

Creating Stages for Development:  
A Learning Community with Many Tasks and No Goal

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On a cold November evening in 1990 about a hundred people got out of their seats in a public high school auditorium in lower Manhattan and walked into the street, chanting, “*We define community!*” This spontaneous “peaceful demonstration” was catalyzed by Fred Newman, co-founder with me of the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy (Institute). Newman was delivering his annual Institute-sponsored lecture, this one entitled “Community as a Heart in a Havenless World” —a play on both title and sentiment of Christopher Lasch’s 1977 *Haven in a Heartless World*, a book that enjoyed significant popularity among intellectuals. Newman’s talk (an edited version appears in *The Myth of Psychology*, a 1991 collection of early Newman lectures) made the point that there is no haven in this world (Newman, 1991). What there can be is community. He introduced a new concept of community—community not as a static entity defined by others according to geography, ideology or identity, but community as a passionate living environment/activity that has the capacity to support and nourish people who are committed to engaging the cruelty of a havenless world. In creating community, Newman told the audience (the majority of whom were community activists and their friends), comes the responsibility for defining what community, not once but over and over and

over again. He asked people to get out of their seats and join him in the street, and then come back and ask him hard questions.

That evening remains with me as a particular moment of conscious articulation of the Institute community's practice/understanding of community as collectively self-defining, non-goal directed, developmental activity. The Institute is ambitiously dedicated to creating and supporting learning communities in practice all over the world. An important part of this task, as the Institute sees it, is taking a serious look at what learning is, what communities are, and what constitutes practice. All of which I will try to bring to life in this chapter.

The work of the Institute (and my work as its director) cannot be understood separate from its institutional location—a community that has been and continues to be a unique social experiment. The beginnings of the experiment go back 35 years ago or so when Newman, who was a philosopher of science by training, left City College in New York City with a small, disheveled group of 60s radical students. Finding the environment of the academy stifling, they went out to try to build something, to create something. This group of about thirty people went into middle class communities, working class communities, and very poor communities and set up health clinics, therapy centers, free schools—and they had absolutely no plan. They said, “We want to do something to make the world a better place and we're going to go out and do something even though we don't have any idea of how to do it.” They had one rule, if you will, even though they didn't call it a rule (perhaps conviction is a better word), which was: “We will only keep this—whatever this is—open if people come. We will not take any government or corporation or foundation funds. We don't want our hands tied. We don't

want to be controlled by somebody's whim of what they are going to give money for this year or next year.”

It's now 2008, over three decades later, and what has been built is a community that we call a “development community” because human development is the focus of the dozens of projects that have been created and sustained. The Institute is the community's research and training center. We have trained hundreds of people in social therapy, the approach to emotional development Newman created. Some of them work in our centers located in NY and other cities, and others work in hospitals, mental health clinics, schools and community centers. The Institute also trains educators, youth workers and health workers in methods for group and community building, offers a yearly series of seminars and workshops, and hosts national and international conferences that bring together people across disciplines. Newman and I write books and articles, and the research we do is in the partnership with people in projects rather than studying them from a far.

## Social Therapy

The Institute was founded originally to develop and promote social therapy, and this remains at the core of our now quite diverse work, even as social therapy has grown into a methodology for supporting human beings to help each other grow and develop in all kinds of settings and life situations. [1] Newman created social therapy as a component of his and his colleagues' community building effort. It was one of the many hundreds of experiments in alternative therapy and education that sprang up in the 60s era. Like other

radical therapies at the time, it was linked to progressive politics in attempting to help liberate people from oppression and the “isms.” However, unlike most alternatives from that time, social therapy managed to sustain itself and continued to transform, mature and prosper through the following decades. I met Newman and social therapy in the mid-1970s and have been part of its growth ever since.

My training is in developmental psychology and I approach the study of social therapeutic practice from this perspective (Holzman and Mendez, 2003). What initially struck me about social therapy was that it was a way of helping people with whatever emotional pain they were experiencing without diagnosing their problem, analyzing their childhood or interpreting their current life. Instead, the therapist charges the clients (mostly in group settings) with the task of working together to create an environment in which they could get help, because in the activity of developing the group, all would emotionally develop. In other words, clients are not “worked on” by a therapist-expert, but create their own “cure” by creating something new together out of their emotional activity.

It was Newman’s understanding of philosophy, language and dialectics—coupled with his dissatisfaction with the methods of psychology, its understanding of human beings as isolated individuals, and its obfuscation of process in favor of products—that led him to create this mode of therapy. In particular, Newman was convinced that therapy needed to help people demystify language and give them the opportunity to create meaning together. It is our language—especially our language of emotions—that has become rigid and reified and leads us to experience the events in our lives and our

feelings as individuated products, not as part of the continuous process of creating our lives (Newman and Gergen, 2000; Newman and Holzman, 1996, 1997).

