The Performative Approach for Development in Education

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A long time ago when I was 22 years old, I taught in a high school in the state of Rhode Island in the USA. The area was quite rural then and isolated. And even though it was located only 30 minutes from the state capital of Providence, many of the students told me they had never been there. I taught English and, in those days, had the freedom to choose my materials and methods. I was able to develop curricula around old time ballads and popular music. I made up games to teach them logic and critical thinking. My students really appreciated my creativity and my urging them to be creative. Even so, I envied the art teachers because being creative and fostering creativity was what they were supposed to do. I thought they had all the fun.

I didn’t become an art teacher or even remain a high school English teacher. Instead, I went to graduate school in linguistics and developmental psychology. I was fascinated by language—the art of it, the creativity of it, and the effortless way we learn it as babies. Through my study and research, I discovered that performing, playing, and improvising are the secrets to learning language—indeed to learning anything.

I also founded the East Side Institute, with philosopher and community activist the late Fred Newman. Today, the Institute is a global education center for performance approaches to learning and social change.

And, most importantly, I became a developmentalist. Let me explain.

I have a PhD in developmental psychology, but I identify more with the activity—rather than the study—of human development. I work to support people to develop themselves and their communities. I invite people to see development as a social, creative, life-long human activity and to practice it in their daily lives. By develop, I mean create new responses to existing situations, transforming what is. These new responses can be feelings, ways of thinking and understanding, Ways of teaching and learning, ways of seeing and talking, and ways of doing our relationships. Ways of responding to the scariness of the world. Ways of navigating uncertainty and unknowability. Ways of living. Ways of creating new forms of life.

I am a developmentalist because the world—the earth, the sky, the animals, the children, the elders, the families, the villages, the towns, the cities, the schools, the work place—needs to develop. Without creating escape routes, we remain trapped. Without creating the new out of everything that currently exists, we repeat ourselves. We continue to kill mind, body and spirit.

Developing **(creating the new)** is far from easy. The great majority of the world’s people are not even aware that developing is possible after childhood, or that development is a social accomplishment, not an individual one. People create it together, rather than it being something that happens to us individually. When the conditions are favorable, this creating of development has no end, but is ongoing and continuous. But when the conditions are unfavorable, development stops.



A developmentalist’s practice is based in a social-cultural, relational, and performative understanding of development. This is different from the common understanding of development that we have been socialized to. Whether you have studied psychology or not, you most likely picture human development as a series of stages that individuals pass through on their way to becoming adults (think of Freud and Piaget). These stages are believed to emerge in a fixed order, due to maturing of the brain and a reasonable amount of nurturing. In other words, the dominant view is that development is something that happens *to us* *as individuated selves*. In addition, while over the past half-century psychologists have expanded their interest and understanding of development beyond childhood, a stage-like and hierarchical view is still embedded in what has come to be known as life-span development. This is the case not only for Piaget and Freud, but also for other influential psychologists such as Kohlberg and his stages of moral development and the hierarchy of needs put forth by Maslow.

A simple way to see the difference between this dominant view and a developmentalist’s understanding of development is to picture two kinds of stages. Stage theories fit well with an image of a ladder with its steps leading progressively upward. My social-cultural, relational and performative theory fits well with the image of a theatrical stage upon which a cultural activity, a performance, is created and shared. Through this social activity, the actors and crew are building relationships with each other and the audience.



A developmentalist incorporates this theatrical language into their way of seeing human life. I mean this literally. Performing, for me, is more than a metaphor. It’s what people do. Creating stages and performing on them is, to me, what people do and how they develop.

Performing in this sense is closely related to playing in the way children do. This is easiest to see when children are engaging in free and imaginative play with each other, their toys and stuffed animals, and all kinds of objects. They create the stage for an elephant and a horse to dance and choreograph their moves, they create a doctor’s office and become a doctor for their sick teddy bear, they stage a confrontation between two superheroes, they perform as Mommy making dinner for her babies, and so on. In situations like these, they are being who they are and other than who they are—*at the very same time*. They are themselves, but they are also performing “other.”



A century ago, the renowned Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky identified this kind of play as the leading activity of children’s development—in play, he wrote, children perform “a head taller” than they are (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). They stretch; they do things they don’t yet know how to do; they suspend the “real world” and create something fantastical out of what they’ve experienced; and they actively create who they’re becoming.



While Vygotsky’s insights give us a deeper understanding of what is easily identified as children’s play, they do even more—they help us realize that this capacity to perform/to play is the key to *all* human development and learning.

To illustrate, let’s look at the development and learning of language, something Vygotsky was very interested in as a cultural-historical phenomenon. He looked at language as a unique form of psychological activity, one in which people not only create words and meanings, but also continuously create new speakers (and signers and writers and readers). Building on this understanding, for decades I have pursued the topic of how humans become what I like to call “languagers” (Holzman, 2109). I use this term (which I think I made up) to convey more than learning and more than speaking. Languagers create language and use language to create other things— relationships, learnings, material things, and themselves. Languagers are speakers, listeners, conversationalists, readers, writers, poets, singers, creators, makers of meaning. Becoming a languager involves acquiring skills and knowledge. But it’s fundamentally a developmental, a qualitatively transformative, activity of becoming something and someone you weren’t.

