

**LEV VYGOTSKY AND THE NEW PERFORMATIVE PSYCHOLOGY:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

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## THE JOURNEY

Fifteen years ago, when I was working with long-time Harlem educator Barbara Taylor to create an experimental school in the heart of one of New York City's poorest communities, we used to say that we were "bringing Vygotsky to Harlem." That's Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who lived and worked in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 30s. Vygotsky's work was suppressed until the 1960's and little known in the West until the late 1970s, and then only among a select group of educators and developmental psychologists. Hardly a household name. Barbara and I wanted every kid and parent in Harlem to get to know Vygotsky because we believed an approach to teaching children based in his ideas could revolutionize our educational system (and much else). Vygotsky's theoretical and empirical work passionately affirms the socialness of human beings. It provides an understanding of growth and development as an ongoing *creative and collaborative process* – to us, a welcome change from the stagist and individualistic understanding that dominates in psychological and educational theory. Vygotsky's ideas seemed to point the way to a cultural transformation of education that would make it possible for all people to learn actively, creatively and growthfully, no matter the age or circumstance. Well, things didn't work out quite the way we had hoped, although one year the graduating class of the Barbara Taylor School wrote and performed an original musical number they dubbed "The Vygotsky Rap."

My dream of transforming how schools are organized, how teachers teach and children learn and don't learn, how educational researchers study schools and children

and teachers, and how parents and all of us as citizens relate to schooling and learning began well before the Harlem experiment. So did my love affair with Vygotsky. In the late 1970s, I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Rockefeller University's Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition in New York City when the Lab's director, psychologist Michael Cole, resurrected Vygotsky's writings. 1978 was still the 60s, culturally speaking, and there was still excitement among academics that our basic institutions, including schools, could be transformed and, further, that what we did as committed and activist scholars would have an impact. But the era of activism and fervor for social change ended. While today Vygotsky is far better known among educators and developmental psychologists than he was two decades ago, our failing educational system has remained virtually unchanged.

Much else has transformed, however. As we begin the new millennium, there is perceptible in the broader culture a belief in individual and institutional transformation. There is a receptivity to Vygotsky's ideas in other disciplines, including psychotherapy and medicine. These are fields in which I have been working directly as a researcher, trainer and consultant for many years. Perhaps it is no surprise, however, that it is the business world that shows the most promise of embracing – in practice -- some of the most revolutionary of Vygotsky's discoveries. And so, today I find myself “bringing Vygotsky to corporate America.” My story is, in one sense, not unusual. My journey – from academia to the private sector – has been taken by thousands of others. But it is worth telling, I believe, because more than my personal story, it is an analysis of some important cultural trends in which business is playing a leading role. This analysis will

emerge as I explore the following issues: why this is happening now; who Vygotsky was; why his work provides an important foundation for many of the needed and/or desired changes in how organizations (and the people who comprise them) function; and what some practical applications of his work look like in corporate settings.

## THE LANDSCAPE

There is no shortage of attempts to characterize the current – and ever-changing – business environment, its challenges and its opportunities. Nor do we lack experts to guide us to greater success. The production of books, videos, conferences, online courses and other materials designed to help us innovate, create culture, train and retain a creative and flexible work force, and establish a loyal customer base is itself one of the fastest growing businesses of the last few years. Amidst this cacophony of different voices, if you listen carefully you can discern a theme. A new world view is being offered, including a new view of what it is to be a person. No longer are we seen as self-contained, isolated individuals who come together only out of necessity to accomplish certain tasks. We're social beings -- relational, connected, part of something larger than ourselves. We and the world we live in are not fixed entities, but continuously emergent, complex and not predictable because we and it are always transforming. "Man" as rational thinker, man as machine, man as computer – these metaphors from the modern era are being replaced by ones more coherent with what many refer to as the *postmodern* era in which we are living (not to mention that "man" has been replaced by "person,"

“men and women,” “human beings,” etc.). The new concepts and terms are no longer weighted toward cognition, but place emotions and/or spirituality on equal footing. Human beings are not so much fully formed and fixed as we are characterized by fluidity, multiplicity, complexity and creativity. Above all, from the business point of view, it is the relationality, connectedness and collaborative nature of human action that “gets things done.”

Examples of this trend abound. Here are a few of the hundreds of book titles urging executives and managers to embrace a holistic, dynamic and creative view of work and workers.

*Peak Performance: Aligning the Hearts and Minds of Your Employees;*  
*The Passionate Organization: Igniting the Fire of Employee Commitment.*  
*The Living Organization: Spirituality in the Workplace, A Guide for Adapting to the Chaotically Changing Workplace;*  
*A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America: A Hard Look at Spirituality, Religion, and Values in the Workplace (Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series);*  
*Managing with the Wisdom of Love: Uncovering Virtue in People and Organizations (Jossey Bass Business and Management Series);*  
*Awakening the Corporate Soul: Four Paths to Unleash the Power of People at Work;*  
*Common Knowledge: How Companies Thrive by Sharing What They Know;*  
*Collaborative Creativity: Unleashing the Power of Shared Thinking;*  
*Building Team Power: How to Unleash the Collaborative Genius of Work Teams.*  
*Igniting Innovation – Inspiring Organizations by Managing Creativity;*  
*Creativity and the Management of Change;*  
*Managing Complexity in Organizations;*

