**Applied Improvisation Series Proposal:**

**Playing Around with Changing the World**

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The proposed chapter explores the use of improv in a 10-month immersion program in performance activism and social therapeutics. Using case study data from multiple cohorts we explore the relationship between improvisation, human and community development, social change, and performance activism.

**Chapter Abstract**

With deepening social, environmental and political crises worldwide, many who want to make a difference in the world are finding that they need new tools in their efforts to make social change, as well as foster personal and community development. Whether they are alarmed by the increasing political polarization and lack of productive dialogue across difference or responding to the influx of refugees to places in the world already stressed by economic and political changes, many people are frustrated by the ineffectiveness of traditional ideologically driven approaches to social change and are looking to be more creative. The proposed case study will explore the ways that improv is impacting on **community organizing and activism**, within the emerging performance activism movement.

The East Side Institute has become a hub for creative activists. Founded in 1985 by Dr. Fred Newman, a philosopher, community organizer, playwright/theatrical director, and therapist and Dr. Lois Holzman, a developmental psychologist and radical educator, the ESI developed Social Therapeutics as an approach to human development and social change. Social therapeutics emerged as a radical alternative to traditional psychology’s focus on helping people more successfully adapt to the world as it is. Social therapeutics shifts the focus to developing people as social creators of their lives and transformers of the world. Social therapeutics is currently practiced internationally as an approach to therapy, education, healthcare, community and youth development, and increasingly to community organizing and activism. One of the key discoveries has been that the human capacity to perform, to be who we are and other than who we are simultaneously, is critical to personal and societal development.

Over the decades the founders and builders of the ESI have sought out and organized people around the world who are engaged in social and personal change projects and who are looking for new tools, methods, conceptions and approaches to moving forward. And we discovered that there are a growing group of activists and practitioners who share our understanding of the power of performance and improvisation, and the ESI has responded by becoming a hub and training center for a new form of activism called performance activism.

The International Class (IC) is the ESI’s flagship program and since 2004 over 100 scholars, researchers, clinicians and community organizers have participated from 25 countries. They come looking to impact the poverty, violence, despair and fierce prejudices of their communities. The IC is a ten-month cohort immersion program that takes place in three week-long residencies in New York City and online via google groups and teleconference calls. Participants study the intellectual traditions of social therapeutics and are introduced to and participate in many of the community-based practices it has inspired. And a critical component of the work is the development of each cohort as a performance ensemble that can support the growth of everyone in the group, including the faculty. Improvisation is one of the most important tools used with the International Class. The proposed chapter will present a case study of the use of improv with the International Class over the past 10 years and explore the methodological relationship between improv, social therapeutics and performance activism. In addition to further describing and analyzing the sessions, the chapter will include data collected from IC alumni on their experiences of learning to improvise and its impact on their experience of the International Class and how it has affected their work as performance activists.

Each improv session is designed by facilitator Marian Rich with input from the director of the East Side Institute and the faculty on what would be helpful to the particular group they are working with. Warm-up exercises often include a sharing of children’s games from various cultures. The improv sessions play with the group’s language differences and explore people’s capacity for meaning-making. Rich plays with gibberish, translation games, and switching roles and identities, with a focus on relationality.

Participants are encouraged to explore non-ideological forms of activism, using “yes, and” as a tool for listening, building with what you’ve got, seeing “the other,” and creating something new with the differences in the room. Once they have practiced the basics of “yes and,” Rich brings in more advanced listening and responding improv exercises based on the particular interests and needs of each group. For example, a recent session responded to the group’s desire to explore what it takes to influence someone, a key issue for many activists. Using an exercise learned from Don Waisanen, Ph.D., the group paired up and chose a topic on which they had opposing viewpoints. Person A states their opinion, and Person B paraphrases what they heard. At this point Person A can either accept or reject what Person B has offered. As one group member reflected, this exercise, *“...opened us up to another possibility and perspective. We could see the importance of the performance vs. the actual content. It forces you to actively, earnestly listen, be present. What it takes to influence someone is acknowledging instead of confronting.”* One way to understand what has happened here is that influence has moved from a cognitive to a performatory activity.

Throughout the year-long program Rich and participants play with and explore philosophical questions and concepts – the self, identity and the dialectical relationship between changing the world and changing yourself. In debriefs the invitation is to create and perform conversation that is not about looking for answers, rather it is to make discoveries about each other and the group. One alumni shared that as an activist he had learned to, “*bring serious play or is it playful seriousness, a commitment to playing around with things, to all my work as a community organizer and world-changer.”*

**Carrie Lobman, Ed.D.,** is associate professor at the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, the director of revolutionary conversations at the East Side Institute and a member of the All Stars Project Board of Directors. She leads improv workshops internationally for educators at all levels with a focus on the intersections of improv, play, human development, and social justice. Her research examines the relationship between play, performance, learning and development for people of all ages and the importance of outside of school programs for providing young people with developmental experiences. She is a trained social therapist and a core faculty member in the Institute’s international training programs. Carrie is co-author of Unscripted Learning: Using Improvisation across the K-8 Curriculum, and co-editor of Play and Culture Series Volume 11: Play and Performance. She received her doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University.

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(Bio for Marian Rich attached)