

Performative Psychology An Untapped Resource for Educators

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Abstract. Performative psychology is a relatively new approach that presents exciting possibilities for educational innovation. Based in the belief that we collectively create our lives through performing (simultaneously being who we *are* and who we are *becoming*), performative psychology looks at learning and development through a cultural lens. The fact that the human capacity to perform is vastly under-utilized, under-valued and understudied in our culture suggests this as a fruitful area for further study and the development of creative practices. This article presents a brief overview of key educational and developmental concepts, including a contemporary reworking of the method of Russian psychology Lev Vygotsky. Next, the practice of one approach within the performative psychology movement is presented -- the performance social therapeutic approach developed by Newman and Holzman at the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy is illustrated through discussion of four programs carried out in educational settings.

Introduction

From its earliest days as a discipline, psychology has taken behavior to be its subject matter (Danziger, 1990, 1997). It's not only psychologists and educators who have been socialized by psychology to see behavior, but the general public (ordinary folks) as well. We are all very good at seeing behavior; when we look at ourselves and other people, that's pretty much what we see. Is there a problem with that (you might be wondering right now)? Are we missing something? Is there something else to see and respond to? Do people do things other than behave? If so, what?

The answer, according to increasing numbers of psychologists who are questioning the current accepted subject matter of psychology, is yes. Many of them seek a new unit of study for understanding human life — one that is socially-culturally based and holistic in a way that behavior isn't. Among the many problems with behavior, for these psychologists, is that it is premised on a conception of the human being as a self-contained individual who exhibits particular behaviors, some of them “hard-wired” and some of them in response to the social-cultural environment. This conception of human beings, according to its critics, distorts who people are and what people do in a fundamental sense: we aren't isolated individuals separate from each other; we're not even separate from our environment! While we surely can be (and are, in Western cultures) *distinguished* from environment, this does not mean we are *separate from* it. Instead of two separate entities, these psychologists posit, there is but one, the unity “persons-environment.” In this unity, the relationship between persons and environment is complex and dialectical: environment “determines” us and yet we can change it completely (changing ourselves in the process, since the “it”—the unity “persons-

environment”— includes us, the changers). People are social-cultural creators and changers, first and foremost. From this vantage point, the problem with psychology looks like this: if psychology is the study of behavior, then what we study when we study behavior is not human life as lived, but a distortion of it.¹

Among the candidates for the subject matter of a new psychology is *activity*. Although today numerous names are associated with “activity theory,” many in the fields of education and developmental psychology are indebted to the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky for how he challenged psychologists and educators of his day (the 1920s and 30s) to create a new psychology of activity (1978, 1987, 1993, 1997a, 1997b). Vygotsky saw human growth as a cultural activity that people engage in together, rather than as the external manifestation of an individualized, internal process. For Vygotsky, development does not happen to us — from the inside, from the outside, or from any combination of inside and outside. In both his research and theorizing, he presented a new methodology for understanding human life as lived, with a particular focus on development, learning and teaching. Key to his new methodology is the concept of *dialectical unity*. Let me “define” dialectical unity by example.

Learning and Development. In Vygotsky’s time, it was widely accepted that development is a key determinant of learning and teaching (a belief that dominates to this day). Vygotsky was troubled by this way of conceptualizing the relationship between development and learning; it didn’t ring true for him. It was too simple, too linear, too causal. He reasoned that learning/instruction (in Russian, there is but one word) would be “completely unnecessary if it merely utilized what had already matured in the

developmental process, if it were not itself a source of development” (1987, p. 212).

Learning was, to him, both the source and the product of development, just as development was 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).

Vygotsky wants us to see the activity, the totality, the whole, the unity, because it is only from that vantagepoint that we can come to understand anything about process and function. Seeing particulars, seeing parts as making up the whole—rather than seeing the whole and the inter-relationships within it—we neither see nor understand very much.

The Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (zpd) is helpful in understanding learning and development as a dialectical unity. To understand the zpd, you need to envision a new kind of entity. Neither process nor product, this new entity is simultaneously both (we can write it as one word—process-and-product or tool-and-result). Seeing process, or seeing the unity process-and-product, is very difficult because we are socialized in Western culture to see only products (things, objects, results). For example, we tend to see, experience and respond to this scholarly journal as a product and not as a moment in an ongoing process (or many processes) that includes the human history of writing, literacy, education, research, etc., the development and learning of each specific reader of these words, and so on. We tend also to see, experience and respond to people as products (identities, labels) rather than as

ongoing process. We see ourselves and others as “who we are” (products) and not as simultaneously “who we are” (which includes our history of becoming who we are) and “who we are becoming.” Yet, each one of us is, at every moment, *both being and becoming*. The zpd is the ever emergent and continuously changing “distance” between being and becoming. It is human activity that gives birth to and nurtures the zpd and, with its creation, human learning and development. In my own work with children and adults in educational and therapeutic settings, I have come to see the zpd as activity rather than as a zone.

Vygotsky noted a fascinating feature of the zpd, one that until recently has been all but ignored by educators and psychologists. In zpd-like environments — that is, ones in which learning and development are jointly created by people’s activity — what happens is that we do things we don’t yet know how to do, we go beyond ourselves. This capacity of people to do things in advance of themselves, Vygotsky discovered, is the essence of human growth. Children learn and develop, he said, by “performing a head taller than they are” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).

One of his most wonderful illustrations is the learning-development of language. Vygotsky vividly described how babies transform from babblers to speakers of a language through performing. The language-learning zpd is an environment that supports the baby to speak when it doesn’t know how to, that is, to perform as a speaker. Vygotsky observed that children become speakers of language through the performance of conversations that they and their caregivers create. The babbling baby’s rudimentary speech is a *creative imitation* of the more developed speaker’s speech. At the same time,

the more developed speakers complete the baby and immediately accept her/him into the community of speakers. They neither give very young children a grammar book and dictionary to study, nor reprimand and correct them. Instead, they relate to them as capable of far more than they could possibly do; they relate to them as speakers, feelers, thinkers and makers of meaning. This is what makes it possible for very young children to do what they are not yet capable of. In this way, we can say that they are *performing* beyond themselves as speakers. When they are playing with language in this way in the language-learning zpd, babies are simultaneously performing—*becoming*—themselves. Performing is a way of taking "who we are" and creating something new—in this case, a new speaker—through incorporating "the other."

Vygotsky's message is profound: performing is how we learn and develop. It is through performing—doing what is beyond us—that when we are very young we learn to do the varied things we don't know how to do. But what happens, as we perform our way into cultural and societal adaptation, is that we also perform our way out of continuous development. A lot of what we have learned (through performing) becomes routinized and rigidified into behavior. (In educational settings in particular, we are too often related to as "who we are" and rarely encouraged and supported to creatively perform beyond ourselves, to do what we don't know how to do so that we can continuously create who we are becoming.) We become so skilled at acting out roles that we no longer keep creating new performances of ourselves. We develop an identity as "this kind of person"—someone who does certain things (and does them in certain ways) and feels

certain ways. Anything other than that, most of us think—as we forget that we are also who we are becoming—would not be "true" to "who we are."

Creating environments for children and adults to perform can reinitiate growth. Participating in creating the performance “stage” and performing on it is how we can go beyond ourselves to create new experiences, new skills, new intellectual capacities, new relationships, new interests, new emotions, new hopes, new goals—which is, after all, what learning and developing are all about.

