

Creating Communities of Hope

Lois Holzman
East Side Institute
New York NY USA

Keynote Lecture
2016 International Conference of Allies Across Boundaries:
Diverse Practices of Education and Human Potential Development
National Dong-Hwa University, Hualien Taiwan
November 18-19, 2016

I speak to you today about education as a revolutionary and as a play revolutionary. A revolutionary because I've chosen to live my life as an activist who uses my academic background and experience to organize people—as individuals and communities—to participate in creating their development. A play revolutionary because I have seen first hand in hundreds and hundreds of cases the power of play to reinitiate development and learning, to allow people to see new possibilities, to create new ways of being in the world with themselves and others, and to generate hope. And whether we think that these are or should be the goals of education, we know that we are living in a time when education is incapable of meeting these goals. I will share with you how it is that education cannot succeed in the absence of play. But I will not stop there, for that would be quite depressing. I'll also share a new understanding of play and its relationship to learning and development, give some examples of successful practices, and perhaps inspire hope.

Certainly in the US—and from what I can see and have been told—in most nations, we are suffering from a growing gap between our development needs and our learning needs.

This gap stems in large part from how learning has come to be understood and practiced. Educational institutions are structured and function with a misguided conception of learning, misguided because it separates learning from development and from play and takes learning to be the acquisition of skills and information. The acquisition of skills and information is the assimilation of what already exists. And while this is of course necessary for adaptation to a society and culture, it does not lead to qualitative transformation, growth of individuals or communities, or new possibilities for a society, culture or the world. For that, we need development. Development is the creating of something new. You can learn a particular thing acquisitionally, but you can only become a learner if you learn developmentally. Becoming a learner requires the transformation of who you are, not an accumulation of what you know. Without the continuous development of people, our societies may prove incapable of producing *learners*.

Similar to a misconception of learning, educational institutions operate with a misguided conception of human development. This conception comes from the dominant Western psychology, which permeates the world. It says that human development happens *to* individuals; it says human development is an evolutionary, hierarchical and essentially internal process. It says that human development takes place in a sequence of stages. And it says that first you reach a developmental stage and then you learn.

This is the psychology of development I was trained in and that I reject. I reject it because in my experience that's not how people grow. I reject it because it does not foster the development of people, but, in fact, it hinders it. It is all about people as products and not

as active producers. It has a politic of maintaining the status quo. Its methods and conceptions glorify individualism and stifle collective action. It holds up science and reason as humanity's saviors and denigrates art and creativity. And in doing all this, psychology contributes to educational failure.

So, 40 years ago I began—with wonderful colleagues—to create a new psychology, one that we call a psychology of becoming and social therapeutics.

This new psychology has a different starting point from what we know as psychology. Instead of positing the individual as primary, as what human beings are, its starting point is relationality. We are social beings—first, last and everywhere in between. Instead of seeing growth and development as something that happens *to* us, from inside out, in the new psychology, we *create* our development and growth. Instead of being about who people are and how they tick compared to some norms psychology made up, the new psychology sees human beings as simultaneously who we are and other than who we are, or who we are becoming. Instead of seeing human beings as only shaped by environment, in the new psychology human beings also reshape and create our environments.

DEVELOPMENT

- ❖ A social cultural activity
- ❖ Doesn't happen to us—people create it
- ❖ Qualitative transformation of what is
- ❖ A process of becoming



The method of this new psychology is to organize all kinds of people—young and old, rich, poor and in-between—to become active reshapers of their environments. Creators of their emotionality, their learning, their growth, their communities. It's an activity that re-initiates hope and imagination—allowing us to see new possibilities and make them happen. Within education, then, if you want all students to become successful learners, then you and they together must transform the environments in which they are not successful learners. That's the developmental activity needed to develop learners. That's developmental learning.

Here is where play comes in. When we play, learning and development are inseparable. Play is how we learn developmentally. Play is how we become learners. Just look at

babies.

