

The talk of learning professional work

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The talk that goes on in workplaces—particularly those defined around certain professional identities, such as doctor, nurse, lawyer, teacher—has been a major topic for linguists for more than four decades. Few of these studies have, however, centered on just how individuals or groups learn to “speak as a professional.” What constitutes their practice, and how does this practice relate to assumptions of role, demeanor, and representation of the profession? The classroom cannot offer sufficient opportunities for individuals to acquire the necessary ways of speaking and habits of thinking that define the professional (cf., Mertz 1996).

This paper considers informal settings in which young people learn to play the roles many professionals assume. These roles provide practice in fundamental lexical, syntactic, register, and generic features of hypothetical reasoning, scenario building, and representation of an institution through playing a membership role. Emphasized here is the element of playing a role—a key component of language socialization for infants and toddlers, but almost never considered for later language development. Providing opportunities for this role-playing are youth organizations that incorporate youth centrally into their daily operations.

Learning in youth organizations. In the final decade of the twentieth century, a parallelism in ideas has quietly developed in two widely different worlds. Within postindustrial societies since the mid-1990s, these two worlds—business and youth-based community organizations—have come together to join their theory and practice with surprising implications for making learning work. Similar philosophies of creativity, collaboration, and communication mark those who aim for success in private profit-making enterprises as well as those who promote the benefits of young people working and learning in community organizations during their off-school hours.

This paper examines the coherence between these two worlds and illustrates through the case of one urban youth theater program how their theories operate in practice. Of key importance here is the fact that young artists *play multiple roles*—both in dramatic personae and also as organizational members—and *act with a sense of agency* that allows them to think outside given structures. Concluding this examination is a broad view of ways that civic leaders and business

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gurus in Great Britain, Japan, the United States, and Scandinavian countries are building a strong movement to take learning and organizations in new directions. The intention of this paper is to help linguists acknowledge school- and community-based after-school programs as sites of adolescents' learning to "speak as a professional."

Living experience. A recent publication of the Harvard Business School bears the subtitle *Work Is Theater and Every Business a Stage* (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The volume draws heavily from performance theory (heretofore best known to academics in departments of English and drama), Christian philosophy, economics, and entrepreneurial promotion published in journals such as *Fast Company*. Endorsements for "the experience economy" and the benefits of thinking of work as theater and of building strong relationships through authentic experiences for employees and customers come from CEOs of established corporations as well as entrepreneurs. As if all this were not surprising enough, the volume is not all that atypical in its fundamental ideas among books that can be found in the business section of bookstores. Compatible volumes bear titles with words or phrases such as "connexity" (Mulgan 1997), "fifth discipline" (Senge 1990), "common sense" (Atkinson 1994), "a simpler way" (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers 1996), "soul of the workplace" (Briskin 1998), and "the dance of change" (Senge 1999). These publications repeatedly emphasize perpetual novelty, creative spirit, transformative experience, and freedom within the workplace to explore ideas with smart, tough fellow innovators and critics.

The content of these volumes meshes with the ethos and practice of youth organizations judged as effective learning environments by young people themselves. It also links with ideas explored in periodicals such as *New Designs* and *Youth Today* in the United States and numerous journals on youth work published in Britain. Youth newspapers, such as *LA Youth*, echo the sentiments of business publications, like those noted above, and illustrate repeatedly the successful work of young people whose creative talents have been honed in community-based organizations where responsibility, local decision making, and resourcefulness mark youth as key contributions to the life of the group. Yet another voice of support for changing conventional ways of thinking about learning and for addressing the importance of relationships, responsibility, and relevance to local needs and assets comes from the school-to-work literature. This message comes through especially strongly in the literature that considers the substantive linkages between what is required for excellence in the *arts* and for success in businesses that look to the future. Both the Goals 2000 and School-to-Work Opportunities acts of the 1980s identify skills that relate to "workplace know-how," and these follow from the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills or the SCANS report (Department of Labor 1992). As national standards in the arts have followed from federal initiatives in education, particular features of learning in dramatic, musical, visual,

and media arts have been outlined in ways that bear a remarkable coherence with the key ideas of contemporary writings in business (see a prime example in “Arts and Earning a Living: SCANS 2000” at www.scans.jhu.edu/arts.html). Educators in a variety of fields examine ways in which new pedagogical strategies, theories of distributed cognition, and project-based learning carry strong links to the world of work. Meanwhile critical theorists in education also caution that these innovative directions may not be as widely available in workplaces as their proponents currently believe; they also urge greater attention to how “the new work order” will affect both complex systems and specific acts of transformation by individuals and small groups (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996).

One common worry across all the groups noted above is the fact that dependence on formal schooling, even in light of all the current reform efforts, will leave students short of the experience necessary to establish firmly the know-how, critical skills, and confidence broadly viewed as critical to the future world of work, as well as the altered family and citizenship demands of that world. Schools simply cannot deliver the extensive time for practice and participation and build-up of moral commitment and group discourse needed for students to develop all that employers, policymakers, and philosophers say will mark the future. Students spend only about one-quarter of their time in school, and older children and teenagers have discretion over 45–50 percent of their time unless parents take charge of guiding selection of pursuits during the off-school hours and provide transportation, fees, and support (Carnegie Council 1992; Heath 2001). Parents with the requisite time and finances expect their children’s time out of school to support and extend learning in a host of ways, to complement what they can do as mom and dad. Moreover, they look to experience with organized religion, sports team membership, arts programs, summer camps, and museums to help build in their children a sense of responsibility, knowledge of teamwork, and understanding of the arts and science that intimate adults in daily contact with their offspring cannot provide without outside organizational support.

