streets matches or surpasses their training in the academy. We have no curriculum but plenty of content to play and perform with. Ours is a methodology of developmental, not acquisitional, learning – improvisational, emergent and shaped by our students. I've come to call what we do, and support performers, educators and activists to do, 'non-knowing growing'.

TOMAS: I think that what you have provided in your response above is a good example of how to create a postdisciplinary space for learning and growing outside rigid organisations. I don't think that it is easy, but it is possible. It is also a way to maintain intellectual integrity.

LOIS: Probably, but please say more of what you mean by 'intellectual integrity'.

TOMAS: By intellectual integrity I mean staying true to yourself as an intellectual being – finding a way to remain true to your vision and values in the work you do.

LOIS: Yes, and as a moral being, as I see it.

Epistemic posturing

TOMAS: Let's talk about the authoritarian role of knowledge in the world and the phrase 'epistemic posturing', which appears in your book (Holzman, 2017, p. 34). As I understand it, for you, doing and performing is more important than knowing. In other words, we develop through doing and performing as opposed to filling our brains with knowledge and information. Is this a correct way to put it?

LOIS: It's close to what I believe. You're right regarding developing and knowing. At this point in history, I believe that knowing as a way of living (as opposed to any particular piece of knowledge) stifles development of individuals, families, communities and the world. In a recent non-academic book I wrote (*The Overweight Brain*, 2018), I speak of my own journey from loving knowledge and wanting to be a knowledge

creator, to becoming a 'growth creator' and using what I know to help others grow.

TOMAS: In your book *Vygotsky at Work and Play* (Holzman, 2017), you note that Vygotsky's ideas have been addressed through various disciplinary lenses and tackled in areas of professional practice, but you also mention the under-acknowledgement of emotions and emotional development among contemporary Vygotskians. In your words, 'emotion has a long history in Western culture of being considered second rate – inferior to cognition, the enemy of rationality and an attribute not of men, but of women' (p. 4). It occurs to me, that when we talk about creativity and playfulness in the context of knowledge production, there is a very similar attitude. This is especially the case when the process of creating knowledge – some may say 'discovering' knowledge – is viewed as a serious and rigorous activity. Within this outlook, it would be a misnomer to use the words 'play' and 'knowledge' in the same sentence.

LOIS: Indeed, yes! Although the inferiority of creativity and play is not gendered the way emotion is. My perusal of research and theorising about creativity is that it is looked at as a cognitive skill. And how play has been studied is similarly with a cognitive lens. And both are viewed instrumentally – what I like to call as a tool for result, a means to an end (e.g. to rephrase you, creativity as a tool for knowledge, and play as a tool for learning social roles in childhood). To me, play and performance are emotion and cognition unified.

TOMAS: I agree with your view. What are the implications for knowledge that we could note here?

LOIS: Well, one implication is that the real-world manifestations of the glorification and hegemony of knowledge are drastic – from pseudo-scientific psychological justification for the inferiority of women to the authoritarianism and cruelty of schooling (as you have written above), not to mention the eroding of play and the arts in schooling and other areas of life that, again, are manifestations of prioritising knowledge over creativity. The last several hundred years of knowledge-generating have led us to take the 'epistemic posture' of human beings to be equal in importance to our upright posture. And maybe it has been. The question is at whose expense and at what cost? It may well have got us here to the twenty-first century, but can it get us to the 22nd?

As I argue for what I call 'non-knowing growing' as the way forward in my book, *The Overweight Brain: How Our Obsession with Knowing Keeps Us from Getting Smart Enough to Make a Better World* (Holzman, 2018), we no longer need to know as individuals and we cannot know. The destruction and spinning of our wheels that goes on in the pursuit of knowledge needs to be given up. I'm not alone here. The technology, entertainment, design (TED) prize winning engineer-educational researcher Sugata Mitra says, 'It took nature 100 million years to make the ape stand up and become Homo sapiens. It took us only 10,000 to

make knowing obsolete. What an achievement that is' (Mitra, 2013, 12:48). And in his book on why the internet has us rethinking knowledge, Harvard researcher David Weinberger makes the point that 'the smartest person in the room' is not an individual but 'is the room' (Weinberger, 2011). There are others, but these two examples should give you a flavour of the conversation going on about the relevance of knowledge to how we do and might live in today's times. The big question for me and my colleagues is: granted, knowledge is socially constructed. Now what?

As I understand it, knowledge as play means knowledge IS play. Does it mean that to you?