Using current terminology, social therapeutic methodology shares company with postmodern, social constructionist, collaborative and narrative approaches that are designed to support the expression of what's positive about people, rather than to fix what's wrong with people (Holzman and Morss, 2000).

### Learning in and out of School

The Institute and its broader community have also worked to address the failure of educational institutions in a manner consistent with social therapy's focus on creating environments for growth. In the 1980s the Institute attempted to create a model school, the Barbara Taylor School, based not in acquisitional learning but in what we call developmental performance (Holzman, 1997a). The school proved to be too radical to be sustained; we closed it after twelve years and have since, across the development community, pursued two different paths.

One path is the creating of outside-of-school programs. Conceptually, these programs are not merely outside of school but also "other than school" in that they do not replicate school-based teaching and learning. After two decades of growing these programs as laboratories for the development of a new learning model, they have begun to impact the mainstream.

The programs are run by the All Stars Project, Inc., a non-profit organization that utilizes the Institute's social-therapeutic approach. The All Stars' learning model focuses

on performance, creativity and development because of how these activities complement the acquisitional learning of the school day. Out of its educational and performing arts complex on 42 St, the All Stars Project runs outside of school youth development programs: the All Stars Talent Show Network; the Joseph A. Forgione Development School for Youth; Youth OnStage! and the Production of Youth by Youth. (See [www.allstars.org](http://www.allstars.org).)

Together the programs involve several thousand young people, ages 5 – 25, with uniquely non-school like learning activities that are based in a developmental understanding of performance—both on and off stage—as fostering emotional and social development. Equally important, the programs emphasize the fostering of new kinds of partnerships between youth and adults. Critical to the running of the programs are youth volunteers who have participated in one or another of the programs, adult financial contributors and adults who volunteer. These programs now serve as a model for outside of school programs in several other cities in the US and abroad.

At the same time, the Institute has worked within schools to support teachers and administrators who want help to bring creativity, developmental learning and a performance approach to learning into their schools and classrooms (to the extent possible in the high stakes testing environment that dominates). In 2006 we launched The Developing Teachers Fellowship Program in which NYC-area public school teachers train with us during the school year. The program has a specific focus on collaboration, creativity and improvisation. Now in its second year the program works with about a dozen teachers annually, a mix from preschool through high school.

## Developmental Learning

As any parent can attest, babies and pre-school children learn through engaging socially, whether that be with caretakers, siblings, peers, pets, toys or media. Moreover, this social activity is most often playful and improvisational. There is no text or worksheet. Before school, children are encouraged to learn how to learn, to stretch, to do what they do not yet “know” how to do. They learn developmentally because others relate to them not merely as what they are capable of at the moment but simultaneously as who/what they are *becoming*. They experience that they are learners because they are related to ahead of themselves (Holzman, 1997a, 2000; Newman and Holzman, 1993). But beyond kindergarten—and even there it is becoming a rarity—play is discouraged and even disallowed.

As a learning community in practice, the Institute tries to contribute to the conceptual transformation we believe education and psychology need—from the study of “individual being” into the study of *the social activity of becoming*. Right away the unit of study become process. Right away, it becomes a social unit. How do people produce becoming, what helps and what hinders it? Vygotsky, with his understanding of learning as socio-cultural activity, is of practical-theoretical help here (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987). He showed us that you could not use old tools, especially old conceptual tools, to do new things, or even an old model (conception) of what a tool is. He gave us the new conceptual tool of tool as *tool-and-result* (Newman and Holzman, 1993). With tool-and-result we create the tool and in the process of creating it, we get “the result.” This is the method to create a psychology and a learning practice of becoming.

Vygotsky's understanding of how young children learn and develop is itself an application of his tool-and-result methodology. Young children and their caretakers create what Vygotsky calls Zones of Proximal Development (ZPDs), developmental environments that supports children to do what is beyond them, to perform who they are becoming (even as they are who they are). They play language games, speaking before they know how. Their creative imitation of the language spoken to and around them is fully accepted. They learn to speak by playing with language; they perform as speakers (who they are becoming). The process of creating the ZPD *is* the joint (ensemble) creation of their becoming language speakers. The process of learning and the product of learning are created together. [2]

Learning and development in early childhood are *social-cultural joint activities* of being who we are-and-who we are becoming. Young children learn and grow because they are supported to “perform a head taller than they are” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). In the work that my colleagues and I do, we have been able to specify two critically important aspects of joint activity that are integral to our work with school-aged children, adolescents and adults. Both can be expressed as directives: “Grow the group!” and “Perform!” For these are the joint activities that create ongoing human development and learning.