But what happens in communities of economic disadvantage or in households where parents have neither time nor money to give such opportunities to their children? Not surprisingly, young people get together on their own, invent ways to pass the time, and look for “something to do.” In the most fortunate of cases, they find their way to community-based organizations that engage them for a substantive portion of their off-school hours in learning, playing, and working with their peers and thoughtful adults who have professional knowledge and experience in the primary activity of the group—whether that be the arts, sports, or service initiatives. A decade of research between 1987 and 1997 documented the everyday life of such groups and took note of changes during the 1990s that brought them to reflect increasingly the ethos and practices of organizational change and workplace relationships advocated by business writers such as those noted above.¹

An illustrative case: Youth theater. Imagine a dead-end street of a block of inner-city apartment houses. Picture there a youth theater on the third floor of a building that formerly housed a school; step into the rehearsal hall or organization office at three in the afternoon on any weekday. Students move around the office, answering phones, checking rehearsal schedules, reading press releases, reviewing the file of head shots from last year's participants, and talking with the adult or college intern who is working at the computer on a grant proposal. Soon the artistic director shows up and moves into the rehearsal hall. After signing in, each student follows him and assumes the same position he has taken, either on the floor or standing. "You're a leaf floating on water; just let go and think about the water and what it gives you, how it pushes and pulls while it supports you." What follows is a series of relaxation exercises, quiet listening to a literary or philosophical selection read by the director, warm-ups, improvisation or writing activities, and collaborative practice in small groups to develop a scene in response to the director's prompt. If the participants seem too stiff or to be blocked in creativity, they move back to the floor, the director telling them to close their eyes and imagine the body moving. He speaks slowly, with long pauses between each sentence.

Think of a scarf coming down through the top of your head and entering your body. . . . It pushes down across your eyes and mouth and neck. . . . As it unfolds and waves inside you, it drops across your shoulders and to your pelvic area. . . . Let it grow inside you until it touches every part of your body. . . . It's moving you, and as it does, it's bringing you into contact with others. . . . Let it carry you up and down and fill you up, your fingers and feet. . . .

The story of the scarf interacting within the young people moves on as "you become the scarf," which swooshes though the air, across the floor, against others, never getting caught, always moving on. Then suddenly, the scarf is caught, snapped in a rough wind, yanked and tossed, "stuck on a nail, jammed into a crack." From this activity, the group then shifts into the improvisation of Zen spaces, moving and interacting with one another to create a unified whole of movement, with individuals switching in and out of directing and pacing roles while simultaneously remaining within the moment, the act, of the group's joined movements. The director silently steps to the side and begins drumming.²

Such may be the course of action for each session, with rehearsal of particular segments of a show currently under development taking up much of the work time. A quick review of the next week's schedule closes the session several hours later. As the time for public performance of the show draws close, rehearsals heat up, but always after a period of relaxation and dramatic exercises. Sessions end with

the opportunity for group members to “decompress,” to prepare for exit from the jointly created performance to individual entries back into the real world. After rehearsal, some students hang around on the worn sofas or at extra desks in the reception area to do homework, while others go off to work in fast-food restaurants or home to prepare the evening meal for younger siblings and working parents. Others work with the intern or adult executive director to prepare mailing lists for announcements of a coming benefit performance.

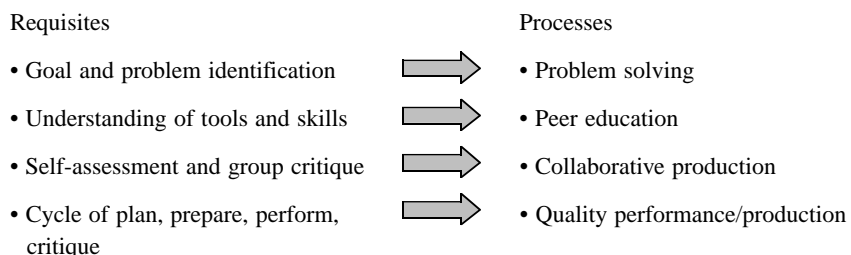
From their entry to the theater group through the final performance, members have been engaged jointly in setting goals and identifying problems that may emerge not only during specific shows but also within publicity and promotion, the competing demands of students’ time for other activities, and travel to distant sites to work with unknown audiences. They show continuously the value of the knowledge and skills they gain in school and how they leverage these into their learning at the theater, particularly as they play roles in the everyday operations of the group’s maintenance. But they also illustrate the diverse sets of experiences individual members bring—the hidden talent of a quiet Latina who turns out to be an exceptional violinist, the special education student whose passion is drums, or the straight-A student who has a knack for history. The theater becomes a place where they can take risks in letting others know what they can bring to the work and play of the group, as they develop their own scripts, choreography, and music, and travel locally, as well as to European theater festivals. The group sees itself as providing *work*; individuals are paid a minimum wage and docked for tardiness or absences; they go through auditions that require them to bring a piece of their own writing for dramatization; they stay on from year to year based on their sustained commitment and consistency of participation and contribution. Their experience in the theater group is something they view as helping them build skills and gain multiple knowledge bases through travel and contact with people they would never meet in their own communities or schools. Resistant as members can sometimes be to signing in and out or being called down severely by the director or team members if they slack off, they admit that “all this pain” matters in the long run. Their director often plays in what may seem like brutal ways off of the fact that the world “out there” does not expect much of young people of color, “broken” families, “run-down communities,” and sections of town with long-standing negative reputations. “No one gives a damn if you fail. Don’t be afraid to fail. If you fail, well, fail gloriously. Really fail. Put everything into it and make it a glorious failure. That is something right there.” The group members are aware that the arts director depends on their knowing they have experienced this attitude elsewhere, and the theater group is a place that allows risks of all sorts, even those of failure. However, above all, the group expects a sense of agency, purpose, and motivation to be directing behavior. In other words, the adults at the theater know that ultimately what the young people choose to do and how they do it rests within them; all

the adults can do is provide consistent support and the strong framework of high demand, professional socialization, real deadlines, and tough authentic critiques. Ultimate success or failure rests with the youth.

This point applies not only to the dramatic performances where young people play roles, but also to the organizational life of the place that also depends on student members stepping in through a variety of ways. Youth members go along with adults to pitch their work to clients who will pay for performances as products. Dramatic productions serve educational roles in juvenile detention centers, parent support groups, and civic clubs; they find favor with children's hospitals, cultural centers, and civic fairs. Generalizations regarding this site apply also to other youth-based organizations (YBOs) in this research that were grassroots or housed within highly flexible and imaginative performing arts centers; differences among these derive primarily from the type of activities the group pursued. Sports groups, for example, spend more time discussing specific rules of their particular sport and sportsmanship than arts or community service groups. Arts groups provide more time for open-ended talk with adults and development of highly imaginative ventures than community service groups more likely to immerse participants in exploration of local civic, political, and environmental issues.

Playing roles in the arts. A close look at arts-based youth groups, not only those in theater but also those within the visual arts and music, illustrates how work in the arts enables—indeed depends on—members taking up numerous roles, varying by visibility, symbolic markings, and essentialness to the organization as the individuals grow with the group. Whether acting as receptionists answering the phone in late afternoons, wearing organizational tee-shirts to city arts events, or mediating between two participants whose tempers have flared, youth members have to sustain everyday life in the organization.

Figure 1 provides a visual sense of how work within an arts-based YBO moves from planning and preparing to practice and execution of plans with understanding of tools and skills growing in the process. Through the full cycle of any project from beginning to end, group members frequently participate in critique and call on individuals to explain, self-assess, and lay out their planned next steps with a piece of work. These skills parallel in large part those currently called on within information-based companies who depend on collaborative project development and assessment as well as recruitment and negotiation of diverse individual talents necessary for excellence in-group performance. Phrases such as “continuous improvement,” “bold new thinking,” and “an eye to the future” appear endlessly in corporate goal-setting sessions and annual reports as well as the thousands of advertising forms every citizen sees or hears daily. Such slogans reflect that corporate entities today measure their assets and see their resources as residing within human capital and the availability of intelligence. YBOs live this resource reality minute by minute, knowing their slim budgets and current favor with benefactors depend on their young members and the transformations of their

Figure 1. Performance/product-oriented group work in the arts

talents and experiences into excellent products and performances. That these very skills have been identified as of prime importance in the workplace and in today's most successful businesses comes as no surprise to young artists.

One difference, however, for YBOs—especially those in the arts—is that work within any specific performance or product moves along with the expectation that each individual will also take up general responsibilities necessary to maintain the organization. For example, within theater groups, from audition to closing-night celebrations, individuals engage not only as actors, dancers, or musicians in their performance, but also within the organizational infrastructure as receptionist, publicist, reader, scriptwriter, critic, salesperson, recruiter—tasks essential to the group's maintenance.

A simple checklist of the number and types of roles students play in the course of two to three hours on any one day of the week masks the range of tasks in which they engage and the kinds of work they take part in to sustain their organization. Any student member in the course of active participation for the first month of each season of the youth theater program of focus here is likely to take part in as many as a dozen different roles for as long as three hours total for each role; such roles include those noted above as vital to infrastructure (receptionist, etc.) as well as those more familiar to the theater. Table 1 illustrates one week's range of roles—organizational and dramatic. This multiplicity of roles as well as the importance of playing each role well especially characterizes youth organizations in economically disadvantaged areas, since these groups rarely have a budget sufficient to employ enough adults to handle all the tasks necessary to maintain the organization. Individual student members have to help with jobs that range from stuffing envelopes to proof-reading to repairing broken windows. Older members also instruct, coach, mentor, demonstrate, and reinforce ideas with younger and novice members, laying down the pattern that as individuals grow through the group, they shape the learning environment that supports group product and performance development.