We can see this beautifully in the process of becoming a speaker when we are very young. I love inviting people to talk with me about this, since most of us have never given it a moment’s thought. I especially like bringing this topic to groups of young people in college classrooms and after-school programs. I ask them, "How many

of you were once babies?" (They all raise their hands and snicker a bit.) "How many

of you learned to talk?" (Ditto.) I go on: "How many spoke English as your first

language? Spanish? Japanese? Korean? Chinese? Bengali?" When I ask how come we all didn't begin speaking the same language, they typically respond that we speak what the

people around us speak. We learn the language we hear. I agree and go on to say that as babies we’re anything but passive in this process, that we play an active role in creating ourselves as speakers. And we do it together with others around us—through playing and performing.

I tell them that each one of us played with sounds and words and sentences as an

everyday part of what we were doing with our families in the house and on the street

and playground. Each one of us creatively imitated mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and grandparents and friends and neighbors and people on television, and they

became part of who we were becoming, as the unique person that each of us is. Each one of us was related to as a speaker even though we didn’t speak a language but merely babbled. It’s as if we were in a scene of a play performing as characters carrying on a conversation. And even though only one character knows the language and neither one understands what the other is saying—we’re performing that we do. And through this performance, we transform from babblers to speakers.

I’ve never spoken with a group that didn’t love this conversation. Teenagers tell me that no one ever talked to them about language before and thank me for giving them the opportunity to think and speak about this new thing. College students are intrigued by the idea that learning the subject matter of their courses might have something to do with learning to speak its language. And that learning it has everything to do with playing with it and performing as a speaker of it.



It’s hard to play in our classrooms though. That’s because we’ve been socialized to equate learning with work and play as something else—frivolous, a luxury, something we don’t have time for if we’re serious about learning and succeeding. This breaks my heart, really. We shoot ourselves in the foot when we stop playing in the name of learning, because with only school **work**, students get turned off and resentful, and have few outlets for their energy, creativity, imagination and sociability to flourish.



All of my adult life has been about bringing playful improvisation and performativity back into people’s lives, whatever their age or situation. And into learning environments, both in schools and outside of schools. I want to help people reinitiate their development, their creativity, their curiosity, their desire to learn. I say reinitiate because we all have these capacities. They are just waiting to be awakened and supported.

Those of you in media education are in a wonderful position to provide that support to reawaken students and support their ongoing development. Like art teachers, you too help students work together to make things.

When we have “conversations” with babbling babies, we and they are playing, we and they are improvising with sounds and words. They are performing as speakers before they know the first thing about language. When we give them markers and papers, we and they are playing, we are improvising with images and representation and perspective and color. They are performing as artists before they know the first thing about art. When we put children in front of a computer for the first time, as Professor Sugata Mitra from India did, they will—together—figure out how to work it, and how to discover information on all kinds of things they know nothing about. They will play, tinker, try, create.

The magic here is that we adults are relating to their performing selves, to who they are becoming. We are not stuck on what they don’t know. We are not obsessed with correcting them. Like skilled improv comedians, we accept their offers (“wa-wa, Mama”) and we add something (“Yes, Mama is giving you some water”). We follow the basic rule of improv—what’s known as “Yes, and.” It is what makes an improv scene entertaining and funny. But it is much more than that. It is the key to the socialness of human development and learning: Accept and build—and people will keep becoming, keep learning, keep growing.

You may be familiar with this famous saying of Pablo Picasso: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Vygotsky’s statement about performing a head taller through play helps me understand how profound Picasso was. I think he is pointing to the trap we get into—once we know how to do something, we become less willing and able to do new things. We get stuck doing what we know how to do. Imagination reigns supreme when we are little—when we don’t yet know that we’re supposed to know. We take risks. We learn how to paint, draw, sing, dance, talk, even think, because we are supported to **play** at “painting” “drawing” “singing” “dancing” “talking” and “thinking.” Because we’re supported to **perform** as painters, drawers, singers, dancers, talkers and thinkers. *Before we know, we do*. We play, we perform, we pretend our way to growth, learning and knowledge. For me, this is the fundamental process of human learning and development.

To continue becoming an artist throughout life, then, we cannot let all the knowledge we are accumulating about art, color, perspective, how things are supposed to look, etc., take over or suppress our imagination and stop us from doing things with paint and pencil and color and perspective that we have never done before.

Vygotsky tells us that imagination and experience build on each other—we might say they improvise! In early childhood, experience and imagination are in constant interplay. Experience gets put to use to create a new experience, which creates new imagining, which creates new experience, and so on. Experiencing live animals in the zoo, for example, can build on and transform children’s play with their stuffed animals into something new, something other than what they experienced at the zoo. And this imaginative play is another experience—to potentially learn with and from.