*Strategic Thinking and the New Science: Planning in the Midst of Chaos, Complexity and Change;*

*The Complexity Advantage: How the Science of Complexity Can Help Your Business Achieve Peak Performance;*

*The Creative Executive: How Business Leaders Innovate by Stimulating Passion, Intuition and Creativity.*

Some of the ideas discussed in these books come from what can be described as “the new psychology.” This phrase refers to efforts by psychologists all over the world to create new theories and practices for how to see, study and support people in creating new ways to be together. They look outside of mainstream psychology and find promising direction from recent discoveries in other disciplines, from physics and biology to performance studies, communication theory and philosophy. Many of these theoreticians and practitioners loosely gravitate to the term postmodern, to characterize the openness and complexity that comes with a breakdown in fixed and static categories and ways of understanding.<sup>1</sup>

A sub-trend within this broader cultural current is to see people primarily as performers and the world as a series of stages upon which we create the millions of scenes (scripted and improvised) of our lives. This new, still small, approach is referred to as *performative psychology*<sup>2</sup> To performative researchers and theorists, people’s ability to perform -- to pretend, to play, to improvise, to be who we are and “other” than who we are -- is key to our emotional, social and intellectual lives. In my view, a new psychology that approaches human beings as performers has tremendous potential to unleash and nurture the human capacity to create and collaborate.

Discussions of performance in the sense of theatrical performance (rather than performance outcomes) are still scarce in the business field, with the notable exception of Pine & Gillmore's *The Experience Economy – Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage*. At the same time, the number of firms using theatrical performance and improvisation in their management consulting, organization development and leadership training is steadily growing and gaining media coverage; in 2000, articles appeared in such major publications as *Fast Company*, *Forbes, Inc.*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, and *Working Woman*. (The largest and best-known US firm is Second City Communications, an offshoot of Chicago's famed Second City improvisational comedy troupe. The work of a newer company with which I consult, Performance of a Lifetime, is the focus of the current discussion.)

## VYGOSTKY AND PSYCHOLOGY OLD AND NEW

Vygotsky is part of the new psychology and, more specifically, part of performative psychology. In order to share why I think his discoveries are compatible with and can contribute to the new business environment, it is necessary to look briefly at the history of psychology so we can see what is so revolutionary about his understanding of human development and learning.

If Not Behavior, Then What?

From its earliest days as a discipline, psychology has taken behavior to be its subject matter. In the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as psychology was fashioning itself after the natural and physical sciences, it needed a unit of analysis that could be measured and quantified. Behavior seemed to fit the bill. It was a phenomenon that could be “found” over and over again and shown to be the factor that unified all the varied things human beings do. Describing psychology’s formative years, Kurt Danziger tells us how behavior served to link the study of people with the study of other organisms.

Whether one was trying to explain a child’s answers on a problem-solving task, an adult’s neurotic symptomatology, or a white rat’s reaction to finding itself in a laboratory maze, one was ultimately trying to explain the same thing, namely, the behaviour of an organism. Classifying such diverse phenomena together as instances of “behaviour” was the first necessary step in establishing the claim that Psychology was one science with one set of explanatory principles. (Danziger, 1997, p. 86).

Over the decades, psychology became more sophisticated, more influential and more diverse. Today, one would be hard pressed to name an area of human life, from birth to death, that is not scrutinized by some branch of psychology. And behavior remains, by and large, the unit by which psychologists make claims about what people do. For example, psychologists today seek to discover the psychological foundations of violence and aggression in order to gain insight into (and reverse the tide of) the increase in *violent*



*and aggressive behavior.* The widespread use and often devastating effects of drugs has shaped a billion-dollar addiction industry in the U. S. which includes the psychological study of *addictive behavior.* The information highway challenges psychologists to rethink *learning behavior.* The pressure of identity politics made clear the need for intensified study of variations in the *communicative behavior* of various groups as compared along gender, race, ethnic and class lines. And so on.

Psychologists and educators aren't the only ones who have been socialized to see behavior. We (ordinary people) are all very good at seeing it when we look at ourselves and others. Are we missing something? Is there something else to see and respond to? Do people do things other than behave? If so, what?

The answer, according to many psychologists who are seeking a new unit of study for understanding human life, is yes. They see many limitations in psychology's prolonged and persistent focus on behavior. For one, it does not have a social-cultural foundation nor is it a dynamic, emergent and holistic concept. Behavior relates to human beings as unchanging in character, in the way that the units of study in the natural and physical sciences are. Chemists, biologists, and the like are aware that their objects of study -- e.g., chemical elements, atoms, genetic material and planets -- do not transform their character and still remain chemical elements, atoms, genetic material and planets. But human beings are different in this respect; we do undergo fundamental, qualitative transformations in our character and yet human beings we remain.