Table 1. Role opportunities—Requiring spoken and written language uses usually identified primarily with adults

Role Opportunities Category of Roles	No. of Occasions of Involvement	
	Dramatic	Organizational
Institutional adult (associated with key institutions, such as family, school, government, or religion) such as parent, minister, nurse, or mayor	12	0
Group representative planning financial and logistical details of group travel	0	9
Organizational structural position (receptionist, publicist, dramaturg, fundraiser, etc.)	6	18

Notes: Based on calculations drawn for a sample week in *practice* phase of an urban theatre group of sixteen young people ages 12–18 meeting an average of ten hours per week during this phase of the drama season. Note that practice cycle coincides with the time of heaviest activity related to scheduling performances locally and elsewhere. The number of occasions was calculated only for those exceeding five minutes in length and are reported here only if they involved at least 50 percent of the group at least once during the week.

Particularly in public relations, whether taking place onsite or in meetings with board members or potential clients or benefactors, young people have to assume the manner of dress and speech of characters they never play at school or with peers outside their organization. Rehearsed, grilled and drilled, and encouraged by anxious adult directors or college interns, youth members cannot fail to feel their responsibility as fundraisers and organizational spokespersons. Specific activities include: public speaking, information processing for action, writing brief notes as well as extended texts of one to five pages in length, rapidly calculating numerical information in the head, and working with printed materials for either organizational decision making or dramatic interpretation. The group needs skills and local knowledge applied from each individual, and those who bring academic achievement in skills such as reading, writing, editing, computing, and public speaking figure as key assets for project attainment and organizational success. Similarly, those who know how to find information and check facts and figures, or where to locate experts, often have to deliver such help within very short time frames. Humorists, mediators, and caregiving types are also valued for their effect on the social climate of the group—especially in times of high tension. In addition, everyone has to know how to respond to unexpected and often seemingly unrelated questions, such as “do you think about where you’re going to fit in as you

play the instrument/role/etc.?” Answers from the youth cannot be flippant but must reflect their artistic, philosophical, or analytical stance: “I look for the tension to take me somewhere” (Worthman 1999: 91).

In essence, within highly effective youth organizations, members put their assembled resources to work acting, thinking, and assessing. Of critical importance through all these is the fact that a sizable proportion of role-playing takes place alongside instruction and facilitation with an adult professional. In the case of the theater group highlighted above, such professionals available during the practice phase of one season can include a writing coach, musician (drummer), artistic director, executive director, and administrator of the organization who coordinates payroll, meeting schedules, and communication with the advisory board. In addition, board members who come from all walks of life often drop in during rehearsal and serve as quasi-mentors (as well as impressive references) for young people from poor neighborhoods. The roles and tasks the young assume from time to time become familiar to youth members by observing the adults around them. On most occasions when a young person takes on a new role, adults are on hand to monitor and support, and ample opportunities exist for practice, apprenticeship, and talk with older youth who previously held these roles or remain as adult staff members as they grow in their early twenties.

But what is it that matters about playing different roles? How does representing more than the individual self and one’s own self-interests and achievements relate to learning? In particular, are there linguistic and motivational payoffs that come with all the roles and responsibilities of these YBOs?

In recent social science, no name is more associated with an understanding of *role* than that of sociologist Erving Goffman. Drawing heavily on theatrical metaphor for his social theory, Goffman ties human person to appearances of the self to others and of the self via others’ responses (1959). A sense of self-identity and of the projected self never lie entirely “within” but always in dialectical constructions of how one appears to others. Through numerous examples of familiar everyday routines, Goffman illustrates the highly mimetic nature of relationships between persons. Each individual learns to become human by doing what others already do; but in incorporating this general model, each “plays” at different times and in multiple ways a wide range of roles. It is, however, difficult to assume roles one has never witnessed; verbal explication and demonstration by a caring, respected adult and older peers help make this possible.

Since Goffman’s work, much has been made of both the multiple roles any individual assumes and of the learning impetus that comes when metacognitive language—that which stops action by commenting directly on what is happening and how language works—surrounds roles. Recent work in performance theory, in particular, has led to widespread acceptance of the idea that individuals carry at all times several different role representations as well as varying levels of deliberate awareness of interpretations of others and of the self (Schechner and Appel 1990;

Parker and Sedgwick 1995). One's stance, character, and emotional state are all, in turn, read by interactants and audience through their prior experience. This makes listening and viewing highly selective—often on the basis of deeply embedded prejudices and stereotypes. An individual also reads others' responses as well as the self who interprets feedback and decides how to respond. Such readings take place not only simultaneously with one's behavior and interaction, but also in memory and in future representations, sometimes in narrative form voiced either in the head or orally expressed and often through highly self-conscious means of artistic expression (e.g., writing memoirs, painting remembered scenes or images, etc.).