When we welcome babies into our world

They learn-play
seamlessly and
continuously all
day long

They play with
everyone and
everything



We're all here tonight because we played our way into becoming who we are today. Way back when, we were babbling, crawling little babies. Way back when, we played—and it changed everything. We played at speaking and walking before we knew how to speak or walk, and that's how come we became speakers and walkers. Our caregivers helped us (they played right along with us) and they absolutely loved us for it and cheered us on. They helped us play at being “bigger” and older and more skilled than we actually were—or as one of my heroes, the early 20th century psychologist Lev Vygotsky, says — as if we are “a head taller” than we are.



“In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were

a head taller than himself.

In this sense, play is a major source of development.”

Lev Vygotsky

This phrase—a head taller—captures how and why human beings develop and learn—because we are not only who are at any given moment or age or stage of life. We are also other than who we are. **We are simultaneously who we are AND who we are becoming.** We are babies who can’t speak a language AND—through play—we are speakers.

PLAYING IS HOW BABIES LEARN TO TALK

- ❖ We play language games with babies
- ❖ We perform conversations with them
- ❖ We pretend they can speak before they can
- ❖ We pretend they understand us before they can

That's how they BECOME speakers!



To summarize so far, play is how babies develop because:



It turns out there's another human activity with the same characteristics as play. In English we call it performance, like what actors do on the stage. Like babies, actors get to be both who they are AND someone other than who they are (their character) AT THE SAME TIME).

WHEN WE PERFORM, WE....

- ✧ Go beyond ourselves
- ✧ Do things without knowing how
- ✧ Relate as who we are and other than who we are
—at the very same time
- ✧ Create something new out of what exists



This playful and performatory way of being in the world with others is something that all of us, at any age, can do. But most of us stop. It's not our fault. A bias against play is deep in our culture. We're taught that play is frivolous. That there's a difference between learning and playing—and that learning is what matters. We're told that performance is being phony or fake—and that being "your true self" is what's important. We're told constantly who we are—and that limits who we can become. We focus on getting it right and looking good—and that stops us from developing. Without play, we get stuck. Without performing in new ways, we get stuck. Individuals get stuck. Families get stuck. Communities get stuck. Nations get stuck. Indeed, these days the whole world appears stuck in old roles, stale performances, destructive games, and emotional turmoil.

Being stuck in standing still. To get unstuck, we have to move. And play is MOVEMENT. Performance is MOVEMENT. In physical space, in time, **and in the always becoming-ness of our lives**. When we move, we get a new perspective. Turn your head 90 degrees and what you see is different from what you saw seconds ago. Walk your usual route to work or home as a tourist there for the very first time and you'll have a new perspective. Strike a power pose as you walk into a meeting with your boss or professor and you'll feel different about the conversation you're about to have.

When we play and perform, we move about and around what's there in our surroundings and in how we feel, see and experience. We can see old things in new ways and we can see new things, things we've never seen before. Walk into your house or dorm room backwards and you'll see it in a new way. Try dancing with your brother or sister or roommate when you get home instead of mumbling hello. We discover what's always been there. We create new ways to feel, new ideas and new beliefs. We discover AND create what we're made of.

Helping people move around old ways of being and seeing and doing and feeling is what my colleagues and I do. We support them to be active participants in creating their and their community's learning and development—continuously. We call our practice social therapeutics as a new psychology of becoming.

SOCIAL THERAPEUTICS: A PSYCHOLOGY OF BECOMING

- ❖ **Social Therapeutics is an approach to human development, community development and social change that relates to people of all ages and life circumstances as social performers and creators of their lives and culture**
- ❖ **Human beings are not only who we are at any given time but simultaneously who we are becoming**



Our work is realized, manifest and developed through a network of independent organizations that we have built and expanded over 40 years. Two guiding principles were there at the start and remain to this day.

First, to be independently funded and supported, and not take money or be constrained by government, corporate, university, foundation or other traditional funding sources. This involved reaching out to ordinary Americans for financial support and participation, by stopping them on street corners and knocking on the doors of their homes. That activity allowed individuals to become active participants in the activities and organizations we were building together—citizens in the best sense of that word. And because we reached out to all sorts of people on the streets and by knocking at their doors, what has evolved

is a new kind of partnership between wealthy and middle class Americans and the poor, a partnership that sidesteps the institutions and assumptions of tradition, ideology and politics as usual.

Our second working principal has been to create new kinds of institutions that in their very design and activity challenge the foundations of their traditional “counterparts.” Examples: The East Side Institute is an educational, research and training center for our new psychology of becoming. But anyone can study and train with us, no matter their educational level or profession. The Institute’s educational approach is playful, philosophical and conversational, as opposed to didactic, and our goal is to support as diverse a group of people as possible to create developmental learning environments. The Barbara Taylor School, which I ran for 12 years, denied individuated, acquisitional learning, and where we began every school day with the question, “How shall we perform school today?” Our social therapy centers practice a group therapy approach that defies the medical model of mainstream psychotherapy and denies that emotionality is in our “heads,” and, instead, locates emotionality in social activity. UX is a university-style adult school that is free, open to everyone who wants to participate and has no grades or degrees. The All Stars Talents Show is a national network of talent shows for youth that is based on cooperation, not competition and ignores the very conception of talent.

Today, the organizations that comprise what is now called the “development community” are the All Stars Project and its youth development programs, free developmental school for people of all ages, and its theatre; the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term

Psychotherapy with its education and study programs and course and research; the Social Therapy Group in NYC and social therapy affiliates in other cities; Performance of a Lifetime, a for-profit business that brings our performance approach to corporations and non-profits to “humanize” the workplace; independentvoting.org; and the bi-annual Performing the World conferences.

THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY BEING AND BECOMING THROUGH PLAYING AND PERFORMING

- ❖ East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy
- ❖ Social Therapy Group
- ❖ Performance of a Lifetime
- ❖ All Stars Project
- ❖ Performing the World
- ❖ Independentvoting.org



These organizations have national and international reach, with the direct participation of tens of thousands who impact on hundreds of thousands. They reach different people with different specific needs, but all share a methodology that involves people of all ages in the ongoing collective activity of creating new kinds of environments where they can be active performers of their lives.

I know turn to some illustrations of how all the insights about play and performance and learning and development I have just described have been put to use. My examples are from one of the organizations we've built—the All Stars Project. The All Stars ...

Through its performance-based youth development programs, the All Stars challenges the traditional psychological approaches to solving social problems, especially poverty, the lack of opportunity in poor communities and poor families, and violence.

The first project is Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids, a performance-based intervention on the intensely conflict-ridden relationship between police officers and young people of color in the US. Ten years ago, an especially brutal police shooting of an unarmed young man in NYC prompted Lenora Fulani, co-founder of the All Stars Project and a long-time political activist and grassroots educator, to try a new approach to the community's anger. She brought some police officers and inner-city teens to do something quite unusual—to improvise and perform together. Over the next 10 years well over 100 workshops have taken place in housing projects, community centers, churches, schools and Police Athletic League Centers, with about 2000 young people and 1500 police officers participating. Twice a year, there is a public demonstration of a workshop that all new police officers who have just graduate from the police academy must attend.

OPERATION CONVERSATION: COPS AND KIDS



This is a scene from a workshop. The police officers and young people are creating a scene on a trivial topic—on this day it was pets—that has nothing to do with the tensions between them. Right before, they were walking around in slow motion, making funny faces at each other and talking in gibberish. After being silly and awkward with each other like this, the cops and kids sit down and talk. They tell each other what’s hard about being a cop and what’s hard about being a kid. They discover that what’s hard is the same—worrying you won’t come home alive. They also tell each other how they wish the cops would treat them and how they wish the kids would treat them. The cops and kids are creating new performances of themselves and of their relationship. They can see each other in new ways, not in their cop and kid social roles. It’s play that allows them to experience each other as human beings, and to create more choices of how to act the next

time they encounter each other in the streets.

Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids resists what American social psychologist Ken Gergen calls “the tyranny of the normal”—the normal ways of understanding and trying to alleviate tensions between law enforcement and young people. These include surveys, education on drug and violence prevention directed at youth, and sensitivity training directed at police). More broadly, it is an alternative to ways of understanding and resolving racism that derive from traditional psychology and sociology. The program disrupts normal ways of relating, which is as if we are fixed characters acting out an already scripted play. It disrupts a behaviorist psychology that insists what we can change is an individual’s or a group’s behavior. It disrupts cognitive approaches to dealing with tough social problems, which assume that if you learn the facts—how to have safe sex, what the traditions of a particular ethnic group are, or how to act when a policeman stops you—then the problem will vanish.

