

Research-Activism as Tool-and-Result

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We were asked to share our experiences and understandings of being/becoming activist scholars. It's a great privilege to be doing this with Anna and Kris.

My experience as the particular kind of activist scholar that I am is joyful, creative and immensely gratifying. For me, being an activist scholar is the performance of my lifetime. It's a performance that is collectively organized, improvisational in the movement of history and improvised in the day to day as well, although sometimes it involves improvising with a script

I use the word performance because it's the key to my activism and my scholarship. We all perform—babies do it with us and with their toys and we call it play. Actors do it on stage and we call it putting on a play. But despite the huge differences between babies and actors, there's a striking similarity. Both are engaging in cultural-historical activities in which they are simultaneously who they are and not who they are. A two-year old babbling baby and at the same time a “mother” “talking” to her “baby” teddy bear as she puts it to bed. Forty-year old Chadwick Boseman, an African American man from South Carolina who lives in LA, and at the same time is T'Challa, Jackie Robinson, James Brown and Thurgood Marshall.

Performing is how human beings develop. When we create an ensemble and perform who we are not, we are creating who we are becoming. Playing is how we develop. When we are playing we are doing things we don't know how to do yet. We become readers and writers and dancers and scholars by creating, with others, the environments—the stages—for the performance of reading and writing and dancing and scholarship. Every human being on this planet needs to have the support to play and perform, to continue to become, not only when they are little but throughout their lives. But they don't. And that is tragic.

Most people recognize that support for development and support for performance when we are very, very young is vital to the continuation of our species. What I urge, practice and promulgate is that the support for development and the support for performance beyond babyhood is a vital necessity for anything resembling social-cultural-political change—not to mention anything resembling a productive and satisfying life.

But in our current cultures, it is very, very hard to continue to develop past childhood—and to continuously create new performances of ourselves. The mainstream institutions, particularly of psychology, education and politics, serve as gatekeepers on our collective action and on our creativity. They dissect, analyze, test and, ultimately, judge us by and with the categories they made up and place us in.

In such a climate, I believe that we have to create ways to get out from under psychology's self-appointed authority on what it is to be human. We need to create new psychologies. Ones that move from the glorification of the mythic isolated individual to the embracing of the relationality of life, from the need for instrumental and adaptive behavior to the desire for the revolutionary becoming-ness of performance. It seems to me that we have to perform as “other” to change the world—we can't do it as we are now—because we are socialized to be isolated individuals who commodify ourselves, who are driven to possess and compete with each other, who see the world in black and white, good and evil, human and not human.

In such a climate, I believe that creating the social, emotional, cultural and intellectual development of all people, no matter their circumstance, is inextricably linked to making qualitative cultural and political change. And so, I work to invite people of all ages and in all places to create development and the communities that support it. To teach people how to engage with each other in ensemble and development environment building so as to transform their relationships to themselves, to each other and to the institutional gatekeepers of both local and global culture. To help people perform their lives and re-perform this rotten and rotting world.

Following Vygotsky, I see this as a “task raised by history” that requires a new kind of method, one that he called “simultaneously the tool and the result of study.” This means that it’s not method as typically understood and practiced, that is, instrumentally, as applied to some situation or set a data. Tool-and-result literally creates itself and its results at the same time. In the language of performance, this new kind of method is one in which the performance and the stage are created together. In the language of philosophy, it is both ontological and epistemological. In the language of perception, it is seeing the social activity of creating process and product simultaneously, as a dialectical unity. In the language of human science, it is relating to people as social historical beings capable of making revolutionary change and building with them, rather than relating to them as objects to be studied, explained, described, or even given voice to. And in the language of politics, its goal is, “All Power to the Developing” because it is people who are developing who can transform the very circumstances that determine us.

Like everything in our lives, my route to becoming the kind of activist-scholar that I am and am becoming, has many beginnings. One of them was working with Michael Cole in the early Rockefeller University years of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition and the emergence of CHAT. What I learned there has been integral to my growth as activist-scholar: that learning and development are socio-culturally situated; that laboratory experiments on human cognition cannot be ecologically valid because you can’t see the social-cultural nature of cognition in the lab; that the lab is not a physical space but an impositional way of

seeing; that science in general, and the social sciences and psychology in particular, are political; and that the research psychologists do can be practically relevant.

During this time, I met community organizers engaged in work that shared some features with the LCHC mission. However, their work was grass roots activism, much of it carried out on the streets of NYC's poorest neighborhoods, as these organizers set up free health clinics and schools and organized people on welfare into a union—attempting to create with people organizations through which they could exercise their power. I was very moved by this work and taken with its independent location and funding stream, which allowed for more freedom to create a new psychology as part of community activism. I chose this route and created an organization outside the university where my colleagues and I could bring community-based practices and academics together, and could simultaneously develop, study and promulgate a developmental performatory approach to learning and development, community building and culture change. It is, forty years down the road, one strain within CHAT. Over these forty years, what's been built is an international development community in which thousands of people directly participate.