This awareness of being read by others and of having the capacity and need to portray different roles at different times and places gets verbalized as a matter of course within YBOs. Their very liminal or marginal status is felt by adults and youth members alike. A readiness prevails to identify what is going on by stepping outside an ongoing course of action by the organization in ways that occur rarely in institutions (such as schools and families) whose position within society is accepted to the point of being taken for granted. Zippy analytic one-liners—"let's initiate an improv"—insert themselves into an intense practice or serious budget meeting to break the tension of the moment and to underscore what the group knows well—even when the script or the balance sheet has been written, "improv" may be the saving action. Talk goes on about topics such as motivation ("how hard were you working to mess up that entrance?"), focus of attention, and effect of one person's behavior on the group ("yea, if Carlo has his way, this play will become a sitcom!"). Everyone has to see his or her role as potentially transformative ("messin' up" takes the whole group down) as well as persistently transitional ("remember: only three weeks to opening night").³

Such metacommentary brings linguistic payoffs in what may be thought of as "practice effects"—having repeated opportunities to engage in intense debate, push a plan of action, critique a scene, or develop a group exercise. Creating future scenarios motivates group members to think about what could happen as well as what they hope will happen. Goal theory research that attempts to understand motivation—how learners' perceptions of the purposes of achievement influence cognition and behavior (Meece 1991; Urdan 1997)—reinforces the idea that a sense of one's place within a learning environment matters. Extensive research illustrates ways that the process of work can feed motivation when there is higher-order need and social fulfillment (Kleinbeck et al. 1990). If one is *not* committed to individual learning as a positive group resource, attractions abound among adolescents for working hard *not* to achieve, *not* to belong, by avoiding work, resisting help, and learning to be helpless—actions often found in bright students who do not want to be seen as academically capable (Dweck and Leggett 1988; Covington 1992; Fordham 1996). Within schools, such moves often win respect from peers who applaud the risks individuals take by defying authority, ignoring assignments, and deflecting others from the task at hand. YBOs turn this risk on

its head: student members *have authority, design assignments, and negotiate, strategize, and create* with others to keep something going that they believe matters to their self- and group-image.

For these young people, ritual retellings of events in the history of the organization play vital roles for intensification of membership and for acceptable sanctions against any moves to resist the reality of deadlines, budget limitations, or cooperation even in the heat of a practical joke gone sour (Heath 1994). Within arts organizations, scenes and characters for projects in photography, painting, dance, and script development come often from individual and group memories. Recognizing shared circumstances provides the glue that builds and sustains relations within the group and brings newcomers into becoming “one of us” by making them part of the creative process. A common theme to emerge is the sense that others “outside” need to understand more of what young people experience and how they feel; particularly called for is recognition from others that young people have to be many things to many people—intimates and strangers, peers and adults, in school and beyond—in order to survive.

Agency: The power to act beyond structure. Within institutions such as schools, opportunities to think and act outside the constraints of the expected role of student or the structure of curricular and extracurricular requirements come rarely. Moreover, schools in many postindustrial nations increasingly require standardization of product or outcome, determined by quantifiable measures of performance on standardized tests. Narrow definitions of achievement that such pencil-and-paper tests honor cannot adequately capture either specialized talents, adaptive ways of knowing, or critical stances. Thus, the agency of individuals in undertaking learning outside expected roles and structures—through means such as observation, persistent objection to ordinary courses of action, and innovative trial and error—have to be submerged. Similarly, because the display of knowledge and skill within formal schooling rests primarily on written expression, individuals whose talents lie more in visual or other means of communication cannot have endless outlets to reveal what they understand.

Youth organizations, particularly those devoted to the arts, place a high value on acting beyond structures to identify and solve problems, express and assess ideas, and create and test new processes and products. For example, in arts organizations that generate part of their financial support through sales of commodities and services as well as through grant-writing and donor solicitation, young members work directly with clients (individuals and corporations, as well as other nonprofit agencies) to learn what clients want and to develop designs for performances and products—from satirical skits to logos to props for annual corporate parties. Much discussion and testing of ideas goes into the design process, which consistently requires reflexivity and critique. Throughout the labor of creating the product, similar processes work through the group, testing

progress and monitoring quality, as well as appropriate movement toward meeting the deadline. As these deadlines approach, the language of youth members in arts organizations mirrors that of physicists facing a deadline for a conference paper and thinking about ways to draw on multiple communication forms to construct and perfect the final product (Ochs and Jacobs 1997).

Open-ended problem-setting and -solving talk as well as narratives explaining how certain effects can be imagined and attempted move the work along. Youth members question one another about how the current bit of work or portion being done by an individual will fit into the whole; they challenge group members to keep in mind both deadlines and relevancy to the project as a whole (Soep 1996, 2000). They see themselves as capable of acting outside and beyond the expected. Such perceptions receive a boost from the fact that highly effective YBOs engage adult professionals in the life of the youth group. This practice is best illustrated within organizations whose activities center in the arts where artists explain and demonstrate technical processes—whether of video editing or of firing kilns or of selecting paint for outdoor murals. Older members who have been with the organization for several years also offer guidance and critique, but their instruction is no substitute for that of practitioners who actually work *in art*—some of whom may, of course, be individuals who have gone through the youth organizations and moved into the professional world. All arts-focused organizations of the research on which this paper is based included key roles for professional artists whose identity depends not only on their “day jobs” in the arts but also on their tight communication with arts and cultural institutions. These artists never question the absolute need for young people in YBOs to have as much access as possible to the world of fine arts as to that of practical or commercial arts. It is as reasonable to expect young actors to be able to perform on the stage of well-known local theaters and performing arts centers, as it is to want them to have tickets to performances of visiting celebrated groups.⁴ Such special opportunities, as well as the day-to-day interaction with professional artists working in their youth arts organization, strongly reinforce a sense of agency on the part of young artists.