Framing and organizing the workshop as performatory, including directing the participants to perform both as themselves and as different characters, is the disruption. The workshop isn’t designed to change anyone’s behavior or to teach anything. Rather, it is designed to provide the young people and the police officers the opportunity to create together because in that process they might see, feel, think, speak and listen in ways they hadn’t seen, felt, thought, spoken and/or listened before.

When they perform together, the young people and police officers have done something they have never done before. They have created a new piece of culture out of something in the broader culture and their separate subcultures. They have this new performance in their individual and collective experiences. They have added a new element to their overworked scripted ways of relating to each other. Having done that once, they could do it again. In the future they may or may not choose to exercise this performance option when they encounter each other on the street. But they now have that choice. Creating choices is how we grow. Performance is a means of growth because it gives people the license to make new choices of how to relate to oneself, to others and to the world.

The young people and police officers are performing “a head taller” just like I mentioned earlier the way very young children do. They are playing with their identities by performing both who they are and who they are not—*and experiencing that they did it*. Creating the performance space and the performance—cops and kids performing moving slowly, performing improvisational skits, performing conversation and performing empathy—is a collective creative activity that is, for both the young people and the police officers. It is a venturing beyond “the narrow circle and narrow boundaries” of their own individual experience. Their experiences are broadened and with that, they have more choices for being/becoming.

The second All Stars program I want to tell you about is Youth Onstage, one of the programs of the All Stars. Youth Onstage introduces young people, ages 14 to 21, to performance, improvisation and the world of theatre. The training—all done by volunteer

theatre professionals—is in the performing arts and emphasizes ensemble building. Graduates of Youth Onstage often appear in plays in conjunction with the All Stars’ Castillo Theatre.

To give you a sense of the program and its impact, I tell a story of 7 young people from the program. They are poor and working class, African American and Latino, boys and girls. Two of them dropped out of high school and the rest go to some of the least successful schools in New York City.

On this particular evening, these 7 step onto theatre stage. They perform a staged reading of the play *What is to be Dead?* by Fred Newman. The play, which was written for adult actors and audiences, engages issues of death, time, postmodernism, revolution, existentialism, and the relationship between blacks and Jews in the United States. The young people perform their reading of the play and then sit down for a conversation with the audience, mostly white adults. The adults ask a lot of questions— “What was it like for you, an African American boy, to play a Russian Jew in 19th century Russia?” “How did you learn your lines?” Do you know what the play was about?”

One of the young men, Ramik, responded like this: “I am not sure the play is about something, but it seems to me that Fred (Newman) was playing around with a lot of existential issues. Like, what is death? Is it an ending? And are we just one person, one true self?”

Someone else asks him if he studied philosophy in school. All the young performers look at each other and laugh. When asked what's funny they describe schools where they barely read books, let alone have conversations on philosophy, and where their classes focus on trying to make up for what they hadn't been taught in elementary and middle school.

Ramik says, "I learned more in the three weeks of preparing for this reading than I've learned all year in school, maybe ever. When we began reading the play, I could barely pronounce the words, but then I started to get really into the character and the lines started to make more sense. The director told us a lot about the history of Jews in Russia and communism and the history of Jews and Blacks working together. And then I started reading stuff online. And it's really interesting."

Ramik had not finished high school, his school reading level was not even close to the level of the theatrical play, and yet here he was conversing with adults about communism and death and his own learning process. He and the other young people were able to perform *What is to be Dead?* and to have such a conversation with the adult audience because they and the adults who worked with them in the program created a stage for them to perform a head taller, beyond their developmental level and way beyond their school learning. They were playing with language, doing what they didn't know how to do, performing who they were becoming.

For Ramik and the others, the performed activity of making theatre reinitiated their learning, their confidence as learners, and their desire to continue to learn. The how of play as performed activity is not just cognitive. It is equally emotional. This unity of cognition and emotion is critical in order for people, especially those young people who have essentially given up, to develop continuously as successful learners.