The unfortunate irony of growing up is that the greater richness of our experiences doesn’t always get put to use by our imagination to create new experiences. That’s because the line between reality and fantasy becomes rigid, and “what’s real” comes to dominate our lives. “Oh, that’s not possible. It couldn’t happen. Dogs don’t moo. Numbers don’t dance. Trees don’t talk.” Our imaginings too often become limited by “what’s real.” And our experiences, like say a trip to Italy, too often get put in the “Well, I did that, and it was great” box of photographs and memories.

To my way of thinking, learning—at its best—is the continuous and emergent interplay between experience and imagination. This has special meaning, I think, for you in media education. As educators excited by the opportunities media provides, as people who traverse the ever-porous border between experience and imagination, I imagine that you would be uncomfortable if you only passed on knowledge and technique, rather than provide opportunities for students to activate their creativity and imaginations.

Perhaps with this new way of seeing as a developmentalist, you will find ways to bring your experience and imagination into a playful conversation with the experience and imagination of your students. Like Picasso’s challenge of how to remain an artist one you’re grown up, my challenge is how to remain playful once you are a teacher. I don’t mean just playing games. I actually don’t mean any particular activity. By playful, I mean *how* you do something, as distinct from what it is you’re doing. Doing something playfully is to be improvisational and performatory.

I’ve learned that you can do just about anything playfully. Even testing—in the school I ran a while ago, we would have the children perform as test makers and test takers before they took the official standardized tests. They had to improvisationally perform as test takers before they knew how. When you consciously perform as someone you are not (yet), you are playing, you are doing what you don’t know how to do, you are opening yourself to imagination and possibility, you are learning, you are becoming who you are not, you are developing.

Let us look more closely at the impact performativity and improvisation can have on your classroom as a developmental teaching and learning environment.

Take improv. As I am sure many of you are aware, this kind of performance is becoming popular as a teaching tool, not just in classrooms, but also in medical schools to improve doctor communication with patients, in corporations to build teams and develop leaders, and as a counseling and therapeutic tool for people with autism, with dementia, and with neurological illness such as Parkinson’s.

As I said earlier, the basic rule of improv is “yes, and.” Here is what that looks like on the stage. Someone sets the scene as you and your partner are at the beach in your bathing suits, and it starts to snow. You speak first, starting the scene by saying, “Wow! They told us the weather on Mars was unpredictable!” Following the rule of “yes, and” your partner might say, “Yeah, I’m glad they prepared us, and we brought our skis along with our bathing suits.” If your partner instead says no and negates what you said—“We’re not on Mars” or “No, they didn’t”—the scene won’t go anywhere. Your partner has to accept what you say and build the scene with it.

In the classroom, teachers can model “yes, and.” One way is to say to the class after one student says something—“Following up on what John said, I wonder if we could say some more colors, add to what John’s saying.” Compared to saying, “Next. What do others think?” when you invite through “yes and” you are helping to create an ensemble performance and generate group creativity.

There is another rule of improvisation that helps build the classroom as a performing ensemble. It is “Make others look good.” Improv comedians are always looking to make their partners look good, not to catch them and make them look foolish. Teachers can help students by practicing and teaching improv as a way to support each other to participate. There must be **something,** some offer in what they’ve said that you can build with. Find it. And use it to make them look good. Not to show they’re wrong.

This strategy really helps to make both teachers and students great listeners. Because you’re not listening to find fault or to correct, you’re not listening to make fun of someone, you’re not listening to see if you agree. You are listening, as I like to say, to build the conversation and build the knowledge.

Another benefit of improv is that it involves everyone and makes them feel like they belong to something. Everyone is in it together doing something, creating something together. Vygotsky called this a collective way of working together. I really like that expression. Instead of a competitive way of working together, we’re building a collective way of working together.

If the classroom environment is playfully performative and improvisational, then you do not have to know the answer to participate in a lesson, to learn history, to learn how to add or multiply, or to learn world geography. You do not have to know everything in order to participate, because it’s not focusing on what is in your head. It’s focusing on what the group can create. If your goal as a teacher is to support your students to create a community of learners. then the challenge is to create the environment for everyone to contribute, no matter how big or small. Imagine that your **classroom is a stage** for the performance of development and learning. The creative question for everyone is: “How are we going to perform our improvisational learning today?”

I hope that what I’ve shared about play, performance and improvisation resonates with much what you already do in your classrooms and inspires new practices. I also hope that you’ll keep the “how are we going to perform” question in mind. Shifting to seeing your classrooms as stages for the performance of development, and approaching teaching and learning as playful and improvisational, are essential if you want to create a community of learners in your classroom, one in which you and your students exercise and grow your creative imaginations.

I leave you with a few words from Richard Schechner, the American theatre director who is world-renowned as the father of Performance Studies: