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Vygotsky on the Margins

Lois Holzman

East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy

New York NY

Vygotsky's (1971, 1978, 1987, 1993, 1997) influence on my work began nearly forty years ago when he was not particularly well known. Fortunately, today there is, at a minimum, name recognition in all areas of education, in the social sciences and much of the humanities. Within education, we find Vygotskian-influenced philosophies, curricula and methods in technology, math, science, the arts, literacy, second languages learning, diversity and multiculturalism—and afterschool and informal learning. Interest in Vygotskian ideas has dramatically increased among scholars and researchers in subdisciplines of psychology where he was previously unknown, such as psychotherapy and social psychology. Among practitioners, too, there is a thirst for the reenergizing that Vygotsky's approach brings to mental health workers, social work practitioners, physicians and nurses, youth workers, arts-based community organizations, and organizational psychology consultants. The interest is international; the Vygotskian tradition in the English-speaking countries, many European countries, Brazil, Japan, and Russia is augmented by emerging Vygotskians in China, India, and countries in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Increasingly, international conferences devoted in whole or in part to Vygotsky and Vygotsky-influenced work bring these diverse disciplines and scholars together.

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Vygotsky's increasing popularity stems, in large part, from the research, writing and teaching of university-located academics who educate new generations of scholars and practitioners. However, just as significant but less known is the way that Vygotsky has also been spreading around the world outside the university, and the difference this is making in the lives of dozens of communities around the world.

The Vygotsky known and followed outside the university is primarily a *developmentalist* rather than an educational psychologist. The key features of this Vygotsky were first articulated by the late Fred Newman and myself in our 1993 book *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* (reprinted in 2013 as a Psychology Press Classic Text). Subsequent writings have expanded on the ideas presented in that book as well as describing the developmental environments Newman, I and our colleagues have built (e.g., Holzman, 2016/2009, 2010, 1997a, Newman and Holzman, 2006/1996, 1997). While these and other writings of ours are known by scholars, the main impact of our work has been on community organizers, youth workers, educators, therapists and counselors, and creative arts and theatre activists working outside the academy. These people are involved in social change efforts. Many at the grass roots with poor and otherwise marginalized groups (men in South African prisons, adults diagnosed with severe psychiatric disorders in India, youth living in refugee camps in Greece and other European countries, children living on the edges of polluted waters in Peru, and families in violence-ridden Juarez Mexico, to name a few).

These people have come to know Vygotsky and been supported to make use of his method and discoveries through the outreach and networking my colleagues and I at the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy (Institute) have been

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doing since the 1990s. Both Newman and I had left the university (he in 1968 and me in 1997) and did our intellectual work within an independent, post-disciplinary environment (of which the Institute is a part) that is inseparable from community organizing activity. This location had everything to do with what we saw/heard/felt in Vygotsky's writings. We were exploring some of the same issues as other followers of Vygotsky, but we were also creating a new and different pathway as part of the exploration.

Headquartered in New York City, the Institute is a non-profit research, education and research center that develops and promotes new practices/understandings of human development that are of practical relevance to psychology, therapy, education, community building and social activism. Chief among these new practices/understandings is *social therapeutics*, an approach to human development that relates to people of all ages and life circumstances as social performers and creators of their lives. We at the Institute believe that there is a global development crisis, by which we mean that there is a mass stoppage of emotional, intellectual, social and cultural development across the world. We work to bring the issue of development and how to address individuals and communities' needs for it to activists, community organizers, scholars and practitioners worldwide. An important component of our networking and organizing efforts is to reach out in the US and around the globe to bring the most innovative and cutting-edge approaches from academia to the field and vice versa. If there is to be a way out of the human development crisis we all face, it is, we believe, ordinary people who are going to make it happen.