I have dozens and dozens more illustrations, and if we had time I would describe dozens more projects we and others who are following this approach are doing right now. Since we don't have all day, all I can do is give you a small glimpse some of the people who I've worked with over the decades building development activities and organizations, bringing play and performance back into people's lives. It has been a privilege to be part of an ongoing creative activity that is crossing the borders of nations, classes, cultures and ideologies and that is impacting on the development of tens of thousands of people all over the world.

I've learned and grown from the 8 year-old boy labeled autistic who became a co-therapist of a social therapy group. When the group ended he told the members, "I like that I can help people. I am no longer focusing on my problems. I like that. A way I could describe how the group has helped me is it has helped me live my life." From the 65-year-old retired health care worker who had given up her dream to be writer decades earlier when she had to support and raise a disabled daughter. She literally wept when she realized she could take a playwriting workshop for free at the All Stars—and who went on to write a play about her teenage years in the slums of Manhattan's Lower East Side.

From the 17-year-old tough teenager from the South Bronx who, learning about improvisation in Youth Onstage! began to teach his friends to say “Yes/And” to whatever offers, however unwelcome, life dealt them in order to get beyond complaining to creating new possibilities. From the head of a major American oil fortune who gave \$10 million to one of our organizers on the street in the early 1990s and went on to become an influential advocate of our performance approach to development and to donate over \$2 million to our organizing efforts. From the academics and practitioners in Sao Paulo Brazil, Tokyo Japan, Dhaka Bangladesh, Pretoria South Africa, Belgrade Serbia, Juarez Mexico, and London England who have been inspired to start organizing developmental activities in the poor communities in their cities. From the hundreds of educators, youth workers, medical and mental health people we have trained at the East Side Institute over the years. There’s Peter Nsubuga from Uganda who started a village school outside Kampala knowing only that the children weren’t developing, and how he, his program and his community have grown into practitioners of developmental performance. There’s Ishita Sanyal and Prativa Sengupta, two Indian psychologists working in different ways with the mentally ill, who wanted at first to only restore to them some dignity and meaningful activity, but who came to experience the far greater potential of relating to these people in emotional distress as active creators and performers of their lives. There’s Miguel Cortes and Jorge Burciaga in Ciudad Juárez Mexico, among the most violent cities in the world, who opened the Fred Newman Center and organize and support people to transform the emotionality of fear into one of hope. And there’s Elena Boukouvala, who brings young people in Greece’s refugee camps together with native Greek youth to create music and art and meaningful relationships.

These and others have helped me to understand at a much deeper level than 40 years ago why play and performance are so powerful. It's because play isn't about what you do. It's about HOW you do what you do. We miss the importance of play in our lives if we think of it as what little children do with their toys and stuffed animals. What athletes do when they're on the football or baseball field. What actors do on the stage. What the rest of us do if we have leisure time, some friends, some musical instruments, a deck of cards, or a board game.

Play has to become a HOW. For all of us, but especially for people who've stopped growing—because of poverty, trauma, abuse, physical limitation and all the other reasons people stand still. People have to be able to play with the “hard stuff” of life, as my examples Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids and Youth Onstage played with hostility and with failing schools. I hope you could get a sense of how performing in new ways can reinitiate a love of learning, create new ways of relating to each other, generate hope, encourage, and empower. As a play revolutionary I invite people to play with anything and everything in their lives. That's because it generates choices: you can go to work, hang out with friends, do chores, study, have an argument, and so on, in the way you typically do (as who you “are”) or you can engage in these life activities playfully, allowing yourselves to perform in new ways that help you discover that together, we can create more choices for how to be.

IF PLAY IS HOW WE DO THINGS...

- ❖ We can play with anything and anyone
- ❖ We can play with work
- ❖ We can play with learning
- ❖ We can play with “hard stuff”



Engaging in any and all life activities playfully brings human development and community development together. It’s how we get to belong to existing communities and also how we create new communities that meet our needs for learning and growing—that are development communities.

There’s something very special about belonging to a community or a group that you were part of creating, that didn’t exist before, that got built through you and others working and playing together. You not only have the community but you also have new kinds of relationships with your fellow builders, relationships nurtured and supported by the very community you built!

