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**Performance Activism:**

**A Reconstructive Approach to Social Activism and Generating Possibility**

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Good evening, Lloyd International Honors students, faculty and staff, and welcome to Let’s Learn! students from around the world.

I want to thank Dean Omar Ali for inviting me to deliver this lecture, and beyond that, for bringing into being a college with the slogan, and more importantly, the educational practice, of “Play, Experiment, Perform.” I’m pretty sure there is no other school within a state university system in the world with such a playfully radical approach to learning and development.

Lloyd International Honors College is a special place. It is, of course, academically demanding and rigorous. Yet its approach to education is not the one-way, monologic, acquisitional model that dominates in both the West and East, the Global North and Global South. Lloyd, under Dr. Ali’s leadership, is experimenting with an approach to learning that is based on very different premises. It’s striving to create environments in which teachers and students move beyond just the passing on of information to the joint activity of making discoveries and creating meaning together. As Dean Ali is fond of saying, “Everyone has something to teach, everyone has something to learn.” How is Lloyd International Honors College doing this? As its slogan says, by playing, experimenting and performing.

Which brings me to the topic of my talk and our subsequent conversation—performance activism.

Performance activism is a new approach to educating, to engaging social issues and to building community that is emerging spontaneously all around the globe. It consists of people, usually non-actors, building performance ensembles outside the institutional framework of the theatre to collectively imagine and act on new possibilities. The performance approach to education being experimented with here at Lloyd is a part of this larger movement. And, as the full title of this talk implies, “Performance Activism: A Reconstructive Approach to Social Activism and Generating Possibility,” it’s a movement concerned with finding creative, positive ways to reconstruct not only teaching and learning but the ways we do politics, the ways we deal with conflict, the ways we do healing, and the very ways we think about ourselves. It is uses play and performance to engage, reorganize and transform the often oppressive and violent patterns of behavior that we’ve been socialized into.

In order for my remarks to make sense, I’m going to ask you listen and to think in a way that is probably new to most of you. I need you to embrace, at least for the duration of our time together, that everything is what it is and also what it is not, that something (and somebody) can be two things, three things or more at the same time, that we all are who-we-are and simultaneously who-we-are-becoming. I’m asking you to relate to people and the world not as a set of discrete, static *things*, but rather as a series of interconnected unending *processes*. I realize this may go against every rational and emotional fiber in your body. It is not the dominate worldview we all grew up with. The worldview we all grew up with was succinctly summed up by the 17th Century philosopher Bishop Butler who said, “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.”

Yet there is another way of seeing the world. In the Western tradition it goes back to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who famously said, “No man ever steps into the same river twice.” His belief that the universe is in constant flux was taken up and developed by the later Greek Epicurus, the Roman Lucretius, and in modern times by Hegel and Marx. In the East this way of approaching the world is represented by, among others, Laozi, the founder of Taoism. Flux, transformation, and what the western world calls “contradiction” is also an integral part of most indigenous worldviews.

The first case of something being what it is and something else at the same time that I ask you to consider is performance activism itself.

Performance is usually considered as entertainment, as an art and/or a diversion. We think of it as something done by specialists called actors, who pretend to be people other than themselves acting out a story for us while we sit still and watch passively. Oh yes, and it’s fun. Activism, on the other hand, is related to as being political and sometimes risky. It means being committed to a cause and to being discontent with the world the way it is. Oh yes, and its serious, very serious.

Now let us consider performance activism, which includes all of the attributes I’ve just noted for performance *and* activism. Performance activism uses techniques, tools, and exercises that originated in the theatre. As in the theatre, people pretend to be other than who they are. They make up images, movements and stories. It’s fun. It’s also deadly serious in its intent and its impact. When Dean Ali, blowing on his trombone, lead a playful procession to the Lloyd Honors College Orientation on August 15th they were having fun. Does that mean they weren’t serious about education? Of course not. In fact, I would argue that they were more serious than those who unthinkingly follow university precedent and tradition. They were saying, in effect, “This is our education that we’re creating and we’re going to try something new, something we enjoy, something that might, in fact, work better.” In a profound sense, that is what all of performance activism is saying, “This is our world. We don’t like how it’s going. Let’s try performing something new and see if it works better.”