TOMAS: To respond to the first question, not everyone will agree that (all) knowledge is socially constructed. There are varieties of views and degrees of commitment (*weak* and *strong* social constructionism) that exist even among social constructionists. For instance, some will grant that social facts are socially constructed but the same will not apply to natural facts. This is a complex and lengthy topic for which we don't have enough space here. I have written about it elsewhere for those interested (Pernecky, 2016). What is worth acknowledging is that the notion of knowledge as socially constructed will be granted by some, but not all.

One may be tempted to say that the proposition of knowledge as play is more likely to appeal to social constructionists as opposed to, say, realists or pragmatists. Yet, in my opinion, this would be a mistake. I don't associate creativity and playfulness with a particular epistemological stance. Also, this kind of thought creates division and fragmentation; what we need is more openness and communication.

In Chapter 1 (this text), I noted David Bohm – a prominent theoretical physicist – who co-wrote a book called *Science, Order, and Creativity* with F. David Peat (2011). They argue that creative play is fundamental in formulating hypotheses and coming up with new ideas. They go on to say that 'thought which tries to avoid play is in fact playing false with itself. Play, it appears, is of the very essence of thought' (p. 37). I bring this example up because when we discuss play and creativity, we are not talking about play as something that is only in the toolbox of radical social constructionists. It is available to all thinkers regardless of disciplinary background or philosophical orientation – theoretical physicists included!

With regard to the 'Now what?' question, social constructionists have a number of possibilities. One can turn to critical theory and explore the extent to which social constructions have impacted specific peoples and communities. The examination of who may benefit from, or is oppressed by, certain social constructs can be very powerful. Social constructionism also presents the possibility to construct anew, which is an invitation to hopeful and non-deterministic prospects. For me, these two facets of social constructionism are immensely important and a way forward to creating a more just and equitable world.

Lastly, is knowledge play? I would agree that, fundamentally, humans' interaction with, and understanding of, the world is a creative activity which is not too dissimilar from play. But I also think of knowledge-as-play in a more foundational sense. Following Bohm and Peat (2011), 'fixed knowledge is illusory, since all knowledge arises out of the shifting, changing activity of creative perception, free play, unfoldment into action, and its return as experience' (p. 46). It is a different way of relating to knowledge – a more open attitude and understanding of the process.

LOIS: I love that! And it's reminiscent of how Vygotsky writes of play in early childhood being developmental because imagination and experience do a 'dance' – mutually influencing each other to create something new.

And I'm glad you pointed out that the social construction of knowledge is a topic of lengthy discussion. I too have written about it elsewhere (the most direct text being Fred Newman's and my book, *The End of Knowing*, 1997). You and I should have lively conversations, no doubt!

TOMAS: Yes, perhaps a future dialogue!

The (postdisciplinary) university?

TOMAS: An important topic I would like to bring up is the difference between viewing the university solely as a place of teaching, learning and research, and a more holistic approach according to which the university is understood as a space for development. I feel strongly about the need to shift from only *teaching* specialised skills to *developing* global citizens. I see this as the most fundamental and urgent task of universities in the twenty-first century. Disciplinary learning and the ever-increasing specialisation can be limiting in a developmental sense. We have segmentation of thought and skill, and we have more and more specialists of sorts, but with this comes the loss of understanding and appreciation of our interconnectedness on a global scale – be it social, psychological, political, environmental, biological, financial and economic, etc. Do you agree?

LOIS: Oh yes! And not only our interconnectedness on a global scale but as well in the most mundane and local aspects of our lives. Disciplines and over-specialisation make us knowers of less and less and dumb at the same time.

TOMAS: If we were to articulate universities as spaces for human development, what are some of the key principles?

LOIS: 1. Get away from academic disciplines that tear apart what is a complex totality. Become postdisciplinary (a terrific term you introduced to me).

2. Involve all people in a university in learning that is united with development, not torn away from it in the name of producing knowledge.

3. Take seriously that learning is social and involve the participation of everyone in the creating of learning environments that highlight/maximise our sociality.

4. Get rid of grades and ranks. This will be a long process, so while it's happening (while you and others are creating a new play) relate to ranking and grades as scenes in the authority play – it's just not the only play in town.

5. Let students (if that is what some people are called) co-conceptualise with others (if they are called something else) what is to be learned and how it can be learned.