Another problem with behavior is that it is premised on a conception of the human being as a self-contained individual who exhibits particular actions, some of them

“hard-wired” and some of them in response to the social-cultural environment. This conception of human beings, according to its critics, distorts who people are and what people do in a fundamental sense: we aren’t isolated individuals separate from each other; we’re not even separate from our environment! While we surely can be (and are, in Western cultures) *distinguished* from environment, this does not mean we are *separate from* it. Instead of two separate entities, these psychologists posit, there is but one, the unity “persons-environment.” In this unity, the relationship between persons and environment is complex and dialectical: environment “determines” us and yet we can change it completely (changing ourselves in the process, since the “it”—the unity “persons-environment”— includes us, the changers). People are social-cultural creators and changers, first and foremost. From this vantage point, the problem with psychology looks like this: if psychology is the study of behavior, then what we study when we study behavior is not human life as lived, but a distortion of it (Holzman, 1999b; Newman and Holzman, 1996).

Here is where Lev Vygotsky comes in. He challenged psychologists and educators of his day (the 1920s and 30s) to create a new *psychology of activity* (1978, 1987, 1993, 1997a, 1997b). Vygotsky saw human growth as a cultural activity that people engage in together, rather than as the external manifestation of an individualized, internal process or the lawful pattern of responses to external stimuli. Growth and transformation don’t happen *to us*; we create them. In both his research and theorizing, Vygotsky presented a new methodology for understanding human life as lived, with a particular focus on child development, learning and teaching as collaborative, creative,

cultural activities of continuous transformation. Key to his new methodology is the concept of *dialectical unity*. Let me “define” dialectical unity by example.

### Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development – The Human Activity Zone

In Vygotsky’s time, it was widely accepted that human development determines the course of learning and teaching (a belief that dominates to this day). The common notion that a child at a certain level of development (e.g., Piaget’s concrete operations stage) is capable of learning only certain things in particular ways is an example. Vygotsky was troubled by this way of conceptualizing the relationship between development and learning; it didn’t ring true for him. It was too simple, too linear, too causal. He reasoned that learning/instruction (in Russian, there is but one word) 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” (1987, p. 212). Learning was, to him, both the source and the product of development, just as development was both the source and the product of learning. As activity, learning and development are inseparably intertwined and emergent, best understood together as a whole (unity). Their relationship is dialectical, not linear or temporal (one doesn’t come before the other) or causal (one isn’t the cause of the other).

Vygotsky wants us to see the activity, the totality, the whole, the unity, because it is only from that vantagepoint that we can come to understand anything about process and function. Seeing particulars, seeing parts as making up the whole—rather than

seeing the whole and the inter-relationships within it—we neither see nor understand very much, because we distort what there is to be seen.

Vygotsky's concept of the *zone of proximal development (zpd)* is helpful in understanding learning and development as a dialectical unity (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Newman and Holzman, 1993). To understand the zpd, you need to envision a new kind of entity. Neither process nor product, this new entity is simultaneously both (we can write it as one word— process-and-product or tool-and-result). Seeing process, or seeing the unity process-and-product, is very difficult because we are socialized in Western culture to see only products (things, objects, results). For example, we tend to see, experience and respond to this article as a product and not as a moment in an ongoing process (or many processes) that includes the human history of writing, literacy, education, research, etc., the history of each specific reader of these words, and so on. We tend also to see, experience and respond to people as products (identities, labels) rather than as ongoing process. We see ourselves and others as “who we are” (products) and not as simultaneously “who we are” (which includes our history of becoming who we are) and “who we are becoming.” Yet, each one of us is, at every moment, *both being and becoming*. The zpd is the ever emergent and continuously changing “distance” between being and becoming. It is human activity that gives birth to and nurtures the zpd and, with its creation, human learning and development.

Vygotsky noted a fascinating feature of the zpd. In zpd-like environments — that is, ones in which learning and development are jointly created by people's activity — what happens is that we do things we don't yet know how to do, we go beyond ourselves.

This capacity of people to do things in advance of themselves, Vygotsky discovered, is the essence of human growth. Children learn and develop, he said, by “performing a head taller than they are” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).

One of his most wonderful illustrations is the learning-development of language. Vygotsky vividly described how babies transform from babblers to speakers of a language through performing. The language-learning zpd is an environment that supports the baby to speak when it doesn't know how to, that is, to perform as a speaker. Vygotsky observed that children become speakers of language through the performance of conversations that they and their caregivers create. The babbling baby's rudimentary speech is a *creative imitation* of the more developed speaker's speech. At the same time, the more developed speakers *complete* the baby and immediately accept her/him into the community of speakers. They neither give very young children a grammar book and dictionary to study, nor reprimand and correct them. Instead, they relate to them as capable of far more than they could possibly do; they relate to them as speakers, feelers, thinkers and makers of meaning. This is what makes it possible for very young children to do what they are not yet capable of. In this way, we can say that they are *performing* beyond themselves as speakers. When they are playing with language in this way in the language-learning zpd, babies are simultaneously performing—*becoming*—themselves. Performing is a way of taking "who we are" and creating something new—in this case, a new speaker—through incorporating "the other."