Performative Psychology

We have now reached the subject “proper” of this essay—the potential of performance and ways that the new performative psychology can serve as a powerful educational intervention. Performative psychology is based in an understanding of human life as primarily performative, that is, we collectively create our lives through performing (simultaneously being who we *are* and who we are *becoming*). Psychologists, psychotherapists and educators who practice and promote performative psychology, such as myself, believe that the human capacity to perform is vastly under-utilized, under-valued and understudied in our culture.²

In the remainder of this essay, I will try to show performative psychology at work. I will draw upon my own experience and illustrate a few of the performative psychology projects I have been involved with in my capacity as director of educational programs at the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy. (The Institute is a research and

training center for human development and community. Headquartered in New York City, it has ties to sister centers in other US cities and collaborates with organizations in other countries.) The Institute's particular performative psychology specialty is *performance social therapy*, a therapeutic and educational practice that supports adults and children to actively shape environments in which they can creatively perform both who they are and who they are becoming (see Holzman, 1999b; Newman and Holzman, 1996; 1997). The Institute designs and implements programs for children, youth and adults in family, school, after school and community settings and provides training and consultation in our approach to other organizations.³ Below I briefly describe a few of these programs.

Programs in Educational Settings

Performance social therapy—which we refer to as performatory developmental learning in our educational projects—enhances students learning by creating opportunities for them to perform as learners (and readers, writers, speakers, scientists, mathematicians, artists, historians, and so on).

Among the numerous benefits of performance as pedagogy is that it suspends truth and truth telling, and the shame and blame associated so often with “getting it wrong.” When a five-year-old girl says, “I’m the Daddy and you’re the baby” in pretend play with her eight-year-old sister, there is no presumption of truth or falsity. When a

character in a play utters the line, “My name is Cinderella” no one questions its truth-value. (No audience member gets up and says, “No, you’re not! You’re my daughter!”)

When children are very young we encourage their imagination and care little if their creativity clashes with reality or what we take to be true. Indeed, babies and toddlers manage quite well without being held accountable for the truth— without even any awareness of it. Their learning and developing happen at a fantastic rate as they participate in creating life activities with their families and caregivers in an environment that is, to a large extent, performatory and, thereby, unconstrained by truth-referentiality. The three-year-old who draws a Mommy with green hair floating next to a yellow sun that is half her size is applauded for his drawing, but by the time he is ten, the child will get little praise for drawing unrealistically. This is not an argument against representational art or perspective; it is a concern is with how we adapt children to a culture that places such a high premium on truth telling, facts, reality and “being right.”. For the truth-telling game is played in such a way that we lose sight (and typically never teach children) that it is a game, a way of speaking, a form of life, a performance. In the process, performing, improvising, creatively imitating and doing what you don’t know how to do become de-valued.

Performing School

As noted earlier, Vygotsky has shown us that successful learning takes place in early childhood when there is a *zpd*—a performatory environment in which young children and their caretakers jointly create conversations, essentially through language play.

We approached the creation of a primary school with this in mind. We wanted to create a school in which similar kinds of improvisational conversations could occur (e.g., science conversations, math conversations, and so on). To us, that meant the learning environment had to be playful and performatory. We knew this would be a great challenge because of how unplayful and unperformatory schools in the US tend to be. Beyond kindergarten, play (including pretend play, the unself-conscious performance that dominates in early childhood) is discouraged and even disallowed. Schools not only replicate the broad cultural dichotomy “work/play” (“stop playing around and get down to work”); they also reinforce it organizationally and discursively with their own educational dichotomy “learning/playing.” For example, in most schools a specific time is set aside for play (and this only in the early grades; by junior high and high school play time has been replaced by study hall and physical education classes). We speak of doing “school work,” not “school play;” we “play house” but we don’t “play reading.” In these ways, children are socialized very early on to associate playing with free time, fun and frivolity, and learning with work, what is important and what is real. (Adults do this as well. If you are a teacher or parent, listen to yourself over the course of a day and hear how you talk to your students or children about school, work, play and learning.)