In the words of two young people who participated in performance programs:

“I’ve learned that community doesn’t necessarily mean people who are like you. It’s people who you do something with.” (16 year-old girl)

“Before, community for me was just the people who live in your neighborhood. But I don’t know anyone in my neighborhood really. We moved there three years ago and one of the few people I got to know moved. Now I think that community isn’t who you live with, it’s who you interact with.” (17 year-old girl)



When people create developmental community they confront some paradoxes of contemporary life—and that’s a good thing. The first paradox is this—life is lived socially, but is experienced and related to individualistically. The second paradox is this—life is continuous process, but is experienced and related to as products located in a particular time and space. The third paradox is this—people live, learn and develop in social units, but are not instructed in ways of creating or functioning effectively in them. People don’t even know how to talk about such things. Conversations are rare among family members on HOW they want to live together, or among students and teachers on how they want to create their classroom, or among work groups on how they could function to maximize productivity and creativity, and so on.

We need to invite children, youth and adults to engage these paradoxes directly and practically. You have to have the experience of transforming what there is in order to create hope. How do we do that? By creating environments for people to participate in activities in which they will have to discover for themselves such things as how to create a group, what learning is, how to talk and listen and create a conversation.

My decades of experience have taught me that it is as performers that people are able to engage, in a developmental way, the paradox of experiencing what is a social existence as a separate and individuated one.

Children *become*, Vygotsky showed, through the performances as other than who they are (speakers, artists, readers, caregivers, and so on) that they and their caretakers create together. If children were not simultaneously being and becoming, there would be no human civilization. Little children do this without any awareness of it, they “create the ensemble” through their relational activity. Their performance as learners leads their development. But this human ability gets stifled as we become socialized to experience ourselves as isolated individuals. It needs desperately to be rekindled. Conscious performance is a method to do so because it intensifies the relationship between being and becoming. Performance reminds us that we are social beings. Playing around with psychological jargon, I characterize the human developmental process as one of creating stages *for* development rather than going through stages *of* development.

I've touched on many themes, including: the gap in the world between our learning needs and our development needs; how play and performance can create developmental learning and development communities; and the need to engage life's paradoxes in order to reinitiate development and learning. I end by offering you what I think is one of the most significant statements about community I've ever heard. It's from a talk Fred Newman gave twenty-five years ago, and they guide me every day.

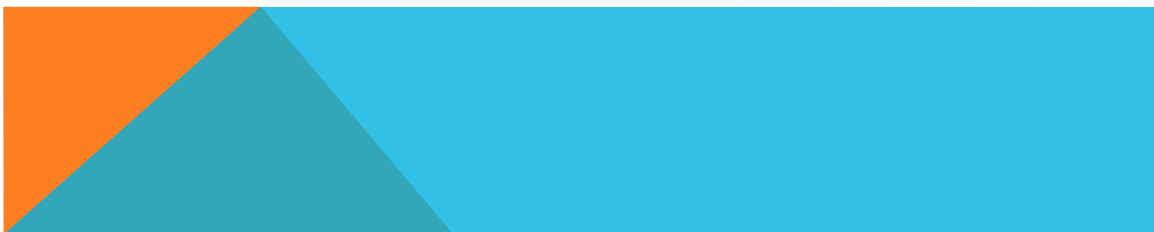
Newman told the audience that he was reading a popular and influential book called "The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World"—and that he didn't agree with it. So, he titled his talk "Community as a Heart in a Havenless World." Here's some of what he said:

COMMUNITY AS A HEART IN A HAVENLESS WORLD

"There is no haven, no place to hide. There is no escaping the cruelty, the pain, the torture. Many people try. They turn to families, to intellectual endeavor, to relationships, to drugs, to crime, people look to politics, people look everywhere to find a haven. People join communities because they seek a haven in a heartless world. But there is, in my opinion, no haven."

"I want to talk about community not as a location, but as an activity. Not as a haven, not as a place where we can go and hide. Community is the specific—and passionate—activity of supporting people who, far from seeking a haven in a heartless world, want to engage its cruelty, to do something to change it, to create a world in which havens are not necessary."

Fred Newman, 1990



In other words, community of hope.