**Georgia State University**

**Let’s Perform a New Campus Life**

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Ask students to write: 3 words describing their current campus life and 3 words describing what change they’d like to see in campus life.

[Among the responses—more love, more community, less counting, imitative, authenticity]

Ask them to share their words. Have a conversation.

Thank you. When you want to bring something new into being, like a “New Campus Life” it’s helpful to know what you think and feel about your current reality and what you imagine the possible alternatives to be.

The big question for all of us who want to make change, whether in the classroom, the campus, the city or the world is “How.”

Our conversation today is about how: how you might create a new campus life; how you might make small changes and big ones; how you can make learning and teaching more enjoyable, more growthful, more gratifying; how you might create the path for new ways to be and see and feel and relate and study and learn and make friends and have fun.

You can guess from the title of my presentation, “Let’s Perform a New Campus Life,” I think that the “how” has everything to do with performing.

Right off the bat, I don’t mean performance as in a “performance review,” that is, how you’re doing at your job. No, I mean it in the theatrical sense of being someone else, the way actors do on a stage.

At first that might sound silly, even absurd. How can performing change anything?

Well, if we only behave in the ways we’re used to, if we only fit into campus life as it now exists, I don’t think anything can change. Taking the risk of playing some new roles, performing some new relationships, playfully generating new possibilities is key, I believe, to any kind of change and growth.

You might be thinking, “Are you saying you don’t want people to be authentic? To be real?” That’s exactly what I’m saying—IF what it is to be authentic and real is to just be *who you are now.* We’d still be in diapers if that’s how our parents related to us. But they didn’t. The magic of early childhood is that parents relate to us as who we are *and* who we’re becoming AT THE SAME TIME. They create “stages” for us to perform ahead of ourselves and they perform right along with us.

Let me show you what I’m talking about.

[*Show Father-Baby Conversation Video*]

Here’s what I see—I see a scene in the life of a baby. I see a performance by a father and his son, a performance of conversation. I see the two of them playing with sounds and words. What’s so fascinating is that neither one understands what the other is saying— and it doesn’t matter. In the performance, the character father understands what his baby is saying and the baby understands him.

The father relates to the baby as who he is (a babbling baby) and at the same time as other than who he is (a languager). If he didn’t—if he instead told his son, “Don’t talk until you know how” or “Here’s a dictionary and a grammar book. Learn it and then we can talk”—the boy would never learn to speak. He’d never develop as a speaker and learner. Luckily, variations of performances of conversation like this one take place hundreds of times a day in the life of nearly all children. SLIDE of baby’s life

Let me take a step back here. Many of you may know of the important discoveries about the socialness of children’s development and learning that the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky made in the 1920s and 30s. Vygotsky showed that babies learn language—and everything else that makes up human culture—by creatively imitating the adults and older children around them, by playing and by performing because, as he put it, that’s when little children are “a head taller than they are.”

SLIDE “head taller”

I’ve written and co-written a number of books and dozens of articles about Vygotsky and the implications of his discoveries. I think Vygotsky’s observations and the method he used to see them, are key not just to understanding the developmental psychology of children but to the development of all of us throughout the life cycle, and the key to creating a new campus life, a new family life, a new social, economic and political life for us all.

You all just saw that dad and his baby. I think you sensed the joy in their performance. The problem is that once we become teenagers and adults we stop relating to each other that way, we shut down possibility, we learn to be college students and teachers just like the college students and teachers before us. Whether that’s what we want to be or not, whether it’s easy for us or hard, there’s a lot of pressure to do and be what’s expected. We’re taught, and most of us believe, that we can’t make any changes to campus life, or anything else, until we *know* what we want the change to be and exactly how to get there. What if we don’t know what the change should be? And how could we possibly know how to get there? What if we, instead, play at change, perform it, the way babies and adults play?

This is not just idle speculation. I, along with thousands of people around the world, have been using Vygotsky’s discovery—his socio-cultural performatory approach to human development—to generate change for decades now. And it works. In the 1970s, when I and my mentor and colleague Fred Newman, a philosopher, playwright and innovative therapist, began to study Vygotsky in great depth, we were—in addition to being academically trained—community organizers, radical, progressive cultural and political activists working with hundreds of other organizers in the poor communities of New York. What our activist context and activity enabled us to see was that the ability to perform and develop doesn’t end when we grow up.

With that insight and Vygotsky’s method, we have, over the last 40 years, created alternative schools, theatres, therapy centers, community centers, and political parties—all independent from existing institutions and funding sources. They’re places that meet people’s needs—especially people who are marginalized—for participating in their own development and learning. As we were building these organizations and attracting people from all walks of life who wanted to join is, ideas for new projects sprouted. And a community was being born—a community of people—of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, economic classes, educational levels, sexual orientations. All these folks had very little in common except that they were building community that supported young people and adults to grow.

And something wonderful happened. Everyone involved in these playful, performatory building activities learned and developed in the process of creating a development community. We were witnessing people creating their own development, as joyful as that dad and his baby—and on a far wider scale.

I just used a phrase, “Development Community.” You may not have heard it before, most people haven’t. I think it’s a very important concept and activity to understand if we want to create a new campus life, and all sorts of new social and cultural possibilities.

It’s common to think of community as a place, a location, such as a neighborhood or a town, or a campus like this one. Another way of thinking of community is of a group of people connected by a particular history and culture, such as the “Black community,” or connected by the work they’re doing such as the “medical community.” These kinds of communities exist; we all belong to a number of them. Nothing wrong with them, unless, of course, we start setting various communities against each other.

But from the developmental perspective these kinds of communities are limited. They are defined by the past or simply by who we are. You have to fit in to belong. They’re basically static and can be resistant to change. In distinction, a development community is dynamic. It’s a community that people bring into being through playing and working together. A development community is very powerful as a transformative force when people create it to meet some need of theirs, to transform what is into what is becoming. For example, to bring into being a joyful learning environment in the classroom.

Performing and building a development community are, essentially, the same activity. We don’t perform alone, we perform with others, we create—to use the theatrical term—an ensemble. That’s a helpful way to think of a development community, a performance ensemble that is improvisationally creating itself as it goes along. It can be a little scary. When we collectively create something new we have to break some rules of conduct, break through some cultural boundaries on what is expected, allowed, take some risks with social norms, challenge some deep-rooted conceptions of what it means to be, a college student, or for that matter, what it means to be human. We have to loosen-up some fossilized ways of being. In other words, we have to perform. And when, as adults, we do so, then we are, in Vygotsky’s words, a head taller, and we all are growing beyond our regular feelings, attitudes, learning and knowledge, and creating possibilities for different ways of relating, feeling, thinking and learning.

I have the joy and privilege of working and playing with hundreds of play and performance activists in the US and around the world. And I wish I could tell you stories of every one of them. Since I can’t, I’ll introduce you to three of them who are located on university campuses where they work to create play and performance spaces that go a long way toward transforming campus life.

First is Peter Harris, chairman of the theatre department at Western Galilee Academic College in northern Israel. Students in the theatre department are Arabs and Jews. Right off the bat, that’s a challenge. But It's much more complex —Arabs can be Christian, Muslim or Bedouin, and they all have their different cultures, customs. Even though they are all Israel citizens, they have different ways of affiliating with the state of Israel. They enter college life with the fears and with biases and languages they grew up with. In the environment of making theatre, they get to meet and acknowledge each other is ways they never did before.

Here’s some of what Peter says about the beauty of creating a performance space and performing on it:

“In creating the dramatic space, we’re on an equal footing in an important way because we're all actors. The performativity enables people to observe one another, to appreciate each other’s performance skills, performance, joy. And then instead of looking at someone who you may have biased attitudes towards, you're looking at someone who moves beautifully, who beautifully interacts with you in an improvisation, who has a keen sense of performance activity. And you can set aside the things that can create a negative dissonance because you’ve brought performance into the space and opens up all kinds of new possibilities.”

Second. is Tony Perone, Tony is on the Social, Behavioral and Human Sciences faculty at the University of Washington, Tacoma where he teaches courses in human development. Tony is not your usual academic—he’s a trained improviser, a clown who visits hospitals and orphanages, a teacher of English to immigrant adults—experiences and skills that combine in what he calls a community-building approach to higher education. In his courses, the students share the responsibility to co-create how they will become a community in which all can perform as learners and group builders. They play, improvise and get to know each other in new ways. Oh, and by the way, they learn the required material, and more—it becomes part of who they are becoming.

One student’s evaluation included this reflection: “What I’ve learned is to engage in community building as a way to support development. There are very few moments in school that I have been able to build community within a class in the way we did, and I think this is what ultimately led to a lot of development that was able to occur for me and my classmates”. Another wrote: “This class made me see adulthood as something we are continuously creating every day. I feel that I have been following the rules of adulthood that I don't necessarily need to follow, which is making me reflect and reevaluate what I truly want in life.”

Last but not least is Omar Ali, professor of history and Dean of Lloyd International Honors College at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. No one I know has done more to create a new campus life than Dr. Ali. His work goes way beyond the classroom, touching all the work done on campus and the people who do it—and beyond to the people who live nearby.

He began by bringing improvisation into his classes and running performance workshops for faculty, Omar built relationships with people who live in Warnersville, a mostly poor African American community near campus. About four years ago, he and a handful of his former students began doing outreach there and launched Community Play!—a monthly series of free workshops, classes, and talent shows. Back on campus, he started Monday Play! improv and performance workshops open to all faculty, staff, and other workers on the campus. Another such program he developed called *Bridging the Gap* brought police and students together to create new conversations, The university administration saw value in this performance work—how smart of them!—and gave the green light for a series of workshops for all 400 maintenance and facilities workers on campus. What’s more, the university provost agreed to Omar’s proposal to make the Honors College motto "Ludite, Explorate, Perficite!" [pronounced 'Luditeh, Explorateh, Perfikiteh'] ...translated from Latin, that’s "Play, Experiment, Perform!" Omar describes what they are doing is Greensboro as "creating performative/playful/philosophical culture-change." I absolutely agree with him.