The Institute’s longest-running educational project was the Barbara Taylor School, a primary school for children ages 4-14, which served as a laboratory for the

development of a Vygotskian activity-based pedagogical approach from 1984-1996. In its early years, the school's innovation was in its content more than its structure; as in many schools, children were separated into three age groups, but emotional and social development were as important as intellectual growth. In the later years, the school was transformed into a performance space (both physically and conceptually) and the student body, teachers and other adults became a multi-age, multi-skill ensemble cast and crew. Children spent their days creating life scenes, aided by adults who functioned more as theatre directors and reorganizers of conversation than teachers in the traditional sense. To the extent that there was a curriculum, it was jointly created each day by the students and adults through improvisational performance. To the extent that developmental learning occurred, it was created simultaneously with performance. I have written extensively about the history and practice of the Barbara Taylor School (see Holzman, 1995, 1997b, Strickland and Holzman, 1985; and especially *Schools for Growth*, 1997a). Here I present a vignette from our extensive notes.

The students and learning directors were having lunch. Charles, a new student just beginning his third week at the school, begins taunting Alice for being stupid. Both children are eight years old, he has just discovered. Charles had been in a gifted program in a public school and prided himself on being very smart. He was constantly getting into fights with other children, was identified as a problem student, and was routinely sent home from school. For these reasons, his mother decided to place him in the

Barbara Taylor School; she thought he needed a more therapeutic environment where he would be supported to grow emotionally and socially.

The scene began when Charles loudly and incredulously proclaimed, “You don’t know how to spell ‘cat’! I don’t believe you’re in third grade!” Learning director Len said to the group, “I need some help. Charles is playing the Competitive Game and it’s turning into the Nasty Game.” When I came over, Charles was continuing to “marvel” at the fact that Alice could not spell ‘cat.’ He kept asking, “Why can’t she spell ‘cat’?” Alice was sinking lower in her seat, her head bowed. Len and some of the students attempted to change what was going on. They asked Charles why it mattered so much to him, why he was being nasty, and if he wanted to do something about it. A twelve-year-old boy said matter of factly, “No one taught her to spell; that’s why she can’t.” I told Charles I thought his question was a good one and that I had another good one— “How come you *can* spell ‘cat’?” Charles said, “My mother taught me.” Several of us pursued this: “How did she do it?” Charles said that his mother told him to watch the game shows on TV and he did; that’s how he learned to spell.

During these conversational exchanges, Alice’s brother Kevin whispered to her, “C-A-T” and she began to say repeatedly, “Cat--c-a-t.” Charles shouted at Kevin, “Don’t tell her! That’s cheating.” One of the

students excitedly said, “She’s learning it right now!” We asked Alice if she wanted to learn how to spell; she said she did. We asked Charles and the others if they thought Alice might be able to learn by watching game shows; they said yes. During the next ten minutes an animated discussion took place on how to organize game show-spelling performances both at the school and for Alice at home. By the time lunch was over, it was decided that Charles and Len would be the co-producers and directors of the performances and four students had signed up to be the writers. Over the course of the next several days, the game show-spelling performance became an integrated activity of the school. On one day, Charles spent over an hour making a schedule of all the shows he thought Alice should watch. The writers spent time putting together flash cards to be used on the game show. Different students would come along and add a word or two throughout the course of the day. (Holzman, 1997, pp. 124-125)

As director of the Barbara Taylor School at the time, I was less concerned with whether Alice would learn to spell than with Alice and others learning that spelling is learnable — that is, that it is a performance. It seems to me that learning that you are a learner is key to developmental learning. While it was long ago pointed out (for example, by Bateson, 1972) that learning how to learn is a component of learning anything, learning how to learn is not the whole story. In learning something, young children are learning not just two things but three: the particular thing learned; how to learn; and *that they are*

learners/that learning is something human beings do (Holzman and Newman, 1987). It is this third “kind” of learning that traditional schooling, with its emphasis on acquisitional, knowledge-based learning, leaves out. But without it, learning becomes separated from and often replaces developing. The relational activity at the lunch table just described is the process of creating a zpd that makes it possible (but, of course, not inevitable) for developmental learning to occur, in part through the reintroduction of this performatory element of the activity of learning.