If learning and development occur by creating environments for joint activity (ZPDs), in which you can perform past where you are at the moment, then it would make sense that what you would want to do to continue learning and growing is to create (environments for) joint activity. In our work we talk of growing the group, or building the group, because the current psychology (as social science and as how people



experience themselves) is individualistic. In contrast, we want people to experience the socialness of existence, and we want people to experience what it means to exercise the power of collective creativity—and by that I don't mean anything very grandiose. I mean events as every day as the baby saying, “Ba-ba” and the mother saying, “Do you want your bottle?” That is joint activity; that is collective creation. However, most of us walk around most of the time not experiencing that we create together in that way. Social therapy and developmental learning have as their task helping people to create an environment (their group) in which they can get help and/or learn. It is in that process of “growing the group” that new emotional and learning activity is generated.

And why “Perform!”? Performing, as I am using the term, is a form of play that, when done intentionally, can intensify and change the relationship between being and becoming. This is a relatively new understanding of play and performance. The more usual view is to see play in contrast to work, something unserious, what little kids do, and what adults sometimes do in their time off. And most play, from adolescence on, is game play—competitive, rule-governed, with winners and losers. But there is more to play than games. When little children play they usually have no goal other than playing what they’re playing. If there are any rules, they are usually made up in the playing rather than beforehand. In play, children creatively imitate and amplify other people in their lives—their brothers and sisters and parents and grandparents, and TV, storybook and toy characters. They create scenes and stories.

This kind of play is more like performing in a play than playing a game of basketball. Unlike later game play, in their pretend play, children are who they are and, at the same time, other than who they are. They are doing what’s familiar to them and, and

the same time, doing things that are brand new, things that are beyond them. And they do this all day long. We let very young children perform ahead of themselves—speaking before they know how, drawing pictures, reading books and much more. That’s how they learn and develop. This performing kind of play and these spaces for performance are essential to development and learning—not only in early childhood but for all of us at all ages.

Additionally, performance reminds us that we are social beings. As human beings we live our lives in groups—family, work groups, school groups, play groups, all kinds of groups, cities, countries, continents. But we don't do it very well. It seems clear from everyday life and from the world situation that our group skills are not very developed. I think we don't understand all of what groups are and do. I am suggesting that the unit that grows, that develops, that learns, is a social unit not an individual unit. Groupings of people construct “zones”—the spaces between who they are and who they are becoming—that allow them to “become.” Seen in this way, the ZPD is the ever emergent and continuously changing “distance” between being and becoming. In constructing ZPDs people do things they do not yet know how to do; they go beyond themselves; they perform.

That is how I understand developmental learning communities. As ZPDs, they are a rejection of the individuated learning and development model that dominates our educational system. More than deconstruction, they present a positive alternative—groupings of people engaging in the ensemble, performatory activity of developing and learning. Taking performance to a metaphorical level, we would do better to imagine

stages *for* development than stages *of* development as, for example, as in Freud's or Piaget's stage theory (Holzman, 1997b).

### Creating a Global Learning Community

As mentioned earlier, the Institute is a research and training center for developing and promoting alternative and radically humanistic approaches to psychology, teaching and learning, and therapeutics. From our founding, we believed that developing new conceptual frameworks and methodologies required the simultaneous building of a fully participatory community and, further, that these twin tasks required an independent location, that is, one free of institutional ties to university, government, corporation or foundation. As a small non-profit organization, the Institute still carries on its work with a nearly all-volunteer staff of seasoned professionals and undergraduate interns, and a few hundred dedicated financial supporters who believe in our mission.

We recently created two innovative international programs as a way to include many more people into the community building activity. Performing the World (PTW) is an international conference bringing together practitioners and scholars, grassroots entrepreneurs and mainstream professionals, who are working with or want to learn about performance-based approaches to human development, social transformation and cultural change. A uniquely non-disciplinary and performatory gathering, PTWs have been held every other year since 2001. The International Class (IC) is a 10-month combination NYC residency and distance-learning program for helping professionals, educators and community developers throughout the US and internationally who want to learn the Institute's approach to human development and learning. In its first four years The

International Class has trained 50 colleagues from dozens of countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Central and South America, the US, Canada and Mexico. All told, we estimate that currently the Institute (through these and other programs and events, print and other media materials, and the Internet) and the network of organizations, institutions and individuals it works with in the US and abroad directly serve over 500,000 people annually. It is an emergent, improvisationally created learning community in practice.