6. Be radically inclusive and democratic with one exception – require everyone to take improv classes.

TOMAS: Yes, I resonate with all of the above but would need more clarity on number six. I fully agree with the first point about complexity; I have talked about it in the introductory chapter (this text) when articulating some of the broader concerns of postdisciplinary scholarship. I also agree with a shift towards human development and the creation of more collaborative environments (#2 and #3). And getting rid of grades is something a number of postdisciplinary scholars would like to see. However, it is a difficult thing to do. With regard to letting students co-conceptualise with others the *what* and *how* of learning, I interpret this as a student-centred approach whereby students drive and articulate research problems/research questions and then try to find solutions and possible answers. I have recently addressed this in a paper I published with first-year students. I thought that what they had achieved in class was so valuable and important, that it was worth publishing (see Pernecky, Abdat, Brostroem, Mikaere, & Paovale, 2019) – although it took a long time to figure out how to do it! Is this what you have in mind? Do you have a more vivid example?

LOIS: I'm eager to read that paper. I have two things to add. First, what I mean is not rigidly student-centred, but more co-created by both students and faculty. Following Vygotsky, a zone of proximal development utilises the diverse inputs of everyone. So the question is more, how do we use what everyone has to give (including the faculty) to create environments where questions, methods and 'answers' can be discovered/created/found? How can we learn this? What should we do? What's our performance as learners to look like? What are our props? Who are our characters?, etc.

TOMAS: Returning to point number six, when you say 'radically inclusive and democratic' you mean…?

LOIS: Great question! For one thing, being radically inclusive and democratic doesn't mean making sure everyone has equal time. Rather, it means inviting everyone to create an environment where everyone can participate – in whatever ways they choose at any moment. It's the 'how?' again. If some people feel intimidated, can we transform that?

Can everyone participate even if they didn't do the assignment? If the 'smart' folks (or the men, as can often happen) talk more than the others, we can decide to take that on – how can we use what these people know in a way that doesn't stifle others? Do we want to do that? How can those who haven't done the work be in the play/the conversation/ the discussion? Can we reorganise things so that that doesn't matter at the moment? Do they have nothing at all to give to the conversation, the journey? Does this direction of invitational questions help give a flavour to what I mean?

TOMAS: The suggestion of improv classes may require more clarification. If someone wants to become a nurse or an engineer or do a major in global studies, how would improv classes be implemented? And why are they so important? Some programmes have practical components and work placements. We have a course called Work Integrated Learning, which is part of our bachelor's degree. Students are placed in organisations and work on research projects. They have a mentor in the organisation and an academic advisor at the university in their programme. But I don't think this is what you have in mind. Am I correct?

LOIS: There are now so many books and articles in just about every field celebrating the value of improv for the workplace and for everyday life. There were none when we started out, so I'm thankful that the information is now so freely available. Among the many writings are my own and those of my close colleague, Cathy Salit (2016). For now, though, here are the main benefits of improv noted by Lolly Daskal (2018) in a column in *Inc*. magazine:

1   You learn to own your power.
2   You learn to embrace your fear.
3   You learn the value of collaboration (crucial when it comes to keeping your team effective and happy).
4   You learn to adapt and be agile.
5   You learn to build a great ensemble troupe.
6   You learn the importance of creativity and discovery.
7   You learn to lead – and to follow.

TOMAS: OK. I may need to keep thinking about this one and explore the 'how' of improv in the classroom.

The problem-solution dichotomy

TOMAS: Does knowledge have to be based on the problem-solution dichotomy? The structure of tertiary education and research, including all the processes, committees, research textbooks and so forth, are based around research problems. For instance, students have to articulate research problems and devise strategies to tackle them in order to be accepted into master's and doctoral programmes. You discuss this in

your book and call it the 'hallmark of good science, good education, good government' (Holzman, 2017, p. 10). If this approach is not suitable for human development, then what model do you think is more apt?

LOIS: I don't know if knowledge *has to* be based in the problem-solution dichotomy. The evidence, though, is that *it is*. To me, this orientation and method is not sufficient for the challenges of the current times. Seeing problems and solutions, especially when the vast number of solutions fail to 'make the problem vanish' (a phrase of Wittgenstein I love), too often leaves us stymied, frustrated. What if, instead, we come to understand a situation by virtue of engaging in activities that move us about and around it, playing with its assumptions, changing perspective to see it anew and see different aspects of it, performing a world without it, etc. Some might call the understanding we generate 'knowledge' and I'm OK with that in some contexts. I really believe, however, that we cannot know but that we can create. And seeing and relating to the world without the problem-solution model is one way to play, change perspectives, etc. How difficult it is and how eye-opening it can be are surely worth discovering, don't you think?

TOMAS: Yes, absolutely. I think that we are always sense-making, always articulating, always relating to the worlds in which we are submerged. We are always constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing – even through silence, inaction and apathy. And we also construct problems and solutions (i.e. we have learned to exist – *be and become* – through problems and solutions, continuously striving for progress). We live in a society where it is just wonderful to have solved yet another problem – we do this at school, at work and in life. Even businesses and telemarketers appeal to us by offering to solve problems we did not know we had.