This vignette is meant to illustrate some of the important characteristics of performatory developmental learning. First, it is activity-centered. The task is to continuously shape and reshape the unity persons-environment into a zpd where learning-development might occur. The adults are trying to shape the group activity (the creating of the zpd) rather than control behavior. Second, the group activity was improvisational. The process of coming up with the idea for a collective game show-spelling performance was a reshaping of some of the elements in the existing acquisitional knowledge-dominated environment to create possible learning. Third, Charles’ nastiness was not related to as a behavior problem, but as a way of talking (a line in a play, a language game) that needed to be dealt with. No one tried to stop Charles from making fun of Alice as an end in itself; the group worked to reshape what he was giving—his question, competitiveness and abuse (and curiosity, perhaps)—into something potentially developmental for the school as a whole. What was created, among other things, was a new language or conversational game (we could call it the Curiosity Game or the How Do You Learn To Spell Game). Asking Charles how come he could spell and how he

learned to do so was, as I see it, a bit of practical philosophizing. It changed the focus from knowing to learning, from product to process, from fixed mental states and identities and labels to relational possibilities. Spelling is one of the infinite performances of which human beings are capable. Alice could perform as a speller (create who she is by being who she is becoming); Charles could relate to her as a speller rather than as “a dummy.” These new possibilities come into being simultaneously with language activity, the making of new meanings, the performance of conversation. And, for the moment, no one was playing the Nasty Game.

Performing English

In 1998, we followed an English as a Second Language (ESL) class in an urban New York City high school. The teacher, a Master’s level ESL teacher who is also an actor, had had some training in performatory developmental learning. We were interested to see how this approach worked in a traditional setting and to learn something about the process by which the class developed as a positive environment for the learning of English. Observations and audio- and video-recordings were made weekly, meetings with the teacher were held periodically and, near the end of the semester, a student focus group was held. At the students’ request, it was followed by a performance they created to illustrate and expand on topics that emerged in the focus group.⁴

When performance is used in classrooms, it is typically as an instrumental tool to facilitate the learning of some particular content or skill. Even if improvisational,

performance rarely grows from the entirety of the classroom culture (Pineau, 1994). In performatory developmental learning, however, it is the activity of performance that takes center stage. The goal is to create a performatory environment. In this ESL classroom, the attempt was made to use everything that goes on in a classroom (for example, one student's bad attitude, another's reading skills, the teacher's experience, the topic of the day's lesson, the text, etc.) as a potential growth activity. The students and teacher worked together in an improvisational manner to continuously shape and reshape the environment into a "learning-development stage" upon which the students could perform beyond themselves as speakers, readers and writers of English. In other words, they had two simultaneous performance tasks: creating the stage and performing on it.

Analysis of the observational data suggest that the teacher's method was effective in three related areas: environment building; English language practice; and classroom ambiance. What the teacher did helped her and her students create a positive learning environment, as summarized below:

Key Elements of Teacher's Method

Focused on the total and ongoing activity of the class rather than on particular topics or tasks

Related to everything happening as performance and to students and herself as performers

Directed and re-directed students in new intellectual and social performances

Characteristics of Positive Learning Environment

Created trust and support and minimized fear and competition

Encouraged students to play with language rather than worry about being right/looking good

Provided constant experiences of success, particularly in creating new ways to relate to themselves, each other, language, and teaching materials (texts, assignments, tests, etc.)

The teacher introduced theatrical discourse to the classroom (e.g., “Let’s see how we perform together as a class right now;” “That was an interesting performance;” “Would you like to perform that scene over again?”). As performance and performance language became a regular part of the classroom activity, students began to direct each other—and scenes always ended with a round of applause. These newly created classroom rituals were important in integrating performance into every aspect of the class. They also were key to creating the new culture of the classroom, a culture that was performatory rather than information and knowledge based.⁵ Two illustrations follow.