Vygotsky's message is profound: performing is how we learn and develop. It is through performing—doing what is other than and beyond us—that when we are very

young we learn to do the varied things we don't know how to do. But what happens, as we perform our way into cultural and societal adaptation, is that we also perform our way out of continuous development. A lot of what we have learned (through performing) becomes routinized and rigidified. We become so skilled at acting out roles that we no longer keep creating new performances of ourselves. We develop an identity as "this kind of person"—someone who does certain things (and does them in certain ways) and feels certain ways. Anything other than that, most of us think—as we forget that we are also who we are becoming—would not be "true" to "who we are."

Performative psychologists, therefore, work to build environments for children and adults to create new performances and reinitiate growth. Participating in creating the performance “stage” and performing on it is how we can go beyond ourselves to create new experiences, new skills, new intellectual capacities, new relationships, new interests, new emotions, new hopes, new goals—which is, after all, what learning and developing are all about (Holzman, 1997a, b; Newman, 1996).

The Harlem-based Barbara Taylor School I mentioned at the beginning was a Vygotskian project (Holzman, 1997a). It is one of several performative psychology programs for children, youth and adults in family, school, after school and community settings that I have been involved with for many years. One youth program, the All Stars Talent Show Network, is especially notable for its success with thousands of young people from the poorest inner city communities (Fulani, 2000). These programs are based on the Vygotskian performance-based approach of the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy, a non-profit research and training center for human development

and community headquartered in New York City.<sup>3</sup> However, none of these Vygotskian, performance approach projects would have been possible without a major development in the field of psychotherapy.

## DISCOVERING THE THERAPEUTIC IN VYGOTSKY AND THE PERFORMATIVE IN THERAPY

Among the many hundreds of experiments in alternative therapy and education that sprang up in the 60s era was a practice known as social therapy. Founded by Fred Newman, a Stanford University Ph.D. in the philosophy of science who left academia in 1969 to do community organizing, social therapy was radically different from traditional approaches. Like other radical therapies at the time, it was linked to progressive politics in attempting to help liberate people from oppression and the “isms.” However, unlike most alternatives from that time, social therapy managed to sustain itself and continued to transform, mature and prosper through the following decades. I met Fred Newman and social therapy in the mid-1970s and have been part of its growth ever since.

What initially struck me about social therapy was that it was a way of helping people with whatever emotional pain they were experiencing without diagnosing their problem, analyzing their childhood or interpreting their current life. Instead, the therapist charged the clients (mostly in group settings) with the task of working together to create an environment in which they could get help, because in the activity of developing the group, all would emotionally develop. In other words, clients are not “worked on” by a

therapist-expert, but create their own “cure” by creating something new together out of their emotional activity.

It was Fred Newman’s sophisticated understanding of philosophy, language and dialectics -- coupled with his dissatisfaction with the methods of psychology, its understanding of human beings as isolated individuals, and its obfuscation of process in favor of products -- that led him to create this mode of therapy. In particular, Newman was convinced that therapy needed to help people demystify language, get free from its constraints, and give them the opportunity to create meaning together. It is our language – especially our language of emotions – that has become rigid and reified and leads us to experience the events in our lives and our feelings as individuated products, not as part of the continuous process of creating our lives.<sup>4</sup>

When I shared Vygotsky with Newman, he seized upon his methodological and empirical discoveries. Vygotsky’s understanding of children’s language development, Newman realized, was profoundly relevant to adults’ emotional development. Vygotsky had shown that in the zpd of early childhood, children are supported to do what is beyond them, to perform who they are becoming (even as they are who they are), and that this process of creating the zpd is the joint (ensemble) creation of their becoming language speakers. They learn to speak by playing with language. Vygotsky’s accounting was completely coherent with the activity of social therapy, in which people are supported by the therapists to do what is beyond them (create the group), to perform who they are becoming.



Newman had discovered the therapeutic dimension of Vygotsky's remarkable research. Therapeutic work is actually development work: helping people to continuously create new performances of themselves is a way out of the rigidified roles, patterns and identities that cause so much emotional pain (and are called pathologies). In social therapy, people create new ways of speaking and listening to each other; they create meaning by playing with language. The significance of this, as Newman recently commented, is that "some kind of development takes place in the process of ensemble, collective performance, not just of someone else's play, but performance of our own discourse with each other" (Newman, 1999, p. 130). Newman and I were very excited by this new development and kept working it in new ways – I in education and child development and Newman in social therapy. We studied Vygotsky's writings extensively, dialogued with colleagues about our new understanding and wrote our ideas down in a book on Vygotsky's life and work (Newman and Holzman, 1993).

In the mid 1990s, Newman made a breakthrough about the relationship between therapy, performance and human development (breakthrough that led to the formation of Performance of a Lifetime and its innovative approach to working with businesses). By this time, Newman had begun to write and direct plays and he found the ensemble work of creating a play (creating Vygotskian zpd's) remarkably growthful for everyone involved. He was mulling over the relationship between therapy and theatre – could some new activity be created that could transform that relationship?