In 2001 the Institute began to offer a series of online seminars, usually lasting 4-5 weeks. For the first few years we did them in real time, which was very difficult for the participants across the Atlantic (and Pacific) who had to stay up or wake up in the middle of their night. So we switched to a virtual time format, with people writing whenever it is convenient for them. The seminars are open to everyone who wants to participate, regardless of their educational background, and participants range from teachers in Brazil to US social workers needing CE credits to youth workers in India to graduate students from just about anywhere. With heterogeneity of culture, profession and experience, there is more “material” with which to build the learning community/create a ZPD.

The faculty who “teach” these seminars usually begin with a post inviting people to create the learning group simultaneous with creating the learning— like this one from “The Social Therapeutic Approach: An Unscientific Psychology”:

Hello Friends and Colleagues!

We’re a big group of people from several countries, professional locations and fields of interest. I’m looking forward to us getting to know each other as we create our learning together. If you’re new to online classes it could take some getting used to. Each of you will discover your own comfortable-with-a-little-stretch way to

participate. You can expect to hear from me quite a lot during the weeks, although I am likely to pick one day each week to concentrate on you.

Our first reading is the last chapter of Kurt Danziger's book, *Naming the Mind* (the entire book is a great read). Here's a line from it: "The special authority of modern Psychology derives, not from its moral implications, but from its scientific pretensions" (p.182). The next reading is from *Unscientific Psychology*, a book Fred Newman and I wrote, in which we say (many times!) that psychology is a myth. It will be interesting to begin by hearing from everyone responses to these statements. Some of you are psychologists and/or have studied psychology some, and others of you are not. So let's mix it up with thoughts about psychology and pretensions and myths.

Where the group goes from there is completely open. It is our job together to create the seminar/community and to take responsibility for what we create. Not surprisingly the challenges of creating community online can become a topic of conversation, as it did in the "Developing Community Development" seminar. In the second week of ongoing conversation, the Institute faculty member leading the seminar wrote:

It is certainly a particular challenge to create online communities. How are we doing in that task? How do we define ourselves? "Participation" has engendered a lot of conversation in community development circles. Issues such as the cultural dimension of participation are being looked at in the field. For this seminar, here are some questions I ask myself about participation. If people don't write, does that mean they are not participating? For me this is tricky in an online environment. In community contexts I have experienced that people who talk all the time are not necessarily more participatory than people who listen more or do more. It's a different kind of participation. But in an online context it's much harder to know

what people are thinking and/or doing if they don't write something. Online environments have this limitation. On the one hand they give us the opportunity to be in contact with people all over the world but on the other hand we are limited to the words we write to each other to be connected. The connectedness part is for me the critical issue. If it is difficult to understand each other in person, it is even more difficult online! (for example what is our understanding of what it means to understand?) So given this, I am not so concerned with understanding. Even if we don't understand each other, we can still build especially if we allow ourselves "to play with" our words and comments.

The assignments we give (in addition to readings) are to talk to people, not merely or even primarily as “research” to find out what people think, but to involve include, invite others to create conversation (and community?). And then to come back and continue the conversation online.

My colleagues sometimes introduce me as the Institute’s international ambassador because I travel all over the world meeting people. Going to conferences, lecturing, leading workshops, visiting programs, talking long into the night with newly met colleagues—whether in Belgrade, London, Moscow, Johannesburg, Amsterdam, Stockholm or Caracas is always challenging and inspiring. This international outreach is an adventure in community building. It’s a privilege to be able to learn first hand about hundreds of innovative projects being developed in villages and towns and cities, to build relationships with so many extraordinary ordinary people, and to create together with them an ever expanding and transforming developmental learning community.

Over the years people from different countries have written to me after hearing me speak or reading a book or article Newman and/or I wrote, asking how they might

learn more and train with us. That's where I got the idea for The International Class. I sat down with some of our staff to flesh out the rudiments of a program and see who wanted to teach in it. We came up with a structure—three meetings a year at the Institute in NYC and online seminars in between—and some content areas and activities. I wrote to about two dozen people who had contacted me and invited them to become the first International Class. Nine were able to do it. We were off and running!

The best way I've found to describe The International Class is as a core grouping working to create itself as a developmental learning community as it interacts with other groupings involved in the same task/activity. Concretely, The International Class is joined online each seminar by 3-15 others around the world; during residencies at the Institute, it joins with therapists teachers in our other training programs, with teachers, children and teens in schools and youth programs we work with, and with therapy clients in social therapy groups they observe. There is a wonderful—sometimes chaotic—fluidity in this coming together/separating/coming together of overlapping ZPDs. It's a fascinatingly diverse community these people have created, one that is continuously and improvisationally inclusive.