In this first vignette, a student’s disruptive behavior was transformed through improvisational performance into a new scene in the ongoing class play. Early in the semester a fight broke out between two students. Ivan was late for class and Mary went to the locked door to let him in. Before she got to the door Ivan began calling her names and Mary decided not to open it. The teacher intervened and let Ivan in. He was furious

and continued screaming nasty remarks at Mary. Under the teacher's direction, Ivan's disruptive behavior became an occasion for an improvisational performance that contributed to the ongoing process of creating a new culture of the classroom.

Teacher - *[speaking to Ivan]* Well, maybe we need to do your performance again. Do you want to go out and do it over?

Ivan - No!

Michael - This is baby stuff.

Teacher - Why do you think that, Michael?

Michael - This is the kind of stuff you do when you are a kid, name calling and stuff.

[Ivan and Mary continue with the name calling across the room at one another]

Teacher - Yeah, let's do it over *[never losing her humor or cool]*. I think you should do it over and do it differently. *[To class]* Can you think of different ways that he could come in again?

Ivan - No one cares, let's get to work, we are disturbing everyone's work.

Students - We care about the way you act, do it over, yeah, do it over.

Michael - He could be a bum.

Ivan - I'm not doing it. Can someone play me?

[No one volunteer to play Ivan. Ivan gets annoyed and says that they should all start their work and forget about it.]

Teacher - OK, I will play Ivan.

Ivan - You have to do it the same way that I did..

Teacher - I think it should be different.

Students - Yeah, you should do it as a bum.

[Ivan keeps shouting at Mary and mouthing off during this discussion. The teacher goes out, she knocks on door obnoxiously. Mary doesn't let her in at first. Finally, she does and the teacher, performing as Ivan, saunters in and begins yelling at Mary. She walks around room touching and annoying everyone. Her performance is very exaggerated and funny; the whole class is laughing]

Teacher - Was that a bum?

Class - No, that was Ivan.

Ivan - *[laughing]* That was me.

Teacher - *[winks at him]* Was that you?

Ivan - Yeah.

Teacher - Let's see how we perform together as a class right now, let's move on.

From a behavioral point of view, a response to the fight between Ivan and Mary might have been to remove Ivan from the class and send him to the principal's office for being disruptive. Then, the teacher could continue with her lesson. From an activity/performance point of view, the teacher leads the class in creating a performatory/developmental learning environment in which they can try out different parts. She works to keep Ivan in the class and build with what he offers (in improv language, a "bad offer"). She functions more as a theatre director than as a traditional teacher. Students are challenged to take collective responsibility for their classroom and each other by using their creativity to respond in new ways to "old" situations. They begin to relate to what Ivan is doing as a performance and redirect it; in this process, they create new ways of relating to Ivan and themselves.⁶ They have the valuable experience of doing "the scene" over again.

In the second vignette a reading lesson becomes enlivened through performance. In this ESL class, textbook lessons were often treated as scripts. This particular lesson utilized a story written by a Native American.

Teacher - We will be reading a story written by a Native American. What do their voices sound like?

Michael - *[imitates a bad movie version]* GO – NOW.

Teacher – Oh, because they're learning English like you guys.

Michael – No, they talk slow " You — GO—HERE— NOW"

[The class begins to laugh. They are enjoying Michael's performance and several want to try speaking and reading like Native Americans]

Jenny - I want to read now.

Teacher - Can you read like a Native American girl?

[Jenny tries a slow and deliberate voice like Michael's. Everyone laughs as she does this voice. They are having a great time]

Teacher - Does anyone else want to try?

Andre - Yes [*He reads next in a very funny voice and everyone laughs at his imitation*]

Teacher - Anyone else?

Desiree - But the story is over.

Teacher - We can start from the top.

[*Now everyone wants to read*]

Teacher - Two sentences each so everyone can read.

