

PLAY AND PERFORMANCE FOR ACTIVISM

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This chapter aims to discuss the concepts “Play” and “Performance” addressed by Prof. Ph.D. Lois Holzman during the seminar presentation ‘Revisiting Vygotsky for Social Change: relating Theory and Practice’, based on the paper “Research Activism as Tool-and-Result” (Holzman, 2018). This seminar approaches the relation between “Play” and “Performance”, and how these two concepts collaborate to promote social changes.

The meeting was organized through questions, created by the students in small groups before Holzman joined the meeting via Zoom. This organization included one of Holzman’s most remarkable characteristics: openness to dialogue to create new ways of thinking, being, and living in many different realities.

Holzman starts the discussion clarifying the conceptual difference between “Play” and “Performance”. For the professor, the two concepts are interconnected. According to her “play is a kind of performance and performance can be a kind of play”, considering the two terms interchangeable. Holzman highlights that the union between play and performance is related to freedom that both provide to people in reality, enabling them to define their own rules.

The author explains how children need to establish rules for their pretend play when they are playing, like acting as a mom or a doctor. However, these rules are invented during the game itself and they are not imposed from outside. Similarly, in professional performances, there is a suspension of the real world and the introduction of specific structures and rules, as seen in a theatrical play or dance performance on stage. Holzman emphasizes that both play and performance share this developmental aspect, where planned activities are used. The researcher also highlights that Vygotsky, in his work, delves into the role of play in learning and performance in artistic expression.

From this, Holzman points out that the concept of play has been discussed by many scholars and educators, usually related to child development. In common sense, play is related to pleasure and free time, a moment in life when children are allowed to act freely. On the other hand, Holzman’s concept of play proposal expands the act of playing to all people. In her words, “play is a human activity that frees us from reality and allows us to set the rules for it”.

In the article “Research-Activism as Tool-and-Result”, Holzman emphasizes the idea that “Play” and/or “Performance” are not only meant for children. On the contrary, she states that “performing” is how all human beings develop, by being who they are not they create who they are becoming. The author clarifies explaining that when we play, we usually do things we are not sure how to do yet and by doing it, we expand the possibilities of who we are becoming (Holzman, 2018). In her perspective, the possibility of being and becoming is the “developmental potential of play and performance”. Holzman ends her explanation by saying that play and performance are conceptions that can be free ‘from the constraints of childhood and the constraints of the stage’. For Holzman, there is no response to the difference between playing and performance as far as she understands it.

The idea of using “Play” and “Performance” as a human developmental tool has its basis in the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) developed by Vygotsky (1934/1978). During her talk, Holzman declares that both play and performance, are activities that create the ZPD and are the result of the creation of the ZPD. In her words:

Holzman: (...) So as you may or may not know my understanding of ZPD is not the conventional Vygotsky meaning by the followers of Vygotsky, but that it is and it's not a place, it's an activity and it's an activity that groups of people are capable of forming. It's not reducible to the difference between what a kid can do and by himself and with a more knowledgeable expert whether that's a child or an adult, but it's in the creation of the zone of proximal development that the development happens. And so, it's kind of like an improving game (...) where the stage is literally being created, the play is being created, and the creating of the stage and the play.

Holzman brings a wider perspective of what ZPD is by expanding its common and well-known definition that relies on the capacity of what someone can do by themselves and with a more capable peer. By defining ZPD as an activity that groups of people are capable of forming, Holzman defines “Play” and “Performance” as a revolutionary activity.

Based on Vygotsky's studies in the search for a method, Holzman defends the dialectical character of the ZPD as an activity, in which human beings take what exists and create new realities from it. At this point, a student in the seminar asked Holzman: “[...] is it play revolutionary? Are all the plays revolutionary?” And the student also added: “And this is something I was trying to make sense of when I read the ZPD and what you proposed by it”. Holzman builds her response bringing the linguistic meaning of the word “revolutionary” towards its scientific-philosophical construction within the scope of Vygotsky and Marx studies.

Holzman clarifies that all types of play are revolutionary if we consider that the human being is oriented towards dialectical change in reality: as circumstances determine the human being, he has the capacity to modify it. For Holzman, both Marx and Vygotsky were clear about this kind of basic Marxist premise, that it is not a question of nature or creation. It is not a question of free will or determinism, but rather the occurrence of these two factors simultaneously (nature-nurture; free will-determinism). As an example, Holzman mentions the revolutionary role that Vygotsky had in his time in a political sense for trying to create a new psychology and supporting the Bolshevik Revolution. Holzman states that “everything about Vygotsky was politically revolutionary, psychologically revolutionary”.

Furthermore, Holzman points out that the way Vygotsky understands and articulates learning-development with playing in social interaction is also revolutionary. The researcher mentions the importance of the community when she defends play as a collective space for development that involves not only children, but people of different ages, with all types of ideas, connected by an infinite learning-development process because of the human condition: dialectic of living circumstances, transforming them, transforming oneself. Based on these reflections, Holzman links the revolutionary activity of playing to the “Performance Activism”:

Holzman: [...] we call Performance Activism a new kind of social change, radical social change, an effort in which the revolutionary is a kind of change in the practices of everyday life. It helps people develop and produce more creative solutions and not just be against things but come up with new ideas to reorganize the world.

During the discussion, Holzman brings some examples of play as a revolutionary activity. One of them is when we bring play into organizing learning environments such as schools and educational institutions. She makes a provocative statement saying that adults and children can stop working and get to play while at school. In a society where play is understood as an activity performed during free time moments, and work is considered the most valuable human activity, stating that we should play instead of work is surely revolutionary.

From Holzman speeches we can assume that people practice social change not just by talking about it, but by experiencing actions of change; performing who they are towards who they are not yet. As previously said, the conception of playing as a revolutionary act arises from the transformative potential of the human condition, that is, all people have the potential for change, for creating something new. However, this kind of awareness is not fully embraced by society founded on patriarchal, rigid and even oppressive values. In this context, one of the students asked Holzman: “How and by whom play, and performances rules are created? How can we help people see these opportunities, who creates this and how they are created?”. Holzman replies saying the question is a key for performance activists and for those who want to change the world. It is necessary to recognize the context of action and be open to the offers of the place, such as: what are people saying with their body language, with their words? What do they want?

Although it is not always beneficial to be guided by what some people want, once they are not always engaged with community development. It is necessary to understand their wishes and after that work with them as an activist. To reflect on that, Holzman raises some questions: “How do you create new wants? How do you help people want more development?”. For her, these questions are related to the local social context of each one. When creating environments for revolutionary play, activists may have their general methodology, procedures to help people express creativity and performance. However, there is no way to predict what people’s participation or reaction will be. Collective creation will be always linked to the context of each person involved. In this discussion, play and performance are seen as powerful tools for social change. More than that, Holzman defines how play can change realities and be revolutionary. In our research group, Language in Activities in the School Context (LACE), we have experienced the power of play and performance in different developmental and learning contexts. When playing, people can truly live a situation and feel it as if it were really happening. By doing that, they can think and reflect on new ways of social change (Vendramini-Zanella et al., 2021; Liberali et al., 2022).

Through community partnerships, the research group LACE has found a pedagogically engaged approach to intervene in an unjust world. These interactions have increased the participants power to draw upon their diverse repertoires and life experiences to critically and revolutionarily recreate themselves. Such experiences have enabled participants to reimagine ways of thinking, being, learning, teaching, dreaming, and living in an intercultural society. Ultimately, by the transformative potential of play and performance as tools for social change people have created, collectively, new possibilities for growth and transformation in their community.

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