An opportunity arose when it came time for him to lead an intensive weekend social therapy experience sponsored annually by the East Side Institute for Short Term

Psychotherapy. Newman titled the weekend “The Play is the Therapy: Emotional Growth Through Performance” and he had in mind to work with participants to discover the power of performance in the therapeutic process. Over two days, the nearly 200 people (a mix of helping professionals and clients) took part in a series of improvisational performance workshops, sometimes working together as a whole and at other times in smaller groups creating separate skits. The weekend culminated in the production of a sprawling improvisational comedy. Six months later, another weekend experience was held. This time, Newman asked people to do one-minute performances of their lives (the “performance of a lifetime”). After each of these performances, Newman and his colleague, actor David Nackman, made directorial suggestions and asked each participant to perform for 30 more seconds in response to that suggestion. Based on these performances of a lifetime and the performance personas they projected, Newman and Nackman put various combinations of people together and proposed improvisational situations to work on. Once again, the weekend ended with the ensemble putting on an improvisational play. Newman and participants equally felt the power of the experience – an activity totally focused on creative theatrical process, which at the same time was remarkably successful in helping people with their emotional issues.

## BACK TO BUSINESS

“Adults have a tremendously rich variety of material – including our own self-consciousness – out of which to create a continuous life performance.

The more we perform, the richer the material from which we can continue to create new performances.” (Newman, *Performance of a Lifetime*, 1996, pp. 166-7)

My academic and program development experiences taught me how powerful theatrical performance can be as a force to re-initiate development in children and young people. Newman’s innovative experiments in bringing the performatory to therapy and finding the therapeutic in performance demonstrated how effective it could be in re-initiating emotional development in adults. It seemed to us that it was time to take the notion of people as performers to corporate America. If Vygotsky is right and performing is how we learn and develop, then don’t the “living organizations,” “learning organizations” and “passionate organizations” that business leaders are now speaking about need to recognize themselves as “performing organizations?” If creativity and growth come into existence when people together create zpd’s in the home, the school, the theater, the ball field and the therapy office, can management and employees learn to create them at the workplace? If getting up on a stage puts you in touch with your “performing self,” teaches you that you can always create new performances of yourself and has been shown to help adults, teens and children create better functioning and happier families and peer groups, might it not do the same for teams and workgroups?

These questions frame the approach of Performance of a Lifetime (POAL), the training and consulting firm with which I work. Taking the model Newman shaped at the social therapy weekends, POAL opened its doors in 1996, with Newman, Nackman and

two other actor colleagues, Nancy Green and Cathy Salit, as co-directors. POAL relates to people as performers of their lives and creators of their company play. Its goal is to help people discover that that they have the capacity to deal in new ways with challenges and problem areas in their work lives. Just as developing children create new ways to relate to paper and crayons, Daddy leaving for work, or not getting their way, so developing adults can create more options for relating to a new assignment, stress and responsibility, or tensions with co-workers.

There is no better tool for ongoing development than performing. Just watch very young children. They perform all the time, without a stage and without fear of making mistakes. They live performatively, doing things before they “know” how to do them -- playing with words and sounds before they know the language, and creatively imitating who they are not -- “flying” a plane, “reading” to their stuffed animals, “dancing” and “singing” along to a music video.... In Vygotskian terms, children develop so quickly and learn so well because they and we create zpd’s in which they can be who they are and who they are becoming.

When people stop developing, it is because they no longer take part in the kind of performatory life activities that support them to “be a head taller than they are.” In environments that expect adults to do only what they already know how to do (as well as environments that demand that we do what we don’t know how to do but provide no way to learn it), we are not likely to take risks to perform as other than who we think we are. Instead, we tend to repeat our well-learned patterns and passively play out the roles we have already learned. POAL is dedicated to helping organizations and their people learn

to create zpd's -- environments that support performatory life activities – and the continuous growth that this generates.

### Performing the Company Play

While there are great benefits to living in a culture of products like ours, there is a downside as well. When we are blind to the process, we miss seeing, experiencing and recognizing ourselves as the active creators not only of the products but also of the very process by which they came into being. It's like seeing only the tip of the iceberg.

But navigating successfully in our culture requires that we see below the surface. Leaders in all fields are called upon to see “the big picture.” Even though we live in a culture of products, we are going to have to learn how to see process. For if we really want to know how to “work the world” we need to learn how things in the world work, and that includes turning our attention to how they came to be. This is precisely what the practice of a *Vygotskian psychology of activity based in performance* can do for us.

When we are able to see and experience process, new possibilities emerge. Things no longer are only what they appear to be at the moment; they are also what they were and what they can become. A new understanding of creativity emerges. We begin to experience ourselves as the creators of the “products” of our lives (the ideas, emotions, thoughts, conversations, relationships, careers, life styles, etc.). More attuned to the creative process, we become more actively creative. Performing on a stage is like looking through magnifying glasses that show us what we don't usually see -- the

creative process that goes on all the time in everyday life. All of a sudden, if only for a brief moment, we can see, feel and experience being a part of a process, the process of creating with others out of whatever elements there are at our disposal.

The performance activities POAL designs for clients – improv shows, workshops and custom-designed short and long term programs for individuals, teams and entire organizations – give participants the experience of seeing (and being) members of a creative ensemble, a group of non-actors who can and do create improvised scenes together. Clients (which have included Fortune 500 companies, e-commerce start ups, government agencies, health care institutions and other non-profits) have found this creative activity extremely helpful in dealing with the unexpected, enhancing creativity, developing true collaboration and providing real leadership.