[*A girl does it and all of the girls giggle at her performance. They are having a lot of fun with this. People are all whispering along trying out their best Native American voices. Jesus wants to go next but gets shy and laughs and says he will wait. Then Andre wants to read. He does an exaggerated, very deep voice. The teacher says in a very deep voice matching his, "GOOD!", "EXCELLENT." Now Jesus wants to do it finally. The voices get funnier and funnier. Everyone gives a round of applause*]

The students wanted to read and were disappointed when the bell finally rang. No longer just reading the words off the page; they were making and playing with meaning. From a developmental perspective, these young people were being supported to go beyond themselves as readers. Performing helped them break out of their usual roles; in their performances as “Native American English speakers” they were moving around their identities as non-English speakers.

A final point of interest is that here and at other times students laughed at each other, yet no one seemed to mind or take it personally. The laughter seemed directed at the performances, not at the individual students. Often it seemed as if the laughter enticed them to go further — to speak louder and more clearly. High school students in ESL classes are usually reluctant to speak up for fear of being made fun of. In this ESL classroom, an environment had been created in which students were supportive of each other’s performances and encouraged each other to take risks and play with language.

As these students, under the teacher’s direction, continuously created the performatory environment, they were freed from their prescribed roles—that of non-

English speakers—to play with language and thereby change their relationship to it. They were able to break out of the identity of non-knowers and become learners. Trained in performative psychology, the teacher was able to see activity and performance — and not just linguistic behavior. Seeing performance is transformative of teaching practices: “Seeing the teaching and learning process as performance potentially allows one to see and create new things, including performatory pedagogy” (Holzman, 1997, p. 128).

The teacher’s ability to relate to all classroom activity as performance allowed the students to learn how to learn and to take collective and individual responsibility for their classroom as a “learning and performance laboratory.” They no longer felt they needed to sound good or learn grammar before speaking, they just spoke. In the process, they got to sound better and to learn grammar. Whether as their parents or grandparents, Native Americans or early pioneers, teachers or themselves, they were speaking, listening, reading and writing in English. Through performing, they began the long process of creating their life-long development as navigators and creators of the English language.

After School Performance Groups

“Performing helps if you’re shy, it helps you look someone in the eye and talk to them in a strong voice. It helped John this way. You can do all kinds of things you might not think you can when you’re performing.”
(Mother of 10-year-old participant in Growing Up Performed)

The developmental nature of performance can be used effectively in dealing with specific social-psychological issues that young people face. Examples from my own work are

two programs we were asked to design, one for teen pregnancy prevention and another for children who had been sexually abused. A most important element of these programs is that they were open to all children — girls and boys, pregnant or not, in the case of teen pregnancy, and girls and boys, identified as sexually abused or not, in the case of abuse. We believe that working with heterogeneous groups is critical to the success of performance groups and, consequently, no group is ever identified, isolated and worked with by itself. An equally important characteristic of these programs is that they did not focus on the “presenting problems” of pregnancy or abuse. We felt confident (and were proved correct) that such issues would come up in the children’s performances of their lives.

Both programs were voluntary after school programs. “Pregnant Productions” (teen pregnancy prevention) took place in neighborhoods with high teen pregnancy rates in the NY metropolitan area. Participants were drawn locally and they came to an institutional location (a school or community center) with which they already had a relationship. “Growing Up Performed” (sexual abuse) was held in a performance school/space in Soho; children came from all over the city to what was, in effect, a sophisticated, adult environment that was new to them.

Pregnant Productions was organized as a production company. Under the direction of two performance social therapy specialists, the pre-teen and teen participants not only created skits out of their life experiences, they also produced and promoted public showings in their communities. Many, but by no means all, of their skits dealt with hard and painful issues in their lives (including pregnancy). The challenging task of

building an ensemble—coordinating your actions with those of others, deciding what and how to perform and respond to another, etc.— provided the young people with nearly continuous opportunities to make choices. It was this aspect of performance that we believed would be most helpful to these teens and pre-teens: learning to make choices is a critically important life skill that takes on heightened significance as young people face questions of sex, sexuality and pregnancy.