In this way, my colleagues and I have taken Vygotsky's search for method as simultaneously the tool and the result of study into mass organizing. As I understand it, it is in creating something other, in performing our becoming, in creating with people the very development you want to study, that we engage the epistemological authoritarianism of science and its misapplication to the social sciences and education. It's how I've chosen to engage the institutional corruption of psychology, education and politics and their destructive impact on people's daily lives and on the planet.

Because my activist-scholar "becomingness" has everything to do with mass organizing, it's as an organizer that I want you to know me. The kind of organizing I do is designed to create development and simultaneously create a community that supports that very activity of creating development.

My colleagues and I organize everywhere. On street corners and subway platforms, in housing projects, in schools, in health and mental health centers, in theatres and performance spaces, in refugee camps, in churches, in corporations and board rooms, at academic conferences like this one—all over the world. We organize the poor, the wealthy and those in between, the skeptical, the frustrated, the depressed, the angry, the grassroots risk-taking builders, the professionals who've gone out on a limb to defy the establishment, the creatives, the passionate, the closet activists sitting in university classrooms and working in mental health clinics.

We reach different people with different specific needs—poor youth in the urban centers of the US, Japan and the UK; refugees in the camps of Greece, Germany, Italy and Serbia; citizens in Ciudad Juárez Mexico afraid to leave their homes for fear of violence; college students suffering the stress of contemporary life as a young person; managers and line workers at businesses who feel de-humanized; teachers and social workers and counselors and therapists fed up with their diagnostic and drug obsessed professions; successful and well-to-do adults who want to give back; people in emotional pain and turmoil no matter where they are. They are reached with the invitation to develop themselves and their communities. To perform a new world. And to create the stages that make this possible.

At the Institute, which is my independent location that created and expands this methodology across the globe, we call this a new form of social activism in which play and performance are the pedagogy *and* the organizing activity—simultaneously the tool and the result of human development, cultural creativity and social change.

As a mass organizing activist-scholar, I am both inside and outside academia. This dual location has given me great freedom to cross borders and break down boundaries and create new things. It also has put me in situations where my legitimacy as a scholar is questioned. That's been a challenge that I've learned to appreciate. It's helped me explore more deeply why I do what I do.

I have one example I want to share with you. It happened quite a few years ago, but its impact remains. On our way home from an international conference on cultural-historical approaches, a colleague and I were sharing impressions. We had attended many of the same sessions, including a symposium we both presented on. My colleague told me that during the conference she could see the ‘inside academia/outside academia’ tension that my work generates. As an example, she mentioned how some members of the audience at our symposium seemed to be put off when I gave some facts and figures about the size and scope of the community building projects I’m involved in—she thought they took it as self-promoting, and that it set up an unnecessary barrier between me and them that made it difficult for them to hear what, in her opinion, were sophisticated and important theoretical points that these scholars would be greatly interested in. She wondered if next time I should just omit those details and speak to the theoretical issues.

I felt sympathetic to my colleague’s position, especially because she had her own experiences being outside the officially-sanctioned institutions. But I also felt that omitting this information would violate the very methodology I was trying to communicate. Even more, it seemed to me that omitting it would be problematic even on their terms, one of which is “Show me the data.” I wanted those in the audience to take note that my data base is, on the one hand, analogous to their “30 subjects” or “two suburban high schools” or “three mother-infant dyads” and, on the other hand, it’s fundamentally different. The difference is that the people who have been touched by our performance-based methodology of community building are not the subjects of a research study designed to test a theoretical position; their behavior is not to be construed as the result of our intervention or as some natural phenomenon subject to objective (or even relativistic) analysis. Rather, these people are both the tool and the result of our method. It is *their* developmental activity, not my or anyone’s analysis of it, that might create a new culture.

For quite a few years now, people have been urged to “think outside the box.” I don’t think that goes nearly far enough. We need to *give up the box*. We need to “think without a box.” Of course, we can’t. Not completely anyway. But that’s OK. Because developing

ourselves and our world doesn't depend on whether we actually can think without a box. It hinges on whether we can *imagine that we can*. Because imagining shapes and reshapes what we do next.

Something that drives us as educational researchers is the injustice that derives from the unequal access to knowledge that exists in this country and worldwide. Maybe education that provides access for all to the world's knowledge is the key to freedom. But maybe the problem of freedom goes beyond unequal **access** to knowledge. Maybe what keeps us all—whatever our race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, age, occupation, and financial situation—unfree in all kinds of ways is how organized our lives are by *the ideology of knowing and the distance it creates from life as lived*. I've shared a piece of how I came to this belief—or at least how I imagine I did. That, in a nutshell, is my performance as an activist-scholar.