The Institute has over twenty years experience in collaborating with hundreds of NGOs and individual scholars and community educators and activists in over 40

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countries through its study and training programs, international exchanges, conferences and institutional partnerships. Approximately 75 relationships have been sustained for five years or more and are ongoing. A subset of the 75 is connected to each other and to the Institute as a means of support and ongoing development of their work. Together, they form a “community education” project that is unusual in being global, cross-disciplinary and non-university based. Perhaps its most unique feature is that it is an ever-expanding development community. By that I mean a community that supports the development of people and communities *through its own continuous development*. It is designed for people to self-organize in whatever ways make sense to them in their environments, to create *new forms of life* by activistically transforming the existing forms of life that stifle their development and learning.

Before introducing a few of these activists for development, I will summarize some of the key features of the Vygotsky they are inspired by and make use of, a revolutionary Vygotsky who 1) was searching for method; 2) saw learning and development as a dialectical unity; 3) described the developmental features of play and 4) posited that speaking completes thinking.

The Developmentalist Vygotsky

Method as Tool-and-Result

In Vygotsky’s psychology, the unique feature of human individual, cultural and species development is human activity, which is qualitative and transformative (unlike behavior change, which is particularistic and cumulative). Human beings do not merely respond to

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stimuli, acquire societally determined and useful skills, and adapt to the determining environment. The uniqueness of human social life—and in this Vygotsky followed Marx—is that we ourselves transform the determining circumstances. Human development is not an individual accomplishment but a *socio-cultural activity*.

Vygotsky's understanding of development and learning is a forerunner to the Institute's *psychology of becoming* and its methodology of social therapeutics, in which people experience the social nature of their existence and the power of collective creative activity in the process of making new tools for growth (Holzman, 2016/2009). As a cultural approach to human life, the psychology of becoming relates to human beings as the creators of our culture and ensemble performers of our lives; and to human and community learning and development as the social-cultural activity of creating "development zones/stages" where people can "become" through performing, as Vygotsky says, "a head taller" (Vygotsky, 1978).

For Vygotsky, the uniqueness of human psychological activity required a new method designed specifically for that task. In Vygotsky's words, "The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65). This is a radical departure from the scientific paradigm in which human beings and non-humans are investigated in the same manner—namely, with method being a tool that is used to yield results. For Vygotsky, understanding human life requires that we create a method different *in kind* from the existing instrumental one. Most importantly, the activity of doing so ("the search for method") will generate both tool and

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result *at the same time and as continuous process*. This unity—method as tool and result—is something to be practiced, not applied—a non-linear, non-temporal relationship between theory and practice. To capture the dialectical relationship of this new conception, Fred Newman and I called it *tool-and-result methodology*, in contrast to the instrumental *tool for result methodology* of psychology, other social science, and educational research (Newman and Holzman, 2013/1993).

The Unity Learning-and-Development

Vygotsky explored the relationship between learning/instruction (in Russian there is one word for both) and development. He rejected the view that was prevalent in his day and remains so today—that learning follows and is dependent upon development—and was critical of teaching that was based in this belief: "Instruction 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" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 212). He proposed, instead, that learning and development are a dialectical unity in which learning is ahead of or leads development: "Instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development. When it does, it impels or wakens a whole series of functions that are in a stage or maturation lying in the zone of proximal development" (1987, p. 212). Learning is a source of development, he proposed, because it leads development: "The only instruction which is useful in childhood is that which moves ahead of development, that which leads it" (p. 211)... "pushing it further and eliciting new formations" (p. 198). As I understand it, what Vygotsky is proposing here is a new kind of relationship between development

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and learning/instruction, a dialectical relationship of unity or totality, with learning

“leading.” Activating or bringing into existence this unity (learning-leading-

development) is a qualitative transformation of the whole child (Newman and Holzman, 2013/1993; Holzman, 1997).

This unity “learning-leading-development” or “learning-and-development” can be understood as a way that Vygotsky brought Marx’s dialectical conception of activity to psychology. Vygotsky was not saying that learning literally comes first, or that it leads development in a linear or temporal fashion. He was saying that as social-cultural, relational activities, learning and development are inseparable. They are a unity in which learning is connected to and leads—dialectically, not linearly—development. Learning and development co-generate each other. (Newman and Holzman, 1993/2013). If this is the case, an important investigation to pursue is the kinds of environments that create and support this co-generation, and how such environments differ from those that do not—including environments that divorce development from learning and have acquisitional learning as their goal, i.e., most schools (Holzman, 1997).

An example of an environment that does create and support the co-generation of learning-and-development comes from Vygotsky’s discussions of how very young children become speakers of a language. Babies and their caretakers are creating the environment and the learning-and-development at the same time through their language play. This provides a glimpse of what the dialectical process of being/becoming looks like—how very young children are related to simultaneously as who they are (babies who babble) and who they are not/who they are becoming (speakers), and that this is how they develop as speakers/learn language. Embracing this revolutionary discovery could

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transform how psychologists understand the process of human development and how they and educators relate to the learning lives not just of children, but of adults as well.

In this way, *Vygotsky as developmentalist* contrasts with the pervasive emphasis on learning (specifically, school learning) of Vygotskian research and commentary.

How Play is Developmental

Vygotsky wrote little about play and, until recently, few people paid attention to it.

However, what he had to say is of great significance for how we understand development and the current global development crisis. Play and its role in reinitiating development has, for three decades, been a cornerstone of the practice of the Institute and the grassroots Vygotskians within its network.

Just as for Vygotsky learning/instruction is a source of (leads) development, so too is play:

Though the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives - all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 102-3).

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For Vygotsky, play creates an imaginary situation, and even the most imaginative, fantastical play contains rules. What makes play developmental is the interplay of imagination and rules. Imagination frees us; rules constrain us. Creating an imaginary situation frees the players from situational constraints and, at the same time, imposes constraints (rules) of its own. Vygotsky noted that in free or pretend play, the rules are of a special kind. They don't exist prior to playing, but come into existence at the same time and through the creation of the imaginary situation. In Vygotsky's words, they are "not rules that are formulated in advance and that change during the course of the game but ones that stem from an imaginary situation" (1978, p. 95). That is, they are rules created *in the activity of playing*.

For example, when a young child takes a pencil and makes horse-like movements with it, s/he is simultaneously creating this imaginary situation and the "rules" of the play (keep jumping, make whinnying sounds, don't write on the paper). When children are playing Mommy and baby, the new meaning that the imaginary situation creates also creates the "rules" of the play (for example, the ways that Mommy and baby relate to each other "in character"). In these examples, everything—the children who are playing, the pencil, horse, Mommy and baby—are what/who they are and, at the same time, other than what/who they are. Here is how Vygotsky captured the dialectical "otherness" and "becomingness" (tool-and-result-ishness) created in children's play: "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" (1978, p. 102).

The "head taller" metaphor raises the question of how we can we become who we are not, and suggests that the answer lies in the human capacity to do things without

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knowing either how or that we are doing them. Vygotsky was well aware that the opposite of the “know, then do” adage is key to development in early childhood. His identification of free play as playing without pre-existing rules just discussed is a description of doing without knowing how. Additionally, he noted that young children actively participate in their development without knowing that they are doing it. As he put it, “...before a child has acquired grammatical and written language, he knows how to do things but does not know that he knows.... In play a child spontaneously makes use of his ability to separate meaning from an object without knowing that he is doing it, just as he does not know he is speaking in prose but talks without paying attention to the words” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 99).

The similarity Vygotsky is pointing to here between speaking in prose and play is important, because it suggests an important continuity between learning/instruction and play. Vygotsky’s concentration on learning/instruction in formal educational settings may have led him to overlook the striking similarities between play and non-school learning and, in particular, the ZPDs of both learning/instruction and play. Indeed, those of us who have pursued this similarity in studying early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence and adulthood have come to appreciate that *all learning-leading-development is play* in a Vygotskian sense.

Following this direction, I suggest that we can substitute the word performance for play. It might even enhance our understanding, for performance evokes the magic of the theatre—its deliberate invitation to imagine and be captivated by people on stage being other than who they are, to play along with the players. Just as children go “beyond” their normal behavior as if “a head taller” in play, so too do performers on

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stage. Performance in early childhood, as discussed above, is not in the performers' awareness. Adults and little children together create the "stage" and perform on it without any awareness that they're performing. Nevertheless, the countless "conversations" like this one: "Mama, baba, babababa"; "Yes, sweetie, that's a little baby doll" *both create and are* the scenes in an ongoing performance of "The Life of the Developing Baby." In contrast, performers on the theatrical stage are aware that they're performing and so is the audience. This kind of deliberate performance highlights, experientially, the being-becoming dialectical "space" in which we live and in which development is always potential.

Studying these performances in early childhood and on theatrical stages and exploring what the casts of characters are doing as they build the different stages and scenes (as my colleagues and I have done), reveals how the capacity to create new performances of ourselves as individuals and groupings (classroom, family, work team, community, etc.) is essential to learning and development at any age. Through the lens of performance, we see development as stages and scenes of a play rather than scaffolds and ladders (Holzman, 1997b).

The language of theatrical performance (stages, scenes, characters, etc.) is key to the Institute's understanding of human development and learning. In philosophical terms, theatrical performance and its language allows us to see performance not merely socio-culturally, but ontologically, as a characteristic and activity that human beings engage in in the most mundane of situations.

Speaking Completes Thinking

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Learning, development and play were not the only social-cultural activities Vygotsky explored in his search for method to understand human life. He also delved deeply into the relationship between thinking and speaking, and the role that imitation plays in child development.

Vygotsky examined the activity of children’s imitation because, “A full understanding of the concept of the zone of proximal development must result in a reevaluation of the role of imitation in learning” (1978, p. 87). As he had done with existing understandings of learning and development, he found fault with the mechanistic view of imitation that he observed was “rooted in traditional psychology, as well as in everyday consciousness,” and in which “the child can imitate anything” and that “what I can do by imitating says nothing about my own mind” (1987, p. 209). Children are not like parrots. They don’t imitate anything and everything. They imitate only those things in their environment and relationships that are just beyond them, developmentally speaking. Children *creatively imitate* others in their daily interactions—saying what someone else says, moving to music, picking up a book and “reading,” “talking” on a smart phone, and so on. In other words, *creative imitation* is a key element in “The Performance of Being a Head Taller.” Or, in Vygotsky’s words, “Development based on collaboration and imitation is the source of all specifically human characteristics of consciousness that develop in a child” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 210). It is how children are capable of doing so much in collective activity.

The partner to imitation in this ongoing developmental performance is *completion*. This is the Vygotskian term for the dialectical relationship he posited

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between thinking and speaking. Conventional wisdom today is similar to that of Vygotsky's day—words express our thoughts and feelings. This expressionist or pictorial view of language has been discredited by philosophers of language throughout the 20th century and by social constructionists and other postmodernists into this century. Yet it prevails. Vygotsky rejected this view in favor of a dialectical one. Speaking, he believed, is not the outward expression of thinking. It is, rather, part of a unified, transformative process that entails thinking/speaking. He stated this most clearly in the following two passages from *Thinking and Speech*:

The relationship of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a movement from thought to word and from word to thought ... Thought is not expressed but completed in the word. We can, therefore, speak of the establishment (i.e., the unity of being and nonbeing) of thought in the word. Any thought strives to unify, to establish a relationship between one thing and another. Any thought has movement. It unfolds. (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 250)

The structure of speech is not simply the mirror image of the structure of thought. It cannot, therefore, be placed on thought like clothes off a rack. Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word. (Vygotsky, 1987, p.251)

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There are, then, not two psychological behaviors—the private one of thinking and the social one of speaking. There is, according to Vygotsky, just one human social-cultural activity: speaking/thinking, a dialectical unity in which speaking *completes* thinking.