But after the POAL-organized performance (when we take the glasses off), it's all too easy to forget to focus (to forget that we are performing). The product-oriented cultural lens is too strong. Back in our familiar environments where there is no formal stage, we can forget that we are allowed to perform in new ways and that our lives are an ongoing process that we create. Unlike young children, adults need the added support of conceptual learning, of stepping back and abstracting the “lessons learned” from our experiential learning activities. The POAL approach incorporates reflection and dialogue on the method of performance in order to provide support for practicing what are essentially a new language and a new set of relationship and work skills.

The POAL developmental learning process participants go through has the following components:

Experiential learning. Performing the method in a specially designed environment - complete with theatrical stage -under the direction of improvisational performance trainers.

Conceptual learning. Deconstructing the performance experience and learning how the method works.

Practice. Practicing improvisational performance skills in workplace environments with no theatrical stage and with no skilled directors present. (The order and number of practice and conceptual learning components varies depending on the type and length of POAL program.)

## The Value of Improvisation

“Perhaps the most crucial reason to use improvisational theater as a method of training managers might be that it teaches a simple lesson. While preparation is important, spontaneity is even more so...Improvising is a complement to preparation. For example, in a jazz combo, all musicians must prepare thoroughly, but once they have mastered their art they riff off one another. It’s a balance between structure and chaos. This balance requires a mindset that rarely comes easily to those trained to manage. Letting go, yielding control, going into free fall, flying blind, trusting instinct – these are scary prospects, but nonetheless crucially important. When people – and companies – lose their ability to improvise, they can no longer innovate. And those who fail to innovate perish.” (Mukul Pandya, *Wharton Leadership Digest*, April 2000)

To most people, improvising means being spontaneous, dealing with the unexpected, breaking with a script and not following the rules. In this sense, all of us improvise some of the time. To professional performers, however, improvising has another, more complex meaning. It refers to the set of tools and methods that actors use to generate scenes, stories and conversations without a script. Skilled improvisers literally create action – they make things happen – on the spot. They create their stage, characters and plot by working off each other. In order to do so, they have to listen with an openness that is rare in other discourse situations. They have to listen in order to create, not to evaluate, assess or negate – otherwise the scene won't go anywhere. In this sense, good improvisers are doing with adults what the rest of us do when we speak with very young children. When a 10-month old says, “ba-ba” we aren't critical or negative, but rather we accept the utterance and keep the conversation going (for example, “Yes, it's time for your bottle,” “Uh oh, you dropped your bottle, I'll get it for you”). In improv language, this is called *accepting the offer*, in contrast with negating the offer. In Vygotsky's language, it is called *completing* what someone else says (Vygotsky, 1987), in contrast with competing with what is said.

Unfortunately, ordinary conversations, including those at the workplace, are rarely improvised in the theatrical sense. For example, people tend to listen very selectively to what others are saying -- to hear something they agree or disagree with, to assess the “truth value” of what is said, to size up the speaker, or to hear the pause that signals “it's my turn now,” etc. Conversations are typically negating rather than accepting, and competitive rather than complete. These ordinary conversations are old



performances. Learning the tools and methods that professional performers use to improvise is how non-professional performers (the rest of us) can create new conversational performances.

Improvisation is an activity of collaboration, transformation, and discovery. Performing improvisationally is working with everyone and everything available in a continuous creative process. *In a Vygotskian sense, improvising is a zpd for performing conversation.* Like the language games that adults and children who are learning to speak play, it is the creative activity of making meaning together. Just as children become speakers through this process, adults too become more creative and collaborative communicators when they are supported to “babble.”

Improvisation creates a developmental stage that shares the following features with Vygotsky’s zpd:

- 1) It supports participants to embrace the unexpected and take risks.
- 2) It develops their capacity to listen, respond, and build with others.
- 3) It provides a context for them to interact in new and creative ways.
- 4) It focuses attention on the "how" and not just the "what" of communication and conversation.

## CASE STUDY: FOSTERING A HEALTHY COMPANY CULTURE

Any description of a process distorts that process. No matter how you try, you cannot “capture” what went on. What illustrations and examples do is tell a story. And since

most of us learn from stories, providing case studies can be worthwhile. It is in this spirit that the following description of a POAL project is presented.

### The Client

A large office within a federal government agency asked POAL to address two broad organizational needs: relationship building, and more consistent practice of the organization's moral code of conduct. More specifically, the agency was eager to more effectively foster individual and collective responsibility, accountability and open communication. The project lasted approximately two months and involved approximately 100 employees.

### The Process

#### A. Preparation and Orientation

The first step was to conduct interviews with prospective participants in order to introduce the POAL trainers and prepare participants for theatrical performance and improvisation, and to learn about each person's opinion of and experience with the moral code of conduct. The material gathered from these interviews became the basis for creating scenes relating to the employees' practice of the moral code of conduct

#### B. Experiential Learning

Workshop 1 was a performance-focused workshop. Trainers gave a brief orientation to the notion of performance as developmental and the importance of building an ensemble. Participants were then led through a series of exercises designed to help them see and relate to themselves and their co-workers as performers, and accordingly, as the creators of the “scenes” of their work and life.