Learning opportunities that come from sustained contact with professional artists and a range of types of art work come with the strongly espoused view within such youth arts organizations that learning is for sharing know-how, opinions, and information as well as for motivating action. Hence, older youth members with long records of participation in the group can take on occasional teaching roles as well as administrative and planning roles for the organization. The youth group works then not only as a community of practice but also of collaborative preparation for the possibility of instructing younger members. When professional artists have to be away, older youth members take over and, after several trials, they may take on roles that increasingly combine both administration of certain aspects of the program and instruction around group projects or

processes. Youth members thus move back and forth between the role of young artist learning and organizational “expert” teaching.

Widening perspectives on learning. A popular automobile bumper sticker in the late 1990s asserted, “Technology drives the future; the question is—who steers?” Societies around the world whose economies are postindustrial and dependent on information technology have much to learn and unlearn about *work* and how to make *learning* work. For citizens of these nations, no one denies the absolute necessity for continuous learning to keep pace with changing technologies and their effects on patterns of behavior, the environment (social and ecological), and communication. The ability to play any role in “steering” the driving forces of technology depends vitally on knowing not only which skills, attitudes, and information must be unlearned and replaced, but also how to keep learning ongoing as a habit of mind. Professional development and training programs for adults actively promote the idea that what is gained in formal instructional settings must be practiced and tested within actual work places. The same principle would seem to need to apply for students: what is learned in school should “go to work” each day after school in action and reflection. Young people fortunate enough to have access to arts organizations of the sort described here in their own communities can study literature, including drama, during their English classes each day and then move with this background into their after school programs. There they not only read, write, and recite, as well as perform, but they also learn how to work soundboards, put together and break down stage sets, and visit backstage at major performing arts centers to hear explained the vast technological support behind professional performances.

Though educators have, in the main, not endorsed such off-school learning opportunities as vital to academic support and career development, economists, civic leaders, and juvenile justice professionals are increasingly taking up this idea. As they do so, they speak out directly on the matter of the potential of the hours from three to eight P.M. in the lives of students for expanding, complementing, and supplementing formal classroom learning. Moreover, some leaders, particularly in nations worried about growing evidence of the ability of disenfranchised youth to disrupt civic life and to dislodge public faith in the moral climate, see the civic value of such learning as vital to the moral health of their communities.⁵

Throughout the 1990s, leaders of postindustrial nations have begun to lean toward balancing concerns about school reform with attention to off-school environments, and attention is going not only to neighborhoods with labels of “disadvantaged,” but to all communities. Such concerns tie closely with the acknowledgment that late twentieth-century economics and standard-of-living expectations have brought about the fact that the vast majority of households are made up of either two parents both of whom work full-time or single parents who work at least one full-time job outside the household. Both situations mean very

young children are in the hands of caregivers who are not their parents and widespread independence of older children and youth during the late afternoon. Extensive dependence on peers outside organizations such as those described in this paper shows up in unexpected ways that have strong repercussions on community life and individual learning. Young people without some involvement in project creation *with adults in joint work* lack practice in cognitive and linguistic performance that reflects “the art of the long view” (Schwartz 1991). Whereas young children receive their language input and explanations about the world primarily during caregiving interactions with adults, older children have fewer opportunities for explication-in-the-midst-of-joint-process as they grow independent and interact increasingly with their peers. Precisely because the majority of these occasions for explanations occur within tasks of *work* for very young children (tying a shoe lace, putting together cookie dough, or building a castle of sand or blocks), they carry within them both action and consciousness about cause and effect and often also about emotive or mental states and intention. But it is this talk-with-work that older children and young people often miss out on in families of postindustrial societies.

In the daily world of two-working-parents households as well as single-parent families, older children have relatively few opportunities to engage with adults in sustained tasks of joint work—particularly those involving creativity rather than merely sustaining food preparation, cleaning, and doing laundry. But the practice of not only taking on collaborative work roles but also having to talk about what is happening in the work and how it is going is greatly needed. Moreover, participation in such occasions must take place at a level of frequency sufficient to enable both repeated opportunities to hear and to state explanations and to reveal metacognitive awareness of process and of self and others within roles that help accomplish the task at hand (Heath 1998). Furthermore, when adult family members and older children engage in work jointly, the young often play roles that differ markedly from those of more ordinary adult-youth interactions—parent-child, teacher-student, traffic officer-teen driver, etc. Joint work enables participants to exhibit any special talents they may have, as well as to talk about the process and its path of success or failure. Such engagement within a task generally means commitment to seeing it through to successful outcome, and hence intention and motivation are often brought out into the open by co-participants.