Newman and I expanded Vygotsky’s speaking-thinking unity beyond the individual (Holzman, 2016/2009; Newman and Holzman, 2006/1996; 2013/1993). We reasoned as follows. If speaking is the completing of thinking, if the process is continuously creative in social-cultural space, then the “completer” does not have to be the one who is doing the thinking. Others can complete for us. Indeed, if this were not the case, how would children be able to engage in language play, create conversation and perform as speakers before they know language? In early childhood, thinking/speaking must be a continuously socially completive activity in which others are completing for them.

Creative imitation and completion create the ensemble performance of conversation. The baby’s babbling (rudimentary speech) is a creative imitation of the adult’s speech. The adult completes the baby in Vygotsky’s dialectical transformative sense. And so it goes, throughout the days of baby and toddlerhood, when the people in our lives are most supportive of us doing what we aren’t yet able to do, and most embracing of us as the simultaneity of who we are and who we are not. Out of this social-cultural activity, a new speaker emerges.

One of the implications of Vygotsky’s characterization of thinking and speaking, imitation and completion is that meaning making is not the outcome of using language. Rather, the process of language development (becoming a languager) is not one of learning the language to make meaning. Quite the opposite. Vygotsky suggests that

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meaning-making “leads” language-making (dialectically, just as learning leads development). Engaging in language play with others, being related to as a speaker and language-maker before one is, being supported to perform as a conversationalist—all this (and, of course, the actions and relational subjectivity occurring simultaneously) is joint activity, or ensemble performance. Furthermore, such meaning-making performances are necessary to becoming a rule-governed, societal language user and language maker (Newman and Holzman, 2013/1993, pp. 112-118). This counter-intuitive characterization of language development has many educational implications, including subject matter school learning as well as second-language teaching-learning-development.

Vygotskians at the Grassroots

As mentioned, there are hundreds of people across the globe whose study of Vygotsky has been through the Institute and whose work at the grass roots has been influenced by that. Space permits the sharing of only a few of them.

Ishita Sanyal is one of the few psychologists in India. She lives in Kolkata. When her brother had a schizophrenic break she was faced with the stark reality that there were precious few services for people with severe mental illness, and none that gave them any dignity. So she founded her own organization, Turning Point. At the beginning Ishita focused on involving people in educational activities, like computer training. This in itself was a big step, as what was available in other places was so-called occupational therapy such as bookbinding and pickle making. But being introduced to Vygotsky’s method through the Institute, and meeting hundreds of people who were utilizing creative

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and performance activities in their work around the world, Ishita began to involve her staff and clients in developmental activities. She recognized that in order to reinstate development and growth in people suffering from mental illness, you had to relate to them, in Vygotsky's sense, as a head taller through play. Over the years, since, 2007, she has introduced readings on human development to them, helped them create skits from these readings and their life experiences, and taught them improv games. They even put on a show in the village square. The experience of being related to doing what they don't know how to do and what no one expects of them, of working collectively to create their growth, of succeeding, being appreciated and being seen as a human being has been transformative.

Recently, Ishita described about a talent show Turning Point organized for people with mental illness. She wrote: "At the initial screening we saw people complaining of headaches and becoming restless. But when the performance started they became increasingly enthusiastic and often performed more than once, not for the sake of competition, but for the pleasure of performing and discovery. They were able to create a completely different and more positive environment together where instead of only thinking about their problems and difficulties they were immersed in creatively praising each other. I think this helped them to grow and develop because they went from I can't to I can." (Sanyal, 2015, personal communication)

Miguel Cortes from Ciudad Juárez in Mexico is a community educator and non-diagnostic therapist. Three years ago, he shared with other community activists the following: "Four years ago I was struggling to adjust myself to working at the University. I dreamt of doing community work but had no idea of how to do it. A friend of mine was