The first exercise was a movement warm-up which, in addition to helping the ensemble gain a conscious sense of their bodies in motion, worked to slow them down and focus on the activity at hand. They then added making faces and speaking in gibberish to their slow movements. This exercise is done to give participants permission to be something other than normal, or cool, or who they “really” are. The next exercise was the core performance event – the “performance of a lifetime.” For this exercise, each participant was brought to the stage for a 60-second solo performance to give expression to something about her or his life (the POAL trainers demonstrate first to provide examples). In this exercise, the performances varied greatly (as they typically do), with most participants using the spoken word, but some dancing or singing. Many worked to summarize their entire life in 60 seconds; others showed a typical “slice” of their lives or a moment that they considered transitional; still others performed an apparently mundane moment, like what it was like to wake up that morning. Immediately following their 60 second performance, trainers gave them a

directorial suggestion to perform a 30-second “sequel” which expands, extends or sheds a different light on what they just performed. (A POAL trainer is usually cast in this follow-up performance to give the participant the added support of a skilled improviser.)

After all the solo performances, participants worked in small groups. A POAL trainer introduced basic improvisational games and then provided support to the group as they created improvised scenes using “the material” from the performances of a lifetime. The smaller groups then came back together to perform these scenes for each other.

Workshop 2 provided participants with two scenarios analogous to actual work situations, with all the potential miscommunication, tension and stress. (Scene One: A new way of doing something in the company has been implemented and at least one worker is not happy with the change. Scene Two: A group of supervisors are talking about how to deal with people who don’t seem to be fitting in with the company culture.) POAL trainers directed these scenes as a “round robin” in which participants performed and then were “tagged” and replaced by a fellow employee on stage. This exercise allows many participants to take turns playing managers and non-managers in the scenes and provides opportunities for creating and seeing options in how the scenes can go. After each improvisation, there was extensive discussion of the issues and ideas the scenes evoked about the current and desired culture within the organization.

On-the-Job Application. Upon completion of the workshops and a debriefing and evaluation session, participants were urged to talk performance talk back on the job. They were given improvisational exercises to experiment with and practice at work (e.g., “yes and” – an exercise in which the players must accept any conversational offer that is given). The objective was to provide some initial support for participants to begin to integrate performance and improvisational skills into their everyday work activities and relationships.

### C. Conceptual Learning

Reflection and Coaching. Two weeks after the workshop, a POAL learning strategist met with workshop participants in small groups to “deconstruct” the workshop experience in order to reinforce its critical learnings. Participants reflected on their experiences performing at the workshop and trying the exercises back on the job. Their comments, a sample of which appear below, served as the specifics from which the learning strategist illustrated general principles of improvisational and performed conversation. Participants also received direction and coaching on specific challenges they brought up (e.g., tense meetings, difficult sales calls, feeling unfairly treated). These groups provided directed learning on the concepts and method of applying performance and improvisation at work.

Consolidated Learning Document. Upon completion of the group dialogues, POAL provided each participant with a document that included their stated

goals, learnings and challenges, and POAL's teachings on performance and improvisation as they related to their organizational and professional goals.

The document serves as a "living memory" of their on-stage performances, reflections and learnings.

### The Learning

The performance work created a context for employees to realize the need for greater responsibility and accountability and to begin to change how they related to each other and the organization. It established a safe and non-confrontational (and fun) environment in which participants could explore manager/non-manager relationships and potential tensions that can arise. By creating and recreating improvised scenes between managers and non-managers, they were, in fact, creating experiences of sharing responsibility for the kinds of relationships that emerged. Additionally, seeing the action on stage – and having the chance to replay it – enabled them to see that we create our assumptions about each other.

It was clear from what employees said in the group reflection and coaching sessions that they were strongly impacted upon by performing and improvising with co-workers. As you will see from their remarks that follow, participants took a beginning step in making performance their own, that is, in recognizing that it is a skill that can be utilized anywhere and anytime they choose. All quotes (in italics) are taken from the

consolidated learning document prepared by POAL and distributed to all participants upon completion of the client project.

The performance work introduced new ways of doing, understanding and talking about creativity, communication, teamwork and leadership that draws upon the language of theatre and performance. Employees began to compile a list of opportunities for new company “performances” that could contribute to the desired culture change. They envisioned creating “stages” (“*meetings, weekly company lunches and the integration of new hires*”) and “characters” they wanted to work on (“*listener, speaker, facilitator, leader and team member*”). They believed the benefits would be plentiful and mentioned breaking out of “*the comfort zone*” of familiar groups; “*being less reserved and more open;*” “*creating new lines of communication;*” and “*saying hello and making small talk with everyone.*”

We all know that the way we approach tasks, obligations, meetings, relationships and all the activities in our lives greatly impacts on how we carry them out and how we feel about them. Clients reported having new experiences when they see themselves as the creators of their life’s play.