Growing Up Performed was designed to intervene on the stigma typically associated with abuse. It was comprised of children ages 6-12, at least half of whom self-identified as being abused or were referred because they were abused. While the impact of abuse varies from person to person (some young people experience extreme emotional pain and trauma as a result of abuse; others do not), abuse touches everyone and everyone can learn to deal with it in more growthful ways. We believed that performing their lives would support all the children to develop socially and emotionally in ways that would help them when faced with abusive situations. Children came together twice weekly to learn the language and activities of the theatre, as they learned to perform their lives on stage. Two performance professionals and a school social worker (all with varying degrees of training in performance social therapy) directed the groups. Video was incorporated into the program for reviewing scenes and teaching directing. Parents were encouraged to drop in and participate in the program as well. As with *Pregnant Productions*, the children produced a public performance of their creative efforts.

Performance groups such as these are highly effective environment for social and emotional “growth spurts.” While detailed analysis and discussion of these programs is

beyond the scope of this article, I can summarize briefly what we have learned from conducting these groups.

Performing requires a greater level of cooperation, creativity and self-exposure compared to most other activities available to young children in typical institutional contexts.

Among the many ways young people have been found to develop by participating in performance activities are the following:

1. Increasing self-confidence, stemming from the satisfaction and gratification of successfully creating something with others;
2. Appreciating the relevance of and gaining respect for their own and others' life experiences;
3. Expanding the boundaries of their world and their repertoire of responses;
4. Breaking old behavior patterns and being open to new possibilities;
5. Learning the value of slowing down and self-reflection;
6. Realizing you can make mistakes and have another chance to do it different and maybe better;
7. Speaking your mind and allowing others to do the same.

I hope the stories I have told here have made it possible to see activity—if only fleetingly—and thus open the reader to entertaining the possibility of a psychology with a new subject matter. Nothing more than a glimpse can be expected from my descriptions (I think that is the nature of descriptions). To me, the implications of performative psychology for education are enormous. Even more important, I believe that

performance, as a method and as a form of life, can help us to restructure and rebuild how it is that we are together.

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Notes

1. Among the numerous recent critiques of mainstream psychology that include discussions of new subject matter for psychology are Bruner (1996); Holzman (1999); Holzman and Morss (2000); Gergen (1994); McNamee and Gergen (1999); Newman and Holzman (1996, 1997); Sampson (1993); Shotter (1993); and Soyland (1994).
2. Largely due to the efforts of social psychologist Kenneth Gergen, the term performative psychology has come to refer as well to the use of performance in scholarship, particularly the use of alternative forms of presentation of theory and data. Since the mid-1990s, Gergen has generated performative psychology symposia at the annual conventions of the American Psychological Association.
3. The performatory social therapeutic approach of the East Side Institute is the basis for youth programs sponsored by the All Stars Project Inc., including its thirteen-year-old flagship All Stars Talent Show Network (involving 20,000 inner city young people each year). The approach is also utilized in “Let’s Talk About It,” a New York City school-based mental health clinic teen group that is becoming a model for other such clinics in the US.
4. This discussion is based on a report to the Virginia Wellington Cabot Foundation who generously funded the study. The data were analyzed utilizing a coding system much like that described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) in *Basics of Qualitative Research*. This approach aids the researcher in seeing patterns emerging from the data. As themes and patterns were defined, a coding system was created and data was

categorized accordingly. During this process, constant reflection occurred about both the data and the process of analyzing the data. In this way, themes and patterns were modified when needed and the researcher remained constantly vigilant for new understandings.

5. Students' comments on their experience in this class suggest that the culture they created was safe, respectful, supportive and intimate (e.g., "We feel safe here," "Everybody knows each other here," "We understand each other" and "If we don't understand, someone else can help you.").
6. Performing challenges the widely held belief that our actions must inevitably follow from how we feel. When it comes to ourselves and those we know, we forget that if this really were the case, there could be no such thing as theatre or other cultural entertainment. Depressed actors would act depressed on stage regardless of the play in which they were performing. Creating the stage and creating the performance change our relationship to what we have been socialized to see as our level of emotional, intellectual and social development and our personality or character.