Performance activism is, in a way, a new approach to theatre. It‘s also, in a way, a new approach to activism. Of course, when we bring two very distinct social activities together what we have is neither of them (at least as we knew them to be). We have created something other than either of them, something new.

How is performance activism different from theatre, particularly political theatre, theatre that views itself as opposed to the status quo and believes that it has a contribution to make in the struggle for a better world? Political theatre goes back at least 150 years, and it’s where I come from. I started out in theatre as a teenager creating and performing in skits at rallies against the War in Vietnam. In 1969 and ’70 I was an actor with the New York Street Theatre Caravan. The Caravan devised plays with political messages and performed them on the back of a flatbed truck. We worked with local community groups, who would close a block for the evening. We would drive in, take the sides off the truck, plug our lights into a friendly storefront and perform for people standing in the street and sitting on their stoops and fire escapes. In the summer of 1970 we toured the country, performing in many cities, Native American reservations, the lettuce fields of California and the coal mining towns of West Virginia. Our audiences were organized prior to our arrival by the radical progressive organizations of the time: the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the American Indian Movement, the United Farm Workers and radical caucuses within the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers and the United Mine Workers.

Those of us in the Street Theatre Caravan considered our theatre work to be educational political work. We were striving to bring performance and activism together. But we were still doing theatre in the traditional sense. We made up the plays and performed them for audiences who stood or sat and watched us. For much of my life I thought that if you did good political theatre, if you gave people the right ideas and provided them with beautiful aesthetic experiences, that could help enlighten or inspire them to change the world. However, what I and other political theatre artists were doing bore a strong family resemblance to traditional education in which the teacher “knows” and the student “learns.” It wasn’t dialogic in any meaningful sense. The audience could cheer and applaud or boo and walk out. But beyond that, the audience had no role to play in creating meaning with the performers.

I know that great theatre experiences—like any great artistic experience—can stay with you for the rest of your life. It can even become, in a sense, a part of who you are. However, after more than 50 years of creating theatre, I’ve come to the conclusion that in-and-of itself theatre can’t change people’s minds or cause them to become politically engaged. It doesn’t provide the tools for that. What theatre does provide us with is performance.

A key difference between traditional theatre and emerging performance activism is what is being *done* with performance and *who* is doing the performing.

Which brings us to the question: What is performance anyway? Is it simply faking? Is it being insincere as many non-theatre people assume? Or is it, as most actors will tell you, a way of discovering more of who you are, of who you might become? It’s both—and that’s why it’s such a creative and transformative activity. Performance, as I and other performance activists have come to understand it, is the conscious activity of simultaneously being who-you-are and who-you-are-not. Meryl Streep is always Meryl Streep whether she’s performing Margaret Thatcher or Sophie Zawistowski, a Jewish mother escaping Poland during World War II. She knows that and we know that. Acting, which is one form of performing, is being yourself and your character at the same time.

However, you don’t need a character written by someone else in order to perform. Performance, in the broader sense, is creating different versions of yourself; it’s who-you-are and who-you are becoming; it’s relating to yourself as a dynamic *process* who is always coming-into-being, not a static *thing*. Performance in this broader sense is something that comes naturally to human beings. When we’re babies our parents, grandparents, older siblings talk to us even though we can’t understand them. They relate to us as speakers and we creatively imitate them. We babble in response to their words and by the family performing together we babies develop into speakers; we become who we were not. As children we play. We perform as parents, as doctors, as teachers, as the characters we see on television or in comic books. By creatively imitating we learn how to behave as adults. This happens in all human cultures everywhere. Performance is not something alien to any of us. It is not something you have to go to college or a conservatory to learn. It is a developmental skill that everyone has.