That said, I see value in finding solutions to problems in certain domains, particularly in what has been described as 'hard' science. After all, we are able to communicate online, humans can build airplanes and skyscrapers, eradicate diseases, treat cancer, etc. However, social problems are more problematic. To articulate social problems means to segment, isolate and dislocate parts from a whole. And there is always someone doing the articulation, and someone or something articulated as the 'problem'. This is the premise of *critical* social constructionism, which challenges the notion of social problems as something 'objective'.

LOIS: Yes, and I want to add to that we not forget, but engage as well, the very notion of social problem!

TOMAS: In my view, and in light of what we have said so far, a more fruitful approach would be asking a different set of questions. For example: how would you describe what has been constructed here/in this context? How did this construction emerge? What can be said about the

different actors/agents? Ought anything to change and if so, why? How can we construct or re-construct differently to have more equality? Or freedom? Or something else? How can this be done so that we do not disadvantage or marginalise the other? Let's play!

I feel that this approach would be more developmental, more critical, and more playful. It is a way of saying, 'We are all in it together; any transformation or development will take all of us working, exploring, playing and creating together'. And it is aligned with the work you have been doing.

LOIS: I agree 100%. And harking back to your invitation earlier to give another example, the Institute has a programme, The International Class (see East Side Institute, 2019), which is now in its 14th year. It's my favourite activity. It's part distance and three residencies at the Institute over ten months. It's open to anyone regardless of education, profession and location. Each class consists of 8–14 people from six to ten countries. We design the schedule for the residency periods, with some sessions topic-oriented and others simply listing the name of the faculty member leading that session so the activity and topic can emerge from what we've been doing together up to that point. The ongoing questions we grapple with as a class are: who are we/who are we becoming? And how should we learn X? Are we building our learning group? And an overall, how are we doing? What do you/we need?

TOMAS: It sounds very welcoming and inclusive.

LOIS: We have various ways the students get to know each other and us – interviewing each other and then performing as the person they interviewed; improv exercises of many varieties; 'speed dating'-type interviews of people in our broader community. Various ways of playing with the content – Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, social therapeutics, play and performance, politics, philosophy, psychology, education, community development – from watching and performing (and sometimes writing) theatrical plays to transforming theoretical presentations into poetic ones and vice versa, lots of transforming from one mode into another. After a deep seminar discussion on the educational system in their countries, we might ask, what should we do with all this now? And the group might decide to write a scene for a play, create a dance or a song, write a summary or an academic article, etc. So our radical inclusivity (to go back to that topic) is to invite the group to create the next step and it will do that as it will, utilising individuals well or not. We will be there to help, expand and encourage.

It is, no doubt, very weird! And students are delighted, apprehensive, confused at the beginning. What's great about that is that they're really all over the place in that regard. Some love being confused, others hate it, some aren't at all. We say that our methodology makes use of all that – if we/they choose to.

Academic becomings

LOIS: I was so fortunate to do my university teaching in one of the most open and free environments there ever was. I was lucky. Most people are not. Tell me, what concerns you most about how academia currently functions? (What might you launch into a rant about if given the chance?)

TOMAS: The obsession with ranking and elitism! Professors are ranked, programmes are ranked, universities are ranked, publications are ranked – all of which amounts to bureaucratic and hostile environments in which numerical evaluation takes precedence in decision-making. This culture of measurement and competition promotes technocrats who know to navigate the system and do well in this environment. I see this as operating on the premise of 'false quality'. It also kills intellectual integrity.

LOIS: I'd like to learn how you came to this, Tomas. What has your academic (and otherwise) career looked like? Was play an important part of your life consistently or newly discovered?

TOMAS: When I was younger, the thought of getting a PhD and becoming an academic was too extreme, even for my wildest dreams. It somehow all happened through a series of events and encounters with people – including the decision to move to New Zealand, where I completed my master's and then pursued my doctoral studies. What I have to say is that I am grateful for every step along the way. I have met inspirational people, I have attended wonderful events and conferences that allow me to develop further, I have been able to design courses and one would hope inspire at least a few students, I have been able to write and share my thoughts, and I have made incredible friends.

With regard to the 'journey' itself, I think that it is very common for most PhD students to feel that (professional) life only gets busier after finally getting the two precious letters in front of your name: the capital 'D' and the lowercase 'r'! If you want to stay in academia, you need to publish, engage in high quality research, teach, supervise, obtain funding, and so forth. You are also expected to contribute to the wider community by way of reviewing academic papers and book proposals for journals and publishers, and abstracts and articles for conferences. You are expected to organise seminars and events, contribute to various boards and committees, and engage in outreach activities beyond academia. All of this is fine as it is part of our job. However, these activities are now ranked and graded and academics are measured. For example, when it comes to research alone, in New Zealand you get a grade (A, B, C, C(NE), R and R(NE)). Universities are allocated funding based on these categories, but only the first four are funded. To get an 'A' is nearly impossible, and only a very few scholars receive it (for more information, see Tertiary Education Commission, 2017).