Upon graduation in June, the Institute's 2006-2007 International Class formed the International Class Alumni and Friends Fund. The members of this class included a grassroots community theatre director from Bangladesh, a medical student who formed an organization to aid Roma children in Serbia, a performance artist from Toronto, a social work professor and a social worker from rural southern Georgia, a director of a workers university in Taiwan, a social science research analyst from New York City, a Kenyan poet/storyteller who founded an organization for children orphaned by AIDS, a

development officer/youth program director from Los Angeles and, from Montreal, a performer/clown/trainer and a writer of plays and films. This is the story they are eager to tell.

We write to offer you a story of untangled emotions, human messiness, money, learning and selling pens. We want to share what has been a valuable step in our development as an international community of community builders, and invite you to join us in advancing this work.

We came together for the first time in October 2006. At that time, we engaged in new conversations and activities. As the week progressed we were introduced to new ideas about development, community building, education, social therapy and so much more through the East Side Institute. As we came to know each other, we also became aware of the financial discrepancies between participants in the International Classes. Those of us from poor countries had the furthest to travel and the least sources of funding. Before we returned home, our Class agreed to commit to our mutual growth and development as well as our participation in future residencies in February and June. As well as covering expenses for travel to New York, this involved each of us having adequate funds for food and transportation while in New York. We understood that not being physically present and/or not having enough money for everyday expenses would impact our collective development.

Immediately after our first residency we hit the ground running: asking friends, coworkers, and family members to support our International Class. We engaged potential donors, describing the leadership and commitment of our class. By the time our second residency came around we had raised \$2,000. On a very cold afternoon in February, we gathered in Union Square Park and distributed the funds. We took on guilt and shame and commitment and awkwardness and good



intentions, in order to collectivize airline tickets debt repayment, and daily expenses for the residency.

In between the second and third residencies we intensified our fundraising activities. Parties and fundraising events were held in Canada, the U.S. and Serbia where product development took the shape of a pen inscribed with the phrase "Don't leave me alone"--our signal to not suffer economic challenges in isolation. As a group, we sold almost all of these pens in Union Square Park for \$2 a piece, 5 pens to Fred Newman for \$160 (matching funds), and auctioned off the last pen for \$75 at our graduation.

At our final residency the group began to play with new questions: "What about the next class?" "What can we leave for the next class?" "Will they come together in October and have the same financial struggles as we had?" In response to these questions, the International Class of 06/07 has announced the creation of the East Side Institute International Class Alumni and Friends Fund.

We have completed a course of study, but our collective development is not done. We, as alumni, can raise funds to support future classes regardless of our economic circumstances.

It's people who change the world, Karl Marx said. Many take him to mean "the working class" or "the proletariat," a sensible reading to be sure, but an ideological one that ignores Marx's substantial humanism and concern with people—all people—developing. His language in the following quote from *The German Ideology* is 19<sup>th</sup> century but his sentiment is consistent with a 21<sup>st</sup> century social change sensibility: "We have further shown that private property can be abolished only on condition of an all-round development of individuals, because the existing character of intercourse and productive forces is an all-round one, and only individuals that are developing in an all-round

fashion can appropriate them, i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives” (Marx and Engels, 1974, p. 117). Developmental activity is the participatory process of people exercising their collective power to create new environments and new ‘all-round’ learning and development. It is, for the moment, how “we define community.”

## Notes

1. More broadly, as a method for social-emotional growth and learning, social therapy has impacted on education, including outside-of-school, or supplemental, education and youth development (Feldman and Silverman, 2004; Holzman, 1997a,b, 2000; Lobman, 2003, 2005; Sabo, 2007); on training and practice in medicine and healthcare (Massad, 2003); and on community development, organizational development and executive leadership (Farmer, 2005; Holzman, 2006; Salit, 2003).

2. This characterization of the ZPD parts ways with the more typical interpretation that it is an interactionist scaffolding process that aids in enculturation (for example, Bodrova and Leong, 1996; Rogoff, 1984; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). To me the ZPD is expressive of the dialectic of human life—that we are always who we are and simultaneously who we are becoming. For Vygotsky, the dialectic being/becoming was critical to early childhood. He noted that the critical factor in human relationships is how we relate to little children as ahead of themselves (that is, as who they are and who they are becoming) and it is by virtue of the employment of this creative methodology in every day life that human learning and development occur. Learning, then, is both the

source and the product of development, just as development is both the source and the product of learning. As activity, learning and development are inseparably intertwined and emergent, best understood together as a whole (unity). Their relationship is dialectical, not linear or temporal (one doesn't come before the other) or causal (one isn't the cause of the other).

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