The challenge is that after ten or twelve years of being encouraged to play and perform in this way, we’re told to stop. Now we have to behave “like a young lady.” Now we have to “be a man.” The fun is over. Stop fooling around. Now that you’re growing up, it’s time to be serious. Now is the time for work—school work and work to earn a living. We have learned the roles that our cultures have created for us and are told, in effect, that we’re now locked into them. That is who we are. A very small group of us are allowed to keep playing and performing, actors. But that performing is confined to the stage and screen. It has been classified as an art form; it is no longer related to as a life skill.

Performance activism takes that intrinsic human capacity to play and perform, to simultaneously be-who-we-are and who-we-are-not off the stage and says to everyone: “This is something you can do, and you can do it not only to tell a story to others but to discover your own story, to deconstruct the stories you feel trapped in and reconstruct them into narratives you find more growthful, to explore, to come to terms with, and perhaps to transform the pain you’ve been through, to relate to others in new and more growthful ways, to imagine and play with new possibilities.” I could go on. You get the picture. Performance activism gives people permission to try new things, to be aware that in playing with who they are not, they can bring into existence who they are becoming. Play and performance in daily life is not something that need end with childhood. Indeed if we are to continue growing and developing as individuals, as groups, as communities, as nations and as a species we have to perform that development.

Which brings us to activism. Activists are citizens who take an active role in politics. Politics in the broad sense is the collective activity of organizing our social and power relations. It is the process, which goes on for generations, centuries, millennia, of determining who has authority, how authority is exercised, how wealth is generated and who is allowed access to it. It involves the institutions we create to meet our needs and to serve those in authority: schools, the police, the prison system, the military, congresses and parliaments, political parties. Politics also encompasses the ways we’ve been taught to relate to each other in daily life: as women and men, as blacks and whites, as gays and straights, as rural people and urban people, as students and teachers. All of that is fundamentally connected to who has authority, who has privilege, who has wealth—to how we are organized socially.

Activists are people who are either forced by circumstance or who make an ethical decision to play an active role in some or all of that. You can be an activist by circulating a petition among you neighbors to get a stop sign at a busy intersection; by attending meetings of your local school board to work for changes in how your kid’s school is run; by getting involved in an electoral campaign for a candidate who you hope will represent your needs; by organizing a union where you work to get better pay and working conditions; by joining a demonstration against police violence; by occupying an administration building on campus to demand, for example, a Black or Gender Studies Department; by occupying Wall Street to draw attention to economic inequality and to agitate for a more equitable sharing of the wealth that we all create. Activists are active citizens seeking to make small improvements or they can be active in hopes transforming everything—and, of course, the small and the grand are connected; they’re part of the same totality, the same everchanging social process of politics, of creating our culture.

How, then, can performance be activism? As I said earlier, when we bring two distinct social activities together what we have is something new.

The two common threads in all activism are discontent and the exercise of power. There is something about the social organization we have inherited that an activist doesn’t like. That’s why they become active. They’re against poverty; they’re against war; they’re against racism and sexism and homophobia; they’re against the destruction of our environment; they’re against their local town council. The other common thread in activism is the exercise of power. By power I mean people organizing into groups to effect change, to challenge the authorities (the boss, the administration, the police, the government, etc.) and impact on our social organization, our politics. Authority, as I use it here, comes from the top down; it’s forced on us. Power is an activity from the bottom up, it’s generated by ordinary people organizing into groups, it’s emergent, it creates itself through its activity.

Performance activism retains those two characteristics. How it differs from traditional activism is in how its discontent is expressed and how its power is exercised.

At least in part, performance activism is emerging in response to the failures of the old ways of doing activism. Petitions, boycotts, elections, demonstrations, occupations, riots, revolutions, none seem to be working very well any more. The marches all over the world on February 15, 2003, involving tens of millions of people, the largest synchronized protest in human history, failed to prevent the American and British invasion of Iraq.  The Occupy Movement, which spread rapidly from New York to major cities all over the globe, generated a lot of talk, but had no impact on the unequal distribution of wealth.  The Black Lives Matter movement has resulted in the conviction of a handful of killer cops, but has not impacted on the institutional racism of police departments in the United States.  The Arab Spring has led to violent repression, the civil war in Syria, the displacement of millions of refugees, and a military dictatorship in Egypt that is worse than the one they started with.