*“We realize we had a predisposed way of thinking about the organizational retreat. We saw it as a duty. It’s freeing to see it as part of our company play and that we’re creating it. Thanks for the insight!”*

*“Looking at going back to my office after this meeting as a performance is a relief. I can really create who and how I want to be. It’s a different play.”*

*“I can see how this can help us be much more attentive to how we choreograph and produce all of our presentations, both internal and with clients”*

*“In creating our scenes, we couldn’t stop to discuss what’s next but had to take the cues from the person before us. We had to listen in a way to hear the offers. We worked really well together, and we really came together in the actual performance; it flowed.”*

Employees began to imagine new performances that could make a big difference in their work life.

*“When Do We Need To Create Some New Scenes?”*

*“When . . .*

*. . .we keep getting stuck in the same scenes.”*

*. . .someone’s blaming.”*

*. . .we keep going over and over the past.”*

*. . .I’m assuming I know what’s going on.”*

*. . .we’re interpreting other people’s actions and words instead of being open.”*

*. . .I’m being reactive.”*

*. . .we see problems everywhere.”*

They began to see themselves as able to create their performance and the character they chose to be.

*“Who Do I Want To Be When . . .*

*. . .the tension starts.”*



*. . . everyone's stuck."*  
*. . . anxiety is high."*  
*. . . I find myself in a bad scene."*  
*. . . things aren't turning out according to plan."*

They began to identify the many benefits of learning the tools of the improvisation trade

*"It helps you get more comfortable with the reality that we never really know how things will turn out!"*

*"By improvising, you're bringing yourself more actively into an environment."*

*"It helps you develop leadership."*

*"You have to really listen."*

*"It puts you smack in the middle of situations."*

*"It's an exercise in shared responsibility."*

*"Improvisation isn't an end in itself but a skill you work on continually."*

*"It'll give me something new to do when people aren't listening to me."*

To summarize in Vygotskian terms, the POAL performance environment shares a number of features with the developmental learning environments that occur "naturally" in the lives of young children, features that make intellectual, emotional and social growth possible:

- 1) Creates a safe environment to take risks together.
- 2) Re-introduces a creative ensemble activity.
- 3) Provides adults with the experience of being performers, creators of life scenes.
- 4) Helps participants explore new understandings of who they are and what they're capable of, both individually and collectively.

5) Supports them to create new responses in familiar situations.

The activity of performing on stage created a zpd for new performances of the organization and its employees. It provided participants with the developmental experience of doing what they don't know how to do and, in that process, learning how to do new things. Through improvisational scene work they experienced communication, conversation, creativity and responsibility as emergent and collaboratively constructed. They began to see possibilities for change in the workplace and to talk about themselves and their co-workers in the language of theatrical performance and improvisation. Most important, they were able to envision creative solutions to existing problems.

#### DARING TO PERFORM

Bringing Vygotsky to corporate America has been exhilarating. As a developmentalist, it is heartening to see executives, managers and all levels of employees so quickly form a performance ensemble and engage in a rather strange (and to some, silly) creative activity. It provides additional support for something I have long believed -- given the opportunity and adequate support, adults embrace the freedom to play and work in new ways as much as children do. Working with businesses has also been a learning-and-developing experience for me, for the corporate environment has a different set of institutional constraints than the educational system. Learning these constraints and, more important, learning how to work with them has been part of *my* new performance.

The greatest challenge is finding ways to support people in business to take different kinds of risks from the ones they are used to, namely the risk to perform in new ways so they can discover for themselves the changes that are possible to create. As I continue on my journey, I draw inspiration from the following words of my long-time colleague and POAL's founder, Fred Newman. Perhaps you will too.

“From our point of view performance might have nothing to do with being on the stage. We think you can perform at home, at work, in any social setting. In plays, if we don't get it right the first time we can do it again and again and again. Why can't we do it again and again in life situations? Maybe we can... “ (Newman, quoted in Dan Friedman, *Theatre InSight*, 2000)

## Notes

1. Among the numerous recent critiques of mainstream psychology that include discussions of new subject matter for psychology are Gergen (1994); Holzman and Morss (2000b); Kvale (1992); McNamee and Gergen (1992; 1999); Newman and Holzman (1996, 1997); Sampson (1993); Shotter (1993); and Soyland (1994).
2. Largely due to the efforts of social psychologist Kenneth Gergen, the term performative psychology has come to refer as well to the use of performance in scholarship, particularly the use of alternative forms of presentation of theory and data. Since the mid-1990s, Gergen has generated performative psychology symposia at the annual conventions of the American Psychological Association. Discussions and examples of performative psychology can be found in Holzman (1999a), Holzman and Morss (2000) and McNamee and Gergen (1999).
3. For information on the Institute, its approach, trainings and therapeutic, research and youth development projects, see [www.eastsideinstitute.org](http://www.eastsideinstitute.org). More extensive discussions of performatory social therapeutic method can be found in Neimeyer and Raskin (2000); Newman (2000); and Newman and Holzman (1996; 1997).
4. Newman has written extensively on the value of exploring language and views of language as part of any developmental process (see especially Newman, 2000; Newman and Gergen, 1999 and Newman and Holzman, 1999.)

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