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trying to find people he could work creatively with playing music. Now, through totally different paths we come to be involved in doing community work with youth. We not only play drums together, we now record albums created by youth, we create workshops about comics that reflect life in Juarez, and so many other things. In just 4 years we have created conditions where we can do things unimaginable before. And it wasn't by reading the "7 steps for successful community building" or "Community building for dummies." It was our growing and playing and creating community, it was participating in creating with our groups which is not a "let's all hold hands" kind of thing, but a huge struggle, of us at times having no idea what we were doing, of people leaving our community, of finding ways of continuing our work even when the conditions don't exist for it. You cannot appreciate Vygotsky deeply if you are not building with him, if you are not creating environments for growth. (Cortes, 2015, personal communication)

Peter Nsubuga is a community worker in Kampala, Uganda. While in the UK studying accounting, Peter saw a TV show on the plight of children in Africa. He returned home to respond to the need for help in communities suffering from disease, extreme poverty and lack of clean water. He himself grew up poor and had lost three brothers and one sister to AIDS. In 2008, Peter founded Hope for Youth, an organization that provides food, clothing, education and social-emotional development experiences to children and families in a remote area of Kampungu village in the Mukono District. Hope for Youth started with seven children under a tree, and today cares for over 250 children between 4-14 years in their school program, and over 50 youth and women in play and performance-based out-of-school programs.

Commenting on what he learned and now practices, Peter says, "It's an eye

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opener to me on how we can continuously create development in our communities by becoming creators of changes instead of just passively watching life passing by. This is unique especially to those of us who were used to the system that was only encouraging us to be who we are, to develop our identities, rather than to continue performing as who we were becoming.” Nsubuga, 2014, personal communication)

Yuji Moro of Tsukuba University is a prominent developmental psychologist in Japan who had been following cultural historical research since the early 1980s when his colleagues visited Michael Cole’s lab in San Diego. Coming in contact with the Institute and Vygotsky as developmentalist, he has come to recognize that human development can only come about through community development, and he has become a community activist. Among the projects he has implemented in the past five years are radical changes in university education that brings creativity and performance into the classrooms and collaborations with community organizations in Tokyo’s poorest neighborhoods to re-initiate development in the most marginalized of teens and young adults.

Yuji recently commented on the impact of the Vygotsky the developmentalist in Japan: “In the past few years, he’s been an omnipresent figure, provoking academics into discussion on the unity of learning and development in conference rooms, working as a community builder in various cities and countries, and making stages for young people beginning their future” (Moro, 2015, personal communication).

Norwegian psychologist Paul Carlin contrasted his university study with his Institute learning. “My Vygotsky was an aloof, distant scientist, when I first met him at the university of Oslo. He was mostly used in theoretical dueling with the ghost of Piaget in student papers over casting development as blank slate or the preplanned blooming of

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biology. And the zones of proximal development were represented by technical drawings and equations on the blackboard. The drawings traced the predicted path/bridge within a ZPD of the transformation of a skill from novice to expert. My Vygotsky never questioned the tool for result methodology. Never imagined another ontology. What I really appreciate and in turn struggle with in implementing this revolutionary Vygotsky is that it opened my imagination to what is alive, transformable, buildable. A new psychology of becoming. That the human world is alive in a myriad ways, not dead, commodified, closed off. Celebrate what has been built for us to build with further.” (Carlin, 2015, personal communication)

I have learned much from sharing Vygotsky the developmentalist with these people and so many others and being involved in their ongoing work. One important insight has been that when people create stages for development and development simultaneously and through this activity build community, they confront some paradoxes of contemporary life. The paradox that life is lived socially, but is experienced and related to individualistically. The paradox that life is continuous process, but is experienced and related to as products located in a particular time and space. The paradox that people live, learn and develop in social units, but are not instructed in ways of creating or functioning effectively in them. With few exceptions, people do not 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.

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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. What is needed is 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. This is, I believe, part of the developmental task history has raised for us all.

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