Recognizing that strong contextual changes will be needed to enable the young to think ahead, consider consequences, and act morally and as communal members, some national and local political leaders in postindustrial societies have begun to act. They work to locate and understand contexts in which habits of continuous learning and assessing take root and work for young people and adults outside the usual formal institutional dependence on family, school, or government.

In Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries, and Japan, the move to ensure “learning cities” developed in this decade from the conviction that dwelling

complexes—cities, towns, and regions—have to be “lifelong learning laboratories . . . the places where the innovative advances into the learning society will take place” (Markkula 1999: vii). Ironically, in several locations, this move has emerged in large part because of dual recognitions: teacher shortages reaching crisis levels and acknowledgment that much teaching and learning, often of cutting-edge quality, occurred outside formal institutions of learning and without formally designated teachers (Longworth 1999). Several nations simultaneously have faced the recognition that formal institutions do not learn either quickly or efficiently, and thus school systems find it difficult to reorient toward learning with technology, problem-perception and -solution design, and collaborative project development—abilities increasingly called on in both the employment and civic sectors (Senge 1990, 1999). Amidst complaints about the weakening of the moral and civic values in postindustrial life, public spokespersons often call on schools to integrate such teaching within school curricula, arguing that families and communities fall short of their obligation in these arenas. However, within postindustrial nations, major efforts to reform schools from the late 1980s and through the 1990s generally produced disappointing results at great expense. Those attempting to link employer needs and school outcomes consistently pointed out how school demands and work opportunities in the postindustrial labor market rarely mesh effectively (Bernhardt and Bailey 1998; Murnane and Levy 1996; Levy 1999).

In contrast, community organizations that young people recognize as effective learning environments provide multiple roles and responsibilities that tie closely to those that businesses and civic groups identify as essential for the future. Table 2 reproduces the Charter for Learning Cities (Longworth 1999) and the ten actions those who establish such groups declare as their commitment. The ten points of this charter are set out for comparison with the major motivations and processes that effective youth organizations express when asked to “explain” their group.⁶

Embedded within both these lists is the view that learning is not an individual gain but an ongoing communal commitment, going even beyond life work—that self-chosen work we do to sustain our spirit, our inner soul, and those we care about (Hall 1993). Such learning thrives on complexity and connections, on groundedness as well as vision and expansion, on flexibility and movement across learners rather than authority within fixed institutions.

Cities, neighborhoods, public-private ventures, and innovative community organizations—entities never before considered primary sites of education and learning, but instead of commerce, politics, and service—now reflect openness and flexibility in learning for the future (McKnight 1995; Ranson 1994). Operating at the margins of visibility and well outside either mainstream education or politics, these constellations have yet to be brought into the benefits of wealth creation at the unprecedented levels that postindustrial societies saw during the final years of the twentieth century. But more and more spokespersons

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Table 2. Learning cities and youth-based organizational goals compared

A Charter for Learning Cities	Youth-Based Organizational Goals
We recognize the crucial importance of learning as the major driving force for the future prosperity, stability, and well-being of our citizens.	We recognize creativity, group process, and learning as major forces to help ensure that young people see themselves as learners and community builders.
We declare that we will invest in lifelong learning within our community by:	We commit to responding as best we can to needs felt by the youth of our community and to their willingness to learn and lead by:
1. Developing productive partnerships between all sectors of the city for optimizing and sharing resources, and increasing opportunities for all.	1. Developing collaborative partnerships among policymakers, the business community, educators, and local citizens to increase learning opportunities for all.
2. Discovering the learning requirements of every citizen for personal growth, career development, and family well-being.	2. Working with every young person's sense of self as learner and of individual needs in preparing for careers, family building, and community development.
3. Energizing learning providers to supply lifelong learning geared to the needs of each learner where, when, how, and by whom it is required.	3. Promoting dynamism and creativity to model ongoing habits of learning, self-assessing, and project critiquing.
4. Stimulating demand for learning through innovative information strategies, promotional events, and the effective use of the media.	4. Stimulating young people to recognize the continuous pattern of learning by individuals and groups they regard with respect and to promote their own learning through effective means of communication, including the expressive arts.
5. Supporting the supply of learning by providing modern learning guidance services and enabling the effective use of new learning technologies.	5. Linking young people with multilinear opportunities for further education that meet self-chosen possibilities for employment as well as avocational pursuits.
6. Motivating all citizens to contribute their own talents, skills, knowledge, and energy for environmental care, community organizations, schools, and other people.	6. Motivating young people to assess their talents and creative gifts and to look for ways to bring these to bear in their communities with a sense of social responsibility.

continued on next page

Table 2. Learning cities and youth-based organizational goals compared (*continued*)

A Charter for Learning Cities	Youth-Based Organizational Goals
7. Promoting wealth creation through entrepreneur development and assistance for public and private sector organizations to become learning organizations.	7. Promoting social entrepreneurship that moves human and financial resources toward opportunities for community economic development and enhanced possibilities for positive learning with all local sociocultural groups.
8. Activating outward-looking programs to enable citizens to learn from others in their own, and the global, community.	8. Making possible opportunities for youth to engage as actively as possible not only with local cultural institutions but also with youth organizations and related programs in other parts of the world.
9. Combating exclusion by creative programs to involve the excluded in learning and the life of the city.	9. Helping young people engage realistically with prejudicial behaviors that target youth, particularly those regarded as “different” by virtue of racial, ethnic, national, or religious identification.
10. Recognizing the pleasure of learning through events to celebrate and reward learning achievement in organizations, families, and individuals.	10. Relishing the pleasure and the challenge of learning by working as instructor, mentor, role model, and advisor for younger or less-experienced peers.