Moreover, teaching is measured and evaluated through student feedback and the metrics are required at most universities for promotion;

academic journals are ranked by impact and quality – to be a 'successful' academic you need to aim for the highly-ranked publications; universities are ranked; and degrees are ranked … To be an academic in the twenty-first century means to perform to these standards and I find this immensely problematic. Consider developing people through, say, having a great conversation in the classroom, or publishing an article in a journal that is not ranked, or through leaving an everlasting impact on colleagues and students by organising a conference. Your value becomes less. Why? Because these things are difficult to measure, and because they are not deemed important and worthy. So to reiterate, this culture encourages technocrats who know how to navigate the system. Sadly, teaching becomes a burden and a 'distraction' from research (deemed more important), and overall there is more competitiveness and anxiety among colleagues and institutions. Those who cannot cope suffer from burnout and stress despite their passion for what they do. I know a few people who have been impacted this way. To me, this is the wrong path for tertiary education.

The ranking of journals, institutions and academics is the result of rampant quantification that has created a very hostile environment in which the value of thinkers, academic mentors, intellectual innovators and co-creators of learning – in other words, all the roles academics play – is reduced to a set of metrics. The consequences are disastrous: it marks the death of the creative intellectual who has been reduced to a clog in a machine, and whose value as an academic can now be expressed in numbers and letters.

Is play important to me? In this environment, play and playfulness has become a matter of survival. By this I mean having a network of people and events that enable me to engage in interesting and innovative work. Without this 'family' where we can openly talk, share and be free, I doubt I would still be in academia. I also love being with the students in the classroom – finding ways of having fun through learning and creating meaningful experiences. I think I have always been playful in this regard.

LOIS: Everything you say is why we began the Institute! I was so very fortunate to have found people who wanted to do that AND to find an academic position that didn't have all that gatekeeping. I held an academic position for 18 years, until 1997 I think, all the while building the Institute. It's a good story, because I don't think it would be possible today.

While I was at Rockefeller University in NYC working first as a postdoc and then assistant professor, the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (my location) decided to move to the University of California San Diego. My life was in NY, I was building the Institute, etc. and so I decided not to go. At that time, there was no internet and in the US one of the places you looked for academic jobs was in the Sunday *New York Times* 'Jobs in Education' pages. I saw an ad for an unusual school I had

never heard of – Empire State College of the State University of New York. I applied, got an interview, and got the job. Empire State College was an experiment – no grades (written evaluations instead), students create their own degree programmes out of prior life experience, study groups offered by faculty, taking courses at neighbouring universities, and being mentored by someone expert in their topic. Professors were overall mentors, co-designing and managing the degree, mentoring and leading study groups in their areas of expertise. This meant we could 'teach' pretty much whatever we wanted and however we wanted. My study groups were often performance stages and playgrounds – focussing on creating environments where everyone could learn developmentally and creatively (e.g. human development, educational psychology, community psychology, linguistics, philosophy of education – you name it). The school was started by progressive (lefty) intellectuals recruited from prestigious universities. The students were mostly working-class adults, many with good jobs obtained without degrees, others former addicts or musicians who now wanted to 'give back' to their communities, a smattering of 18-year olds who couldn't withstand the stress of campus life, nurses, police officers, writers, secretaries, parent advocates in their children's schools … It was a dream job, with tremendous freedom to experiment, form intimate and lasting relationships with students, and receive immense gratification. At a certain point, I turned my full-time position into a half-time one, and eventually left to devote my energies full time to the Institute and the Barbara Taylor School.

All the while I maintained professional academic ties through conference presentations and writing. I doubt if I would have stayed academically tied if I hadn't had such a job! I was indeed fortunate to create a way to support the passion I had and have for development and learning without measurement and hierarchy.

LOIS: I think we're ready to wind down. What do you think?

TOMAS: Yes, unfortunately, we have reached our world limit. Thank you for finding the time to play, Lois. It has been fun and insightful. What shall we call this chapter? We started by proposing 'knowledge as play', but we have talked about a range of topics.

LOIS: Beginning there was an invitation to discover together so many things that matter deeply to us.

TOMAS: That's it! Let's call it 'knowledge as play – centring on what matters'.

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