This activism failed for many and complex reasons, including of course, the violence that authority is willing to rain down on those attempting to exercise power. Yet to my way of thinking, the root cause of these activist failures is that they have been overdetermined by what we are against and therefore leave little room for the activity of discovering what it is that we want. Traditional activism is an exercise in deconstructive power. It is the activity of opposing, deconstructing, tearing down what we feel threatened, oppressed and dehumanized by. It is an important and necessary part of activism. However, since deconstructive power, quite understandably, focuses on being against what exists, it gives little attention to exercising our power in a way that can help us discover what might work better. Deconstructive activists usually don’t ask, “What happens after the demonstration?”

There is another way to exercise power. It’s called reconstructive power, and it does provide the space to ask that question. It is the exercise of power to create alternative organizations and ways-of-life that work better than those imposed on us by authority. It involves people creating their own schools, youth programs, medical and therapeutic groups, unions, cultural centers, community support groups, and ways of doing electoral politics—all financially and institutionally independent from the existing institutions of authority. Reconstructive power, by organizing people to build new things together, creates the conditions in which people can begin to play with new ways of seeing, being and relating to each other. Unlike deconstructive power, it allows us to find positive things to do with our rage against the machine—it takes us beyond resistance to reconstruction.

This is where the “performance” in “performance activism” comes in. All performance is done in ensembles, in groups. When it steps off the stage it can involve whole villages and neighborhoods, radiating into larger and larger communities. Through Zoom and other apps it is organizing people into groups from different countries and cultures. It gives us a way to be activists who are not defined only by what we oppose.

At this point, I fear, performance activism may remain something of an abstraction to you, so let me briefly share a few examples of what performance activism has done and is doing.

During Zimbabwe’s 15-year armed struggle to liberate itself from the racist settler state of Rhodesia, villagers and guerrilla fighters together evolved a new form of participatory political theatre out of an old and, at that point, fading, cultural activity—the *pungwe*, a gathering to exchange stories and songs. At night, in violation of a government-imposed curfew, villagers would sneak off to meet the revolutionary fighters. Ross Kidd, who spent many years leading performance workshops in Zimbabwe, recalls, “This wasn’t one-way communication—guerrillas simply standing up and giving speeches. This was … a highly participatory activity involving everyone in the creation of culture. People joined in singing, contributed their own sketches, music, and dances, responded to the politicization talks with slogans and bursts of song, and participated in the discussions which punctuated the various cultural presentations. Villagers and the fighters acted out and danced commitments and build up their strength and through collective music-making.” (Kidd, 1984, pp. 9-10)

The pungwes played a significant role in organizing the rural population to support the revolution. Joshua Mpofu, a guerrilla fighter wrote at the end of the war that the pungwes were part of the process of establishing an alternative power base capable of challenging the authority of the white settler state: “Behind the ostensibly quiescent normal peasant existence … there grew up activities [such as the pungwes]and structures of a system of dual power challenging the settler state.” (Cliffe et al., 1980, p. 51)

Another example. In the Indian state of Tamil Nadu a group called the Association of the Rural Poor began by holding adult education classes in the Dalit community. In English, Dalits are called Untouchables and they are the lowest caste in Indian society. The conversations in the classes led to acting out stories from the participants’ lives. Felix Sugirtharaj, one of the teachers, reports that they played scenes, for example, about a Dalit being beaten up by a money lender because he was unable to pay his debt. Or how another’s daughter was raped by goons of the landlord. They then began extending the scope of their performance to rehearsing how to confront the local landlord. These rehearsals included not only what they would say, they also “blocked” the encounter, deciding where the spokesperson should stand in relation to the landlord and where the “cast members” should position themselves.

When the group felt ready they marched to the landlord’s house. Sugirtharaj recalls, “There were 100 people and he was caught totally by surprise. … Of course, the landlord refused to raise the wages, claiming he was losing money already. So we went back and decided to go on strike. That evening and the next we went around to the neighboring villages to present short drama pieces on the potential positive and negative effects of a strike. The strike itself lasted one week. … We succeeded in raising the wage from six to eight rupees per day.” (Quoted in Van Ervin 1992, pp.133-134). Having evolved from an adult education course to a performance group, the Association of the Rural Poor made yet another transformation, becoming a union called the Rural Dalit Agricultural Laborers Association, which eventually spread to some five hundred villages. (Sugirtharaj 1990).

In 2006, in NYC, Sean Bell, a 23-year-old unarmed Black man was shot 50 times by undercover police officers while he was sitting in his car on the night before his wedding. Dr. Lenora Fulani, a friend and colleague of mine for 40 years whose papers are archived here at the University of North Carolina, led demonstrations against the police killers, as she had done in response to police brutality for thirty years. “At the same time,” she recalled in 2014, “I realized that anger and reactive demonstrations had for many years failed to change the culture of fear and hate between poor youth of color and the New York Police Department. I had seen it many times: the community is hurt and outraged, they demonstrate angrily; the police, and their media defenders, get defensive. Eventually, the demonstrations die down and it happens all over again.” (L. Fulani, personal communication, December 12, 2014).

While she believed criminal charges should be filed against the police and that legislative and regulatory action was called for, she also realized that, that changes imposed from the top-down would mean little until the deeply entrenched attitudes of mutual mistrust between police officers and young people of color can be reorganized. What was needed, she concluded, was a change in the culture of police-community relations. (L. Fulani, personal communication, December 12 2014). Thus was launched Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids. Within a month of Bell’s death, Fulani invited some young people she had worked with and some New York police officers she knew to sit down with her at the African American Benevolent Society in Springfield Gardens, Queens and have a conversation together. “The first meetings were awkward and strained,” she recalls, “I quickly learned that we couldn’t have the conversations without play and performance first” (L. Fulani, personal communication).

So Fulani transformed these gatherings into performance workshops in which she starts by having the cops and kids play theatre games together and then create improv skits on silly topics before they get down to building a conversation. There have been hundreds of Cops and Kids performance workshops in New York City and versions of it are now also conducted in Newark, New Jersey and Dallas, Texas.

“Let me tell you why it works,” Fulani said in an address at a gala of the All Stars Project, which sponsors the workshops. “It works because we use performance and improvisation to break down the walls. We pretend that cops and kids can actually speak to one another, and through this pretense, they actually can. When you start playing new roles, characters other than yourself, it’s amazing how quickly everyone is smiling and laughing. I’ve found that even the most sullen kids and the most reserved police officers become hams in two minutes.” (Fulani 2012).

Those are just three examples of what performance activism looks like. There are hundreds of other examples unpacked in much more detail in my recently-published book, *Performance Activism: Precursors and Contemporary Pioneers*. [Hold it up to screen]. You should make sure that the UNC library system gets this book. But even from these brief sketches, I think you can get a sense of how performance is emerging as the means which enables people to discover their collective reconstructive power to build their own organizations. It is the method by which we are challenging the patterns of abusive behavior that have keep most of us humiliated, passive and powerless for centuries. It is, if you will, the revolutionary activity with which we can collectively imagine a different future through the activity of building it in the ruins of the old.

Remember my request at the start of my talk that you try to view the world as a process in which everything is what it is and what it’s not, what it’s becoming. I hope that that request, that invitation, has helped you to understand what performance activism is and why it’s impacting in so many positive ways. It brings together activities that we have not brought together before: play and power; performance and activism; fun and seriousness; discontent and hope. It is something new under the sun and it still very young; it has a lot of becoming in front of it.

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