Source: Longworth, 1999: 206.

are stepping out for new kinds of partnerships and for previously unimagined combinations of energies. Advocates of these innovative partnerships now say without hesitation that changing conventional alignments across and within organizations fit well with the rapidly increasing admission by many that what they want in work is “transforming” experience (see Pine and Gilmore 1999; Senge 1999; and especially Shore 1999). “Same-old, same-old” in hierarchical organization, single-task operation, and mere product delivery has little attraction for those who see personal fulfillment in contexts of collaboration and creativity.

Still to come for these groups is serious and thoughtful consideration of the implications of these new directions for young people. Many youth, especially those fortunate enough to have worked within effective YBOs, have had extensive experience in project-based learning, have had widely distributed role-playing, and have been engaged by a keen sense of moral and civic respon-

sibility. They have come to know that they can be successful through their work in making learning highly visible, but they also understand the importance of their mentoring and partnering as invisible teachers of one another and their audiences, clients, and benefactors. These youth and their organizations show what it means to engage horizontally, succeed in quickly adapting to multiple means of communication, and offer the experience of learning as transformative work. In economists' terms, these young people understand that the more intangible what they offer one another and their communities becomes, the more tangible the value (Pine and Gilmore 1999: 190). The challenge is for benefactors and policymakers of the public and private sectors to catch up with them, join hands, and keep moving. A further challenge is for linguists and other social scientists to describe the language learning and cognitive strategy-building such new professional development sites offer.

Note

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NOTES

1. Carried out under a grant from The Spencer Foundation to Heath and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, this research explored macro- and micro-organizational features of youth organizations local young people judged as desirable places to be. These ranged from local branches of Boys and Girls Clubs or Girl Scouts to grassroots groups and performing arts center youth programs. The research was carried out in over 30 regions of the United States in 120 youth organizations (centering on either athletics and academics, arts, or community service) that involved approximately 30,000 youth over the decade. Special attention in this research went to members of these organizations who remained active as participants for at least one full year with at least eight to ten hours of engagement per week. The research was carried out by nearly two dozen youth ethnographers who spent considerable portions of time with young people in these organizations. They collected data through four primary means: field notes and audiotapes collected within the organizations' activities, activity logs and journal writings of young people, reflective interviews with both adults and youth members, and statistical analysis comparing responses of a selection of these youth with the national sample of students who took part in the 1992 National Educational Longitudinal Survey. For further information on research methods and details related to selection of sites, see Heath and McLaughlin 1993; Heath, Soep, and Roach 1998.
2. Our own field notes, plus the work of Worthman 1999, as well as videotapes of a two-year film project within this theater program, provide abundant illustration of the ebb and flow, pacing, and interdependence of group members. Worthman's work provides especially rich examples and extensive transcripts drawn from two years of true and full participant observation within this youth group that in the early 1990s shifted from being a drama group to being a "program" through which theater and all that surrounded its many enterprises enabled employment and skills development for young people.

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3. As explained above in note 1, audiotapes of language during all phases of youth organizational activities provide a large portion of the data collected by the research team working with Heath and McLaughlin. A specially designed concordance program allows analysis of transcripts of these audiotapes so that particular vocabulary items, phrasal structures, and patterns of syntax can be traced and correlated with local circumstances of the moment because field notes supplement and support audiotaped data.
4. Such access is much more difficult to achieve for community service or sports organizations than for arts groups. Ecological service groups, for example, often have to travel great distances to visit outstanding environmental projects; furthermore, many adults who work with these groups have a passion for conservation, environmental education, and the like, but it is rare for such adults to have their professional life or full-time work be in fields directly related to ecology. Similarly, sports groups may be spectators at professional sports events or meet players on special occasions, but rarely is it the case that the full-time coach of youth sports groups is a professional whose employment is fully within the world of sports (see Thompson 1998 for a discussion of volunteer sports coaches).
5. Numerous publications on teaching and learning repeatedly advocate concepts around the power of community learning and of wide-ranging integration of knowledge from individuals whose expertise on a subject or skill strongly depends on evidence of their relationship to ongoing learning. See, for example, chapters IV, V, and VI in Palmer 1998. Parallel to these ideas are those reflected in publications of the Demos Foundation in London in the late 1990s; see, for example, chapters 6, 11, and 12 in Bentley 1998.
6. This generalization is based on not only content analysis of transcripts of interviews with leaders of these organizations but also mission statements and proposals submitted by these groups for funding. Confirmation that these broad outlines for behavior actually get operationalized in daily life comes from field notes and transcripts of youth not only at work within their organizations, but also in off-site gatherings of group members beyond the presence of adults (see